

# Analyzing The Cognitive Experiences Of Individuals Linked To Regular Exercise At The Gym: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

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## Abstract

**Objective:** As to date, little has been done to explore and understand the cognitive experiences of individuals with regular exercise at gyms in Pakistan through an in-depth qualitative analysis, therefore the study aimed to probe the cognitive experiences of the ones who had been into the practice of regular exercise and workouts at the gym.

**Method:** The participants i.e., males ( $N=3$ ) and females ( $N=5$ ), having 6 months of persistent exercising were approached from Shapes Health Studio (Fitness center/ gym), Multan, Pakistan. The age ranges of the recruited participants were from 25 to 40 years. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and the data were analyzed through an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to interpret common patterns focusing on each individual's experiences thoroughly. The Verbatim of each participant was transcribed to generate the emergent interpretative themes which were categorized into sub-ordinate themes and further into super-ordinate themes.

**Results:** Four super-ordinate themes emerged: (1) influence of social media and social comparison, (2) appearance vs. expectations of body image, (3) mindfulness and improved quality of life, and (4) management of physical and psychological ailments.

**Conclusion:** Movement gives life as it has been revealed from the super-ordinate themes that mindfulness, improved quality of life, and management of ailments like obesity reduce body appearance comparison pressures. Furthermore, psychological ailments such as depression and anxiety are also managed well when the social media influences of having a perfect body are reduced through regular exercise. It can be hoped that the current study will help raise certain persuasion as well as awareness among the population to maintain regularity in their exercises at the gym to adapt a socially active and healthy lifestyle.

**Keywords:** cognitive experiences (brain), regular exercise (movement), gym, individuals.

## Introduction

Regular exercising at the gyms is being acknowledged as a potential habit through which individuals might enhance several domains related to their well-being (Richardson et al., 2017).

Exercises and workouts have been empirically demonstrated in studies as a source of improving subjective and psychological well-being (Papathomas et al., 2015) through creating positive identity, psychological relief (Richardson et al., 2017), as well as by improving the perceptions of empowerment among individuals (Blinde & Taub, 1999). Continually practicing the exercise at the gym has a phenomenal influence on the lifestyles, such as boosting one's social standing (Arbour et al., 2007), minimization of loneliness, and lessened discriminating behavior from other in-groups or peers (Spornier et al., 2009). Physically, exercise can help to alleviate discomfort (Norrbrink et al., 2012), control weight, and improve all somatic functioning (Ginis et al., 2012). In an initial attempt to join the gym, users may encounter a few obstacles that create difficulty in the continuation of exercising in the gym settings (Martin, 2013). Inaccessible and inadequate equipment (Dickson et al., 2011), unfavorable interpersonal interactions (Rolfe et al., 2009), lack of awareness, and scarce support from society (Kehn & Kroll, 2009) also contribute towards irregularity at the gyms. Such events can jeopardize a person's psychological well-being and self-esteem resulting in a sense of isolation, frustration, and rage which is why gym regularity has been proven to be the best remedy for healing, cure, and health (Reeve, 2006). Social media is evolving into an essential source of knowledge related to medical sciences. Therefore it carries all relevant and searchable routes for the consumers who keep browsing about healthcare and various other life-longevity as well as health-related issues relevant to which, fitness as well as physical exercise awareness are two un-ignorable domains abundantly found on multiple sites online (Carrotte et al., 2015). Viewers can have access to fitness videos on different search engines, which promote specific fitness criteria and related exercises in an attempt to satisfy the followers and help them replicate their routines at the gyms.

Evidence suggests that empirical findings are broadening in terms of fitness as well as health communication domains (Lutkenhaus et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2019; Zhou & Krishnan, 2019; Pilgrim & Bohnet-Joschko, 2019). Still, little has been discovered in the past couple of years about the role of influencers of social media platforms and the usage of fitness apps (Oyibo et al., 2018; Oyibo & Vassileva, 2019; Baretta et al., 2019; Hosseinpour & Terlutter, 2019) and how they affect users' health-related behaviors. Although this phenomenon affects people of all ages, yet, it is most frequent among young adults (Vaterlaus et al., 2015), adolescents, and pre-teenagers (Tiggemann & Slater, 2014). As social media networking is seen to be utilized in a positive manner, on the other hand, it may also have a negative impact on people's lives such as in the idealization of exceptionally toned and slim body framing views as well as the rise of new social media trends in the online fitness community has raised the degree of worldwide concerns (Easton et al., 2018), particularly when people have been exposed to unattainable and unrealistic body ideals and contrast their physical appearance with peers and social media models (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

### **Objective of the study**

- To explore and understand the cognitive experiences of individuals with regular exercise at the gym in Pakistan through an in-depth qualitative analysis

### **Research question**

- What are the cognitive experiences of individuals who practice regular exercise at the gym in Pakistan?

### **Method**

## Research design

The present study aimed to explore the lived cognitive experiences of individuals who had been regularly exercising. The aim was to gather the lived experiences of regular gym members, before or after their workouts, depending upon the convenience of both, the researcher as well as the participants. For this purpose, a qualitative research design was found appropriate to use.

## Participants

The participants i.e., males (N=3) and females (N=5), having 6 months of persistent exercising routine were approached from Shapes Health Studio (Fitness center/ gym), Multan, Pakistan through a purposive sampling technique. The age ranges of the recruited participants were from 25 to 40 years.

**Table 1** Demographics of the participants (N=8)

	Pseudonyms	Gender Male (M) Female(F)	Age	Gym/ regular exercise (duration)	BMI
1	Gym member 1	F	26	07 months	35.1
2	Gym member 2	F	37	12 months	34.6
3	Gym member 3	M	40	6.5 months	38.2
4	Gym member 4	F	25	11 months	25.3
5	Gym member 5	M	29	06 months	27.1
6	Gym member 6	M	38	18 months	40.2
7	Gym member 7	F	33	10 months	24.8
8	Gym member 8	F	29	06 months	23.4

## Semi-structured interview protocol

The data were assessed through the conduction of semi-structured interviews and then an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adapted as a methodology for interpreting common patterns by focusing on each individual's experiences thoroughly. Open-ended questions were generated to collect detailed information from the participants. Questions related to mindfulness and improved quality of life as well as body image comparisons and the influence of social media were generated and asked from the participants i.e.,

- “What kept you persistent with your routine of doing your workouts regularly at the gym?”
- How much socially acceptable you think you have become with doing your workouts regularly at the gym?”
- Have you experienced some changes in mental wellness after continuing in your workouts regularly at the gym?”

## Procedure

The data were collected through the Shapes Health Studio (Fitness center/ gym), Multan, Pakistan using a semi-structured interview protocol. Permission to take interviews was taken from the concerned authority i.e., the gym owner as well as the trainers there on the duty. Participants' consent was taken after briefing them about the study objectives and assuring their confidentiality. In-depth interview sessions were conducted with the participants at the time when the participants felt convenient, usually post-workout. The interviews were recorded and

then the verbatim of each participant was transcribed to generate the emergent interpretative themes which were categorized into sub-ordinate themes and further into super-ordinate themes.

### Analysis and Results

A semi-structured interview approach was used to interview eight participants. To gain a more comprehensive understanding of the experiences, the evaluation was done case by case using interpretive phenomenological analysis criteria. Emergent themes were developed from the original verbatim coding. Case-by-case analysis was done to generate subordinate and superordinate themes from the clusters of emerging themes. Four super-ordinate themes were emerged (1) influence of social media and social comparison, (2) appearance vs. expectations of body image, (3) mindfulness and improved quality of life, and (4) management of physical and psychological ailments.

**Table 2** Super-ordinate, subordinate, and emergent themes

Super-ordinate themes	Subordinate themes	Emergent themes
1. Influence of social media and social comparison	Social Media	Influencers Trends Online Hashtags Fitness gurus Exercise tutorials Bloggers hype Fan following Diet plan challenges
	Social comparison	Peer pressure Comparison Social conformity Social standards Bullying Body weight comparison Competition Transformation
2. Appearance vs. expectations of body image	Appearance of body image	Overweight Body fats Curves Aging

	<p>Expectations of body image</p>	<p>Misfit body          Physically unattractive          Sexually unattractive          Out of shape body          Fitness complexes</p> <p>Beautiful          Pretty          In shape          Toned body          Flexibility          Muscles prominence          Sexual attractiveness          Masculinity          Feminine look</p>
<p>3. Mindfulness and improved quality of life</p>	<p>Mindfulness</p> <p>Quality of life</p>	<p>Wellness          Living in the moment          An active mind and transformed body relation          Calmness          Peace of mind          Tranquility          Hope          Goals          Focus</p> <p>Waking up early          Offering Prayer          Routine          Timetable          Capability          Punctuality          Regularity          Persistence</p>
<p>4. Management of physical and psychological ailments</p>	<p>Management of physical ailments</p>	<p>Less fatigue          Improved memory</p>

	Reduced body aches
	Regular periods
	Controlled blood pressure
	Hormonal balance
	Reduction in brain fog
Management of psychological ailments	
	Relaxation
	Wellness
	Improvement in anxiety
	Decreased depression
	Self-actualization
	Contentment

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## Interpretations

Analysis of the experiences of individuals having regular exercise at the gym generated various themes; those themes emerged as sub-ordinate themes and super-ordinate themes. The influence of social media and social comparison, differences between appearance and expectations of body image, psychological impact such as mindfulness and improved quality of life, and management of physical and psychological ailments are some of the aspects of participants' experiences that were emphasized in the emerging themes.

### 1. Influence of social media and social comparison

The first master theme that emerged from the analysis is the influence of social media and social comparison. Social media plays a crucial role in the lives of individuals in the modern era, as most of the time of daily routine is spent using various social media platforms, due to which social comparisons are massively seen among people. Participants in the present study revealed interesting accounts of their experiences about going to the gym regularly. Gym member 1 reported:

“One of the Instagram bloggers, whom I follow, I find her physically very attractive and want to be just like she is”. I feel I can be myself more but imitation of role models who have massive fan following on social media is not a bad idea. I want my posts to be equally appraised and that is going to be possible if I will be up to the mark in social standards of nowadays regarding looks and physical appearance.” (F, 26 years)

Gym member 5 reported:

“A 6-week competition of body transformation post just popped in an online fitness group I am a member of. Damn! I got so inspired looking to the personal trainer and made that my goal to transform my fat and muscle weight into a cool masculine shape.” (M, 29 years)

The above verbatim illustrated the social media influences on participants in their daily lives. It showed that social comparison is the big reason for creating insecurities and making the standards of living high.

## **2. Appearance vs. expectations of body image**

The second master theme that emerged from the analysis of the verbatim of participants is appearance vs. expectations of the body image. As interpreted, the participants reported that there is a difference between the actual appearance of their bodies and the expectations they have concerning how their body image should be. As the gym member 2 described:

“I can’t even see my previous pictures, as they are of the time when I was physically beautiful, pretty, and in shape. Before joining the gym I felt ashamed of my curves and all the fat stuff. I was even bullied as a fat lady in a superstore so; my self-esteem shattered and I used to go out less. But now, I feel much more confident after doing the gym and my workouts here, so that is why I fixed a target of getting back to my previous shape and looks which only being regular here at the gym will do to me.” (F, 37 years)

Gym member 6 stated:

“I was a fitness freak and an outgoing person with a fit body and healthy lifestyle till I had to face some stressors at my workplace. To prove my performance at work I had been continuously sitting for longer hours which raised my BMI. My shirts and jeans were unfit. I started feeling as if I was not the same, “active and energetic” man that I used to be. But doing gym exercises regularly is day by day giving me, “my sense of wholeness back!”

“I feel amazing now hoping, I will soon manage my BMI as well, but prior to that this feeling of pleasure while doing something for my body to get back to my shape is just not less than an ecstasy.” (M, 38 years)

## **3. Mindfulness and improved quality of life**

The third master theme, mindfulness and improved quality of life has emerged from the analysis. Most of the participants reported their mental health has been improving due to regular exercising, as they perceived it as adapting a healthier lifestyle than they had before. The participants reported that they remain active the whole day when they start their day with exercise, due to which they experience mindfulness, self-actualization, calm, focused mind and therefore, it helps improve their quality of life prominently, as Gym member 8 narrated:

“I had been suffering from paranoia and mild panic after I got separated. Anxiolytics improved my symptoms but they didn’t make me feel good as day by day my quality of life was facing a decline. I planned to wake up early for prayer, then, I took the gym membership as well. After prayer, I drove to the gym and had exercises here. This has simply done miracles towards my wellness and has brought me the calmness and peace of mind back. I feel I can handle strenuous tasks while being at ease at work as well as domestically. Gym gives a new life; a new mindset! It’s just an essential need towards my well-being, peace, and mindfulness now.” (F, 29 years)

## **4. Management of physical and psychological ailments**

The fourth theme that emerged was the management of physical and psychological ailments. This theme interprets that regularity in exercises at the gym enables individuals to manage several physical and psychological ailments. According to the notion of the gym member 3:

“I am a bank officer and my job requires me to sit for longer hours during days, and those too are 5 days every week. Not only this but earlier, I was habituated with a super sedentary lifestyle of getting back home and then relaxing on my couch while watching TV or using my cell phone till I ate dinner and slept. I didn’t realize that all this had worsened my health until I had been diagnosed with diabetes (type II). I had also been into moderate depression after knowing about diabetes, so I was suggested by my psychologist to join the gym at the earliest.

Well now! This active lifestyle change has added continuity to my gym workouts and exercises. My diabetes remains normal whenever monitored (gym and medicine both together did miracles). That depression too was a nightmare. It has just gone away, leaving me back in the hope of staying healthy for myself and my loved ones, especially for my kids. Being regular here gave me my health back and a sense of wellness too.” (M, 40 years)

#### **Gym member 7 expressed:**

“I had gained a lot of weight when I was pregnant. It became a cause of hormonal imbalances right after my c-section delivery and later within one and a half years of a sedentary lifestyle, I am now, also diagnosed with pre-diabetic symptoms along with Polycystic ovarian syndrome (PCOS).” along with medicines, I was also suggested to join a gym by my gynecologist. Here, I get new energy and feel less fatigued every day. With the post-workout sweating, I feel that all my tiredness and dullness go away. Also, I have shed down 6.5 kg (1.024 stones), which in itself is a wonderful achievement. Now, my scans show fewer PCOS symptoms and I have a regular period cycle. I can’t quit the gym now as it has given me health and wellness back.” (F, 33 years)

#### **Discussion**

The present study aimed to explore the cognitive experiences of the participants who were regularly exercising at the gym for over a period of six months and above. The influence of social media and social comparison, differences between appearance and expectations of body image, psychological impact such as mindfulness and improved quality of life, and management of physical and psychological ailments are some of the aspects of their experiences that were emphasized in the emerging themes. The results of the present study indicated the influence of social media and social comparison in the participants with regular exercising; this has been supported by the findings of Lewallen (2016), who reported that social media contributes towards social comparisons and the perception of body image. The theme of appearance vs. expectations of body image is also in line with the theme of Larson et al. (2017) in which it was suggested that the expectations about body image considering the actual appearance help to motivate in achieving expected outcomes while exercising. The results of the present study revealed the importance of exercise at the gym on mindfulness and improving the quality of life, which is supported by the findings of Woodyard, (2011) reporting the therapeutic effects of exercise in enhancing well-being and improving the quality of life. Lastly in the present study, regularly exercising was also found helpful in the management of physical and psychological ailments which has also been supported by the findings of Fox (1999), stating that exercise can be effective in the management of anxiety, depression, stress, and other psychological and physical ailments.

#### **Conclusion**

Keeping in view the above detailed lived cognitive experiences it can be concluded that “movement gives life”, as it has been revealed from the super-ordinate themes that mindfulness, improved quality of life, and management of ailments like obesity reduce body appearance comparison pressures. Furthermore, psychological ailments such as depression and anxiety are also well managed when the social media influences of having a perfect body are reduced through regular exercise. It can be hoped that the current study will help raise certain persuasion as well as awareness among the population to maintain regularity in their exercises at the gym to adapt a socially active and healthy lifestyle.

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