

*“I feel like CrossFit is for everyone, but not everyone is for CrossFit”:*

A Qualitative Inquiry of Female CrossFit Athletes Over 30

By Elena Vaughn

### **Introduction and research question**

Greg Glassman opened the first CrossFit gym in 2001, in California (Bowles 2021). Since then, the fitness methodology has grown exponentially popular, due to the unique combination of high-intensity interval training (HIIT), gymnastics, weight training, and supplementary lifestyle coaching. CrossFit is a coed sport, drawing the attention of 20-year-old men and 50-year-old women alike.

The research question for this study is *How does a CrossFit mindset impact women over 30 outside of the gym?* The purpose of this study is to contribute to the growing knowledge of CrossFit as a sport and a lifestyle and gain a deeper understanding of the unique demographic of women over 30 who regularly enjoy CrossFit.

### **Significance and rationale of the study**

The significance and rationale of this study is to gain a deeper understanding of the applied benefits of CrossFit outside of the gym walls.

CrossFit, meaning cross-discipline fitness, is officially defined as “a lifestyle characterized by safe, effective exercise and sound nutrition” (What is CrossFit 2010). Participants practice the same workout-of-the-day (WOD), scaling weights and movements to meet their individual capabilities. Workouts are varied each day, but all workouts use functional, everyday movements at high-intensity intervals. CrossFit defines fitness according to three standards: 1) general fitness skills such as strength, speed, coordination, and agility 2)

performing a variety of tasks and task combinations with proficiency 3) the ability to sustain energy to perform tasks of varying times (Glassman 2002).

Most studies tend to focus on quantitative physical differences between CrossFit athletes and other athletes, but the researcher found one study analyzing motivational differences and another study analyzing the psychological benefits of CrossFit. Both studies are quantitative. In 2014, Partridge et al analyzed various types of motivation in achieving fitness goals. Partridge and her colleagues found that men tend to set goals based on performance in relation to others and women tend to set goals based on mastery relating to personal skill. This team also found that CrossFit athletes with shorter memberships had higher self-directed goals, while those with longer memberships had higher performance-based goals (Partridge 2014). This research partially supports the qualitative data of this study, as participants expressed a blend of performance-based goals and mastery-based goals. Additionally, Davies (2016) notes that younger athletes are more motivated by appearance, while older adults are often motivated by physical health, enjoying the sport, and facing the challenges. The present qualitative data supports this claim, as almost no participants expressed concern about appearance, and all expressed a strong desire for optimal physical health.

On the other hand, Koteles et al (2016) found that optimal benefits of exercise are most closely linked to frequency and age. Their quantitative analysis did not find a correlation between CrossFit training and stronger psychological health. Koteles argued that Partridge's study was too limited to physical goals, and expanded in analyzing perception of the body. Mangine et al analyzed the difference between advanced CrossFit athletes (ADV), recreational CrossFit athletes (REC), and physically active adults (CON). These researchers found that advanced CrossFit athletes had physiological advantages over both recreational CrossFit athletes

and adults who are physically active in other ways. This is a good example of a worthwhile quantitative study examining the physical benefits of CrossFit, but it does not account for the mental or emotional benefits.

This research focused on women over 30 because little academic data addresses this demographic in relation to CrossFit. A qualitative method was chosen to allow for greater detail and personal insight. Coaches were excluded because the impact of recreational athletics is different than the impact of career athletics.

### **Methodology and sampling**

The methodology and sampling for this research followed protocol established in other studies. Participants were recruited through a variety of channels. Five participants were recruited in person, two were recruited via direct online contact, and one was recruited through a social media post on one of the gym's pages. Participants consisted of all cisgender females, and seven of eight participants were Caucasian, reflecting the demographics of the gyms to which they belong.

Interviews were conducted mainly over Zoom, with one via telephone and one in person. Online meetings were recorded and all meetings were transcribed with Otter software. Interviews were 5-15 minutes on average. Two prospective participants were excluded as they were coaches. The research focused on recreational athletes, and coaches were considered a different demographic. Participants ranged in age from 33 to 63, with the median age being 56. Data were analyzed by reading transcripts and looking for key words and repeated concepts. Key words and concepts were compiled into themes and then sub-categories.

### **Questionnaire**

The following questionnaire was devised to understand the holistic benefits of practicing CrossFit, as they relate to women over 30 years old.

1. Name, age, and how long have you been a CrossFit athlete?
2. What initially drew you to CrossFit?
3. What is the most helpful aspect of CrossFit in other areas of your life?
4. What was your exercise routine prior to finding CrossFit?
5. Did you ever want to give up on CrossFit?
6. What physical fitness routines do you have in addition to CrossFit?
7. What effect do the other people at the gym have on your experience? How does that change between classes?

#### Demographic characteristics

Participant number	Age	Length of membership (years)	Prior athletic experience
1	56	14	none
2	51	14	triathlons, biking, hiking, mainly alone
3	63	7.5	walking dog, home exercise videos
4	37	8	P90X, Tough Mudders
5	33	6	worked out in other gyms
6	62	3	yoga and tai chi DVDs
7	38	1 year, 10 months	tried many gyms, active
8	59	10	none for 15 years

#### Themes

<b><u>Physical Fitness</u></b>
Aging Gracefully
Prior Athletic Routine

Functional Fitness
<b><u>Mental and Emotional Health</u></b>
Community
Motivation
Accountability
Consistency

### **Physical Health**

#### ***Aging Gracefully***

Participants shared their desires to maintain optimal health and fitness even while aging.

*“I always feel like we're training for life, you know, meaning Aging Gracefully. Just being to stay fit as long as you can. That's kind of my motto in life”*. - Participant 7, age 38

One athlete highlighted the difference in both physical ability and mindset, between CrossFit athletes and other aging women.

*“I am just strong enough and agile enough and mobile enough to do all kinds of things that other people my age can't do...It's not that they try and fail. It's that they don't try. It's that they know they're not fit enough to go hiking where I go hiking or they're not fit enough or strong enough.”*- Participant 1, age 56

#### ***Prior Athletic Routine***

Two participants had no athletic routine prior to CrossFit, while two had moderate prior routines, and four had vigorous athletic routines before finding a CrossFit Gym.

*“It was honestly a lot of alone, working out. So either biking alone or swimming alone or running alone or you know and even if I would go to the gym, I would lift by myself. And I think I'm pretty motivated to do that. But since finding CrossFit I have really appreciated the community aspect”* - Participant 2, age 51

While some athletes had rigorous exercise routines prior to finding CrossFit, others had little to no activity.

*“Honestly, walking the dog and then maybe some videos, you know...it wasn't too much” -*

Participant 2, age 63

### ***Functional Fitness***

Multiple participants cited functional fitness as the primary benefit of CrossFit. As above, functional fitness is defined by three standards that measure physical capacity to perform a variety of tasks.

*“it is functional fitness like there's many times where like you know we have to carry something up the stairs, we have to lift something up, and we're like, Okay, we're gonna deadlift it and I'm gonna clean it, like we kind of have that language and we can do it safely, and having a you know, 27 pound 17 month old. It's very functional.” -Participant 4, age 37*

While some athletes are motivated to compete at national or international levels, many are simply motivated by longevity and wellbeing,

*“So for me, it's just all about functional fitness. I'm not going to be a Games athlete... I'm trying to live a long healthy life and, and so I take you know, my nutrition, I take all of that very seriously and I'm really into all that. I wish I would have known what I know now raising my kids, but can't go backwards. You know, I just I only know what I know now” - Participant 3, age 63*

### **Mental and Emotional Health**

#### ***Community***

Many participants reported a sense of community and bonding with other athletes at their gym, especially those who regularly attended the same class times.

*“Yeah, the people at the gym and the coaches are a really strong community of people who all believe they can do hard things and be stronger for it. So. . .it's a shared mentality. That and then there's the cheering each other on, encouraging each other. So I find that to be one of my Super Happy Places just because of the mentality of the people that are there.”* -Participant 1, age 56

CrossFit is a community built on positivity and mutual encouragement, which naturally draws participants in.

*“I tend to be positive. And I'm so grateful that there's like minded people like me. And. . . I love the hard work. The hard work of it.”* -Participant 6, age 62

As shown here, the routine of attending the same classes together and encouraging each other fosters a sense of community and belonging, which has tremendous mental health benefits.

### ***Motivation***

Many participants described how the satisfaction of achieving fitness goals inspired them to achieve in other areas of life.

*“I didn't think I was capable of working athletically that hard, and this has taught me that I can because it can work so hard athletically. It makes me feel that I can do, accomplish other things in life that I didn't think that I would be able to, so it just is such a positive thing.”* - Participant 6, age 62

Much of this motivation to continue achieving comes from verbal encouragement from other athletes during a workout.

*“I think they always are encouragement. Just because no matter what level they are, or you are, they're doing their hardest and they're doing their best and it makes me want to do my hardest and my best.”* - Participant 2, age 51

Similar to the above, the community and encouragement of the class fosters motivation and personal mastery-based goals.

### ***Accountability***

One athlete shared an interesting perspective on how athletes hold each other accountable to show up and give their best.

*“I feel like CrossFit is for everyone, but not everyone is for CrossFit”* - Participant 3, age 63

Seeing other people continue to push through can inspire athletes to dig into their last reserves of strength.

*“Yes, there are moments when I want to just throw in the towel, but then you look around, you see everyone around you, you know everyone’s dying. Everyone’s in the same place as us, so you just kind of push yourself and keep going mentally”* - Participant 7, age 38

One participant directly credited a friend with encouraging her to return after an injury, and others frequently cited external encouragement and support as a motivating factor.

### ***Consistency***

Of the athletes interviewed, 7 had been members of a CrossFit gym for more than six years. The shortest membership was 1 year and 8 months, and the longest membership was 14 years. The median length of membership is six years. When asked about their desire to leave, only two had ever adjusted their attendance patterns.

*“I don't think I've ever wanted to give up on CrossFit. I actually, probably more often I find myself saying that. I don't know what I would do if I didn't have the option of CrossFit because just me nothing else has fit as well.”* - Participant 4, age 37

Many athletes are committed to the sport and lifestyle, and can never see themselves leaving their gym.

*“No, I never did. Never. I love it so much. I will do this till I die. I told everyone that I'm like, Yep, I'm gonna be in the gym and 90, 100 I'm just gonna always be there.”* - Participant 3, age 63

One participant discussed taking a break early into her CrossFit journey, after sustaining an injury during a workout. Another still uses the gym's equipment and mingles with friends, but does not participate in structured classes.

### **Discussion of findings**

This research found two broad categories of themes, which were physical health and emotional health. Within those two themes, there were numerous sub-categories.

Within physical health, athletes described their prior exercise routines, their experiences applying functional fitness, and their desires to maintain optimal health and fitness as they aged. Participants were less concerned with appearance and more focused on physical agility and autonomy.

Under the category of mental health, there are strong themes of community, motivation, and accountability to one another. Participants shared how their successes during workouts pushed them to keep an achievement mindset outside of the gym, combined with measuring their performance against others in the gym. Athletes shared their appreciation for the encouragement of others to complete WODs and maintain a consistent schedule, even after injuries and other setbacks.

These personal testimonials show that CrossFit is beneficial for both the mind and body, strengthening interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

### **Limitations and future research**

One considerable limitation is my lack of experience as a professional social researcher. Given that this is my first serious social science undertaking, I do not know the established

protocol. One possible area for further exploration is a quantitative study. People with diagnosed mental health conditions such as anxiety and depression might find it beneficial to practice CrossFit, and those benefits could be quantified and analyzed.

## Conclusion

This study inquired and analyzed the experiences of female CrossFit athletes over the age of 30. CrossFit has become a more popular fitness method among athletes of all ages and genders, and results of this study show that this popularity is well deserved. Future studies can elaborate on the mental health benefits of this sport for those with diagnoses, and explore how other age or race demographics experience CrossFit.

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