

READ THIS FOR ‘GUARANTEED RESULTS’:
A feminist analysis of masculinity, health, and body through a case study of gym-bros
and fit-fluencers

by

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Abstract

Modern fitness has shifted with the rise of social media platforms like TikTok. The accessibility and interactive nature of visual platforms has allowed for “gym-bros” and “fit-fluencers,” as well as everyday gym goers to share their health and fitness journeys, work-out advice, and “transformation” (i.e., physical body changes) videos. The current exploratory sociological research project is in pursuit of understanding how masculinity, body, and health are discussed on TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube. Feminist theory, in particular, intersectionality helps to highlight not just race, class, gender, *but injuries, disabilities, and health/body conditions*. Results and conclusions include how gym-bros and fit-fluencers, as well as everyday users on GymTok present themselves online, the relations that emerge out of this space, and the collective, unified shared experiences in the fitness community. The sentiments of “gains,” “anything is possible,” and “guaranteed results” purported by fitness community members online are embedded in neoliberal ideologies of self-responsibility and individualism. This research project provides insight into how GymTok and other social media platforms facilitate dialogues around body, health, and overall well-being.

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Dedication

This project is dedicated to those who struggle to love their body and appearance.

Chapter 1 - Introducing a Feminist Analysis of Fitness and Health

Health, physical activity, and fitness have become widely popular amongst social media users (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter 2022). The sharing and accessibility of social media sites provides users with tips and tricks on working out, support in personal fitness journeys, and promotes positive participation in physical exercise (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter 2022). Information regarding physical fitness and health can be shared among social media users by videos, photos, and personal narratives and comments. “Experts” and role models remain at the center of social media fitness communities. These experts locate themselves as the center of knowledge regarding health and fitness (Andreasson and Johansson 2013). “Influencers” [short for social media influencers] came into the limelight, rising out of the fringes of online blogs and social media platforms (Abidin 2015). There is certainly an aspect of trust in following and engaging with these “public figures,” as they often take it upon themselves to promote, sell, and advise their followers of certain physical activities, products, and routines.

Social media platforms were the most widely used resource during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 (Gonzalez-Padilla & Tortolero-Blanco 2020). During this time, perceptions of fitness and health also shifted. People reported feeling unmotivated to work out (Kaur et al. 2020). Self-perception shifted during this time—with people viewing themselves differently (Kaur et al. 2020). With all the time COVID-19 afforded for some people, they found time to “put” into altering themselves (Kaur et al. 2020).

Perfectly defined muscles and sculpted bodies have become the ideal on social media. The body has become symbolic of success and hard work (Andreasson & Johansson 2013). Many of the fitness “experts” found on social media platforms, like TikTok, represent this ‘ideal’ image. “Gym bros” is a term that has arose from the fitness and health community on TikTok,

which refers to people who actively post and discuss their fitness progress on social media (Adamo 2022). Gym-bros also are avid gym goers, who spend a lot of time building their muscles, toning their body, and sculpting their physique. Fitness influencers [fit-fluencers] sometimes identify themselves as gym bros. Fit-fluencers are health and fitness “experts” who have amassed many followers on social media. The issue here is fit-fluencers may not have the credentials to give out advice on fitness and health. Concurrently, there was the rise of “GymTok,” a subsection of TikToks marked with #Gymtok. Gym bros often use #Gymtok when posting to TikTok. There are currently, at the time of writing this article, 19 million posts with #GymTok. TikTok has even added a note above these videos stating: “Looking for some motivation? Get started with #GymTok.”

In the present thesis, I turn the focus to “gym-bros,” “gym-rats,” and avid gym-goers who have been posting their progress on social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and Instagram since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. I examine central themes of this culture through a close study of selected TikToks and comments. The following research is two-fold. I am interested in how these individuals portray themselves, in other words, their presentation of “self.” I am also interested in gender relations, and masculine ideals within TikToks and short videos. The present thesis analyzes masculinity, body, health through a critical feminist lens.

In the following chapter I will introduce masculinity and gender studies. I include a brief discussion of self and body research, as well as provide some context for sociological understanding of body, health, and fitness. Included in my framework for the study is a feminist standpoint, allowing for me to better critique gendered ideals of fitness, body, and health. Lastly, I briefly overview modern fitness culture as it appears on social media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit.

Masculinity Studies

The sociology of masculinities became a critical pursuit to study men and their perspectives, behaviors, values, and how they socially situate themselves (Pascoe 2007). As such, sociological understandings of masculinity are guided by, as well as located within feminist literature and theory (Itulua-Abumere 2013). As stated by Itulua-Abumere (2013:42) “the critical writings of men and masculinity which constitute the sociology of masculinity seek to highlight the ways in which men’s power come to be differentiated, naturalized and embedded across all cultures, political borders and organizational networks.” Hierarchical understandings of dominance and bureaucracy maintain masculinity and manhood as symbolic of men’s superiority (Acker 1990). Later shifts in masculinity studies included distinctions between men and women and how they locate themselves throughout their gendered social interactions (Itulua-Abumere 2013).

Masculinity and Technology

Masculinity today has taken a transformative turn with the rise of digital technology and social media platforms. In this way, explorations of masculinity and manhood have become entangled with different pockets of communities; as well as informers to help spread and share information to large audiences. In Andreasson and Johansson’s (2013) research on health gurus, they conducted an in-depth analysis across three fitness blogs, during the rise of the “blogosphere.” Showcased in their research is the shift from traditional forms of masculine and feminine imagery and identity into more complex and contradictory identities and norms (Andreasson & Johansson 2013). As further underscored by Andreasson and Johansson (2013:278) “as a centre of knowledge about health and training, this is a cultural ‘location’ filled with health expertise and human role models.”

Modern-day Cyborgs. As the “male” body enters the twenty-first century, it is subjected to bodily enhancements, where it can become stronger, fitter, thinner, carved, and toned. Restorations and modification of body can be done using medication, enhancement drugs, and technological objects (e.g., work-out gear). In Haraway’s (1991) research she underscores the animal—human—technology relation. Haraway (1991:10) goes on to write:

But basically machines were not self-moving, self-designing, autonomous. They could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author to himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream. To think they were otherwise was paranoid. Now we are not so sure. Late twentieth-century machines have made thoroughly ambiguous the differences between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally that used to apply to organisms and machines. Our machines are disturbingly lively, and we ourselves frighteningly inert.

Stated plainly, the use of artificial, machine objects are transposed onto the natural body. Potts (2005) addresses just this, with the use of Viagra pills by men to enhance their sex drive. She argues that the men in the study were able to redefine their sexuality and masculinity using a pharmaceutical enhancements drug (i.e., Viagra). Little has been written on the late rendition of the “cyborg” figure alongside modern medicine, supplemental medication, drug usage, and modern-day body modifications (Potts 2005). Although Potts (2005) research explores the application and usage of Viagra in men, and how the drug helps to reinforce and authenticate identity and gender; further research investigations are necessary, especially in the ever-evolving world around us.

Gym-Bros. The rise of “gym-bros” across platforms such as TikTok has coincided with the surge of fit-fluencers, as well as the increasing popularity of health and fitness information

online. One of the definitions of gym-bros, by Adamo (2022), describes them as stereotypically “arrogant and unintelligent, they promote the pleasures of athletic self-improvement and community.” On Instagram, gym-bros can be seen posting gym related content, such as their physical progress and pre/post workout meals under the hashtag “fitspiration” (Haak 2021).

Fit-Fluencers. In Durau and colleagues’ (2022) research they find fit-fluencers act as health communicators, endorsing their lifestyle, regimens, and expertise to their many followers. These online “personalities” share their work-out routines, supplement practices and nutrient regimens, “day-in-the-life” (DITL) videos, products, and consumption practices. Their Instagrams, TikToks, and other platforms they choose to utilize portray “flawless” photos of their fitness journeys and show off their sculpted physiques.

Fit-fluencers is a term used by popular culture and scholars to describe online health and fitness “experts.” Simply put, fit-fluencers take it upon themselves to be “experts” in fitness and health, assuming a role of authority here. Fit-fluencers rarely describe themselves as such, rather they prefer terms like gym-bro and gym-rat. Thus, it is important to pay attention to how boys and men situate themselves as consumers, and how they further situate themselves in relation to others who are “consuming” their products. These products are not just physical possessions, but *knowledge and advice*.

Masculinity and Health

Masculinity can play a complex role in body satisfaction for men, depending on sexuality, and eating habits (Blashill 2011; Brown & Graham 2008). Brown and Graham (2008) compared eighty gay and straight Australian males and their self-reported body satisfaction. Their findings suggest that masculinity contributes to body satisfaction (Brown & Graham 2008). Brown and Graham (2008) further suggest body satisfaction improves with a change in

diet and exercise, having an overall positive effect on masculine self. In Blashill's (2011) research, it was found that masculinity had a negative relationship with eating habits. As Blashill (2011:10) goes on to state: "however, the latter association was only found for trait-based measures of masculinity, suggesting that traditionally male personality traits may act as a buffer from body dissatisfaction." Thus, understandings of modern masculinity and how "traditional" values, need to be evaluated in their correlations to body satisfaction, and healthy eating habits.

According to National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) about one in three people assigned male at birth (AMAB) struggle with an eating disorder (or exhibit eating disorder behaviors). Particularly in the United States, eating disorders will affect ten million AMAB people at some point in their life. Men, further, are far less likely to reach out for mental health services—for fear of being perceived as "weak" (Davis et al. 2023). This can have devastating impacts, as men in the United States and around the world are more likely to die by suicide than women (Davis et al. 2023). The life expectancy of males in the United States has decreased from 74.2 in 2020 to 73.5 in 2021 (CDC 2021). The annual death rate for men is forty percent higher than women in the United States (CDC 2021). Problems of this nature are further exacerbated through other intersections, like race, sexuality, socioeconomic status, class, disabilities, accessibilities, and representation and diversity (Davis et al. 2023).

Twenty-First Century Masculinity. The idea behind the "crisis in masculinity," in other words, a state of crises for modern masculinity and manhood, is often taken as a fact (Itulua-Abumere 2013). "Crisis of Masculinity" is "ill-defined and elusive" (Itulua-Abumere 2013:44). Many studies refer to men's health as a silent "crisis," or unforeseen epidemic—which seems to suggest some evidence for a crisis. What follows is a critical analysis of young boys and men's state of health and well-being. For example, men are less likely to discuss their physical and

psychological problems with those around them (Itulua-Abumere 2013). Furthermore, “many remain bad at acknowledging and expressing feelings and are trapped between old-style, machismo and nurturing ‘new man-ism’” (Itulua-Abumere 2013:44). Sociologists and scholars alike have attempted to explore the supposed “crisis in masculinity” through critical analyses of masculine ideologies. Sociologists like Michael Kimmel in his books *Guyland* and *Angry White Men* attempted to unravel modern understandings of masculinity and what it means to grow up as a man in America. For both Michael Kimmel and bell hooks, many men feel threatened when their privileges are taken away. As bell hooks (2015:70) states, today’s men have “structured no meaningful core identity.”

In bell hooks groundbreaking novel *The Will to Change*, she discusses the need for young boys and men to *feel*. She writes that parents would rather teach their sons not to feel than risk having their sons “become” gay. As hooks goes on to state, boys and men are punished for showing their emotions, and even verbally and physically beaten for it. The “crisis of masculinity,” thus is encased in underlying assumptions of how AMAB people, boys, and men ought to behave. That is why young boys and men seek outlets to help them understand their manhood and masculinity. It is in this context that boys and men form identities, brotherhoods, and support systems with other men. They seek out places to form these alliances, like the gym. They even create profiles on TikTok and follow male creators for advice on how to be a man.

A Feminist Critique

Feminist research can include case studies, mixed method approaches, qualitative or quantitative methods, and content analysis (Reinharz 1992). The varied method within feminism is reflective of the diverse perspectives many feminists hold. Although feminist methods have centered around women’s perspectives, strides have been made in conceptualizing masculinities

(Reinharz 1992). Feminism has played a key role in analyzing violence against women by men, as well as the construction and conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity (Javaid 2014). There has also been value in feminist oral histories of men (Reinharz 1992). These studies have ventured to explain the role women played in men's lives and/or the impact men have had on women's lives (Reinharz 1992). Thus, my research underscores the forms of masculinities emerging out of today's fitness culture, while simultaneously analyzing relations between men and women.

What is Feminism?

bell hooks (2000) defines feminism as a fight against sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression. Underscored by bell hooks here thus is not only the experiences of women in patriarchal societies, but a diverse range of oppressions against groups of people. Feminism more broadly highlights silenced voices. As stated by Reinharz (1992:48):

My alternative to saying what feminist research is, is to illustrate what feminist research includes, i.e., to collect, categorize and examine the multitude of feminist research voices. Voices become oppressed in this manner through the process of silence. Thus, for feminists, it is important to hear these voices. Hazel Biana (2020:22) further underscores two kinds of oppressed voices: “1) the silence of the oppressed who have never learned to speak, and 2) the voice of those who have been forcefully silenced because they have dared to speak.”

It is because of this that many feminists also align their work with intersectionality analysis, because such a form of research better understands a diverse range of voices.

Intersectionality is defined by Collins and Bilge (2020) as: “namely, that in a given society at a given time, power relations of race, class, and gender, for example, are not discrete and mutually exclusive entities, but rather build on each other and work together; and that, while

often invisible, these intersecting power relations affect all aspects of the social world.”

Feminism has been critiqued by scholars as not integrating an intersectional lens, thus resulting in the erasure of people of color and their experiences (Borah et al., 2023). Intersectionality arose to combat this issue, in that it allowed for feminist scholars to regard the “intersectional differences” among women, men, and gender non-conforming people (Borah et al., 2023:2). The use of intersectionality here is intended not only to address race, class, and gender, but also disabilities and injuries.

Disability scholars begin with the critical assumption that disabilities are social constructs (Erevelles & Minear 2010). This, in other words, helps researchers attempting to understand disabilities and injuries as not properties of the body, but how cultural rules help to shape what the body does and does not do (Erevelles & Minear 2010). Intersectionality thus helps to reveal how disabilities and conditions are disseminated across the body, marking and categorizing those who are socially considered as “deviating” from a “normal” body and appearance.

Contextualizing Gender Equality

Roughly two-hundred and thirty years later there is still discourse surrounding gender equality and universal gender equity. In the last decade, as Hanna Rosin (2012:51) posits in *The End of Men*, the “broad middle swath of America” is unrecognizable with the rapid increase of divorce and single motherhood. The “rules of sex, marriage, politics, religion, and the future aspirations of young people” have switched, capsizing men’s previously destined roles as breadwinners (Rosin 2012:51). Furthermore, the balance of workforce and university attendance tipped towards women (Rosin 2012). As stated by Rosin (2012:4), “women worldwide dominate colleges and professional schools on every continent except Africa. In the United States, for every two men who will receive a BA this year, for example, three women will do the same.”

These “gains” made by women are considered by some as shifting gender equality in favor of women.

While most Americans, as analyzed by Pew Research Center (2020), verbalize their concerns for the country not doing enough with regards to equal rights between men and women, other Americans have verbalized that the country has gone too far with regards to gender equality. Under the headline of the article, it further states “about three-in-ten men say women’s gains have come at the expense of men.” The idea women have made gains far more than men, further resulting in men being “left behind” is not new. Kimmel (2013) further writes of white American men clinging to “traditional” ideals, where their masculinity has been compromised by women and minorities. In this Kimmel states that gender and racial equality is understood as a “loss” (read: women and minorities “gain” something, “we” lose something). He further describes this feeling of loss in terms of what he coins the “windchill” metaphor—where the real temperature does not matter, what matters is what it *feels* like.

Rosin (2012) argues that, even the struggling middle-class is seeing a shift in power-dynamics, where everyday families are becoming matriarchies. Although women are becoming heads of households, they are still bearers of the majority of childcare and chores (UNICEF). While they may be receiving “gains” through being participants in the labor market, “the majority of low-skilled and underpaid community health workers who attend to children are also women, with limited opportunity for professional growth” (UNICEF). There is furthermore striking evidence to suggest there are “discriminatory teaching practices” and education materials,” resulting in a reproduction of gender gaps (UNICEF).

Whether or not gendered power dynamics have shifted for the better, there is something to be said for how the idea of “loss” and “gains” is socially shaped through and by gender. In the

following chapters I will lay out the modernized, gendered ideas of “loss” and “gains” through a case study of fit-fluencers and “gym bros.” I seek to explain the development of digitized, masculine selves as they appear across social media platforms in tandem with the current health concerns for young boys and men.

Engaging with Masculinity Studies as a Feminist

Patriarchal masculinity refers to the early teaching of young boys and men, not only on how to be a “man,” but how their status of manhood makes them superior to women (hooks 2001). In *All About Love*, bell hooks (2001) describe masking emotions as the first lesson young boys learn in patriarchal masculinity. Patriarchal masculinity teaches young boys of the patriarchal ideal, which includes the idea that feelings are not “fitting” (hooks 2001). Thus, young boys and men explore pain and deny their feelings (hooks 2001).

Other interpretations of masculinity today view it as shifting (Rosin 2012). Men and young boys seem to be in a state of transition. As Rosin (2012:8) states so eloquently, “they lost the old architecture of manliness, but they have not replaced it with any obvious new one.” They are—stated plainly, missing something, as bell hooks described in *The Will To Change*. Men are, in other words, “stuck” looking for something, anything to represent them and their now-vacant manhood (Rosin 2012; Kimmel 2013).

The framing here taken by each theorist is not wrong in that patriarchal masculinity has resulted in the suffering of many men. This aspect of *missing something* though is a process. The process of masculinity here is not—and should not—be deterministic. Rather, as feminist scholars underscore, men have a choice in how they “do” masculinity. As hooks (2001) argues, sexism is taken upon by *everyone*. Men have agency over whether they conform to patriarchal

masculinity, just as they have an opportunity to reflect upon their role in patriarchal societies (Waling 2019). Refer to hooks (2001) here:

From the moment little boys are taught they should not cry or express hurt, feelings of loneliness, or pain, that they must be tough, they are learning how to mask true feelings.

In the worst-case scenarios they are learning how to not feel anything ever (hooks 2001). Learning how to mask true feelings and doing it are two separate processes. Learning to mask true feelings is not the end-all be-all for men, nor should we view such it as such a thing. At what point do young boys shift to not expressing emotion? When do they make that active decision? Why is such a practice like hiding one's feelings and pain attached to masculinity?

As Waling (2019) argues, critical masculinity studies should draw upon feminist notions of agency and reflexivity. In this, Waling (2019) discusses how recent studies addressing the lived experiences of men tend to overlook men's agency and emotional reflexivity. It is important here to not only understand how men negotiate masculine practices and expressions of self, but to not contain these practices into identity categories (Waling 2019). Furthermore, according to Waling (2019:103), "masculinity can be understood as relational process for men, not a determining cause." Thus, it is important to establish my goal here as a feminist scholar, in that I reconcile with how gym-bros engagement with sexist masculinities, especially amid social awareness of systemic and structural inequalities produced through gendered relations.

A Study of a Gendered, Digitized Self

The term coined here is "digitized masculinities," referring to masculinities that appear in the digital sphere. It further has an "extended" meaning, implying the personal and unique relationship one's gender identity can have through the interaction with the internet and digital devices. The aspect of "self" here in relation to digitized masculinities potentially occurring in

the fitness culture online is a peculiar one. As stated by Belk (2013:492), “in the digital world, aggregate levels of self in such communities [digital brand communities] are also much larger and more geographically diverse than family, neighborhood, and national levels of aggregate self.” As such, the “influence” digital fitness culture has is one that is necessary to study, especially with regards to the share and accessibility of specific brands and fitness-related products. Thus, this becomes not only an exploration of masculinities as expressed online, but an in-depth analysis of the potentially gendered digital marketing strategies of organizations and online fitness figures.

There is still little known about gendered consumption practices, especially in the new digital sphere. This is especially true to male consumption practices (Swiencicki 1998). Further, as Potts (2005) mentions, little research has looked at late renditions of the “cyborg” figure. Thus, the purpose of this research is to understand how “gym bros” and fit-fluencers — who utilize modern medicine, supplemental medication, and other body modifications— define and promote masculinity, body, and health from an intersectional position. The goal with this research project is to highlight not only race, class, and gender, but disabilities and injuries, as seen on the fitness community on TikTok. The study intends to grapple with how young boys and men on #GymTok discuss health and body; contextualizing it within modern day views of a “crisis in masculinity.” The approach here helps to add to literature on modern technological advancements in health and wellness, as well as masculinity literature. I began this research with one simple quote, taken from bell hooks (2015:71):

A feminist vision which embraces feminist masculinity, which loves boys and men and demands on their behalf every right that we desire for girls and women, can renew the

American male. Feminist thinking teaches us all, especially, how to love justice and freedom in ways that foster and affirm life.

It is my hope then—in understanding modern fitness culture online—to reconsider masculinity, body, and health through a feminist lens. Stated differently, I ask here: what would masculinity, body, and health, in the modern digital age, look like from a feminist perspective? With the help of the objectives mentioned previously, this study also includes exploratory research question:

RQ: How are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other related fitness social media videos/posts?

Thesis Layout

The literature review will begin with understandings of self, self-presentation (Goffman 1956), and extended self (Belk 1998). Gender research will be expanded upon, including Connell's (1987) research on gender relations. Hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities will also be covered in this section. The concluding section will overview online fitness research, review research on gym-bros and fit-fluencers and introduce key insights into conducting a social media analysis.

Chapters three, four, and five will touch on the methods, results, and overall conclusions for the study. The methodology will include social media, content analysis with an overview of the platforms TikTok and Instagram. "Digitized masculinities" have emerged through the transformative and evolutionary nature of technology. Within this, I will connect research on online communities, their gender expressions, and practices, as well as identity-making processes of online personas, individuals' consumption practices, and interpersonal relations.

Chapter 2 - Warm Up

Lived Selves

For the presentation of self, as posited by Goffman (1956) people evaluate and maneuver their own selves when in the presence of other people. People approach their presentations of self differently depending on their close social environment (Goffman 1956). Sometimes, people approach their presentations of self through other people. As further underscored by Bourdieu (1989:17):

This realist (mis)reading is objectively encouraged by the fact that social space is so constructed that agents who occupy similar or neighboring positions are placed in similar conditions and subjected to similar conditionings, and therefore have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing practices that are themselves similar.

Social space here has inhabitants, or agents, with similar dispositions, interests, and conditionings (Bourdieu 1989). For Belk (2013) what is key in defining the self in this new digital age is the interactions between online and offline personas. Shared digital spaces with shared tastes mark people as being a part of communities (Belk 2013). Furthermore, as Belk (2013) goes on to state, attachments can be formed to different types of content (e.g., music). Take the community formed around the popular game *The Sims*. According to Belk (2013), *The Sims* allows users to explore ownership of luxury goods that players otherwise would not be able to afford outside of the digital realm. In Palmers (2023) qualitative research he analyzed 10 threads and 400 comments from the official *Sims* forum and unofficial *Sims* subreddit. He looked specifically at the gender dynamics within this women-dominated online community—especially with regards to comments made by men in these spaces claiming a “victim status” (Palmer

2023). By creating an inclusive space where women and queer people could comfortably maintain a “safe space,” the users were helping to *moderate* masculinity (Palmer 2023). In reference to Bolter (1996) and Belk (2013) the rise of “the visual” online leads to newly constructed and redefined selves.

(Re)Embodiment

People embody virtual making and lived self; doing so through their physical expression in/of virtual space (Strate & Jacobson 2003; Belk 2013). Within a cultural space, as Simone de Beauvoir (2010) posits—bodies can go through inhibited intentionality—or in other words, bodies are profoundly transformative and engaging (Lennon & Alsop 2020; Beauvoir 2010). Here, Beauvoir is contrasting the alienated experiences that help to structure bodily habits and responses between different sexes. Thus, people develop habits that are internalized and performed through movements and responses (Beauvoir 2010). Beauvoir argues here that women adopt actions that reflect their social positioning (i.e., passivity, weakness, and frailty). Such propositions lead to later works like Bourdieu (1989:17) and the “affinities of habitus.” As maintained by Bourdieu (1989:17), “social distances are inscribed in bodies or, more precisely, into the relation to the body, to language and to time—so many structural aspects of practice ignored by the subjectivist vision.” The way the environment is molded is in turn experienced by us and how our bodies engage with said environment (Lennon and Alsop 2020).

Later understandings of re-embodiment included theoretical connections to gender relations. Connell (1987) lays the groundwork for viewing masculinities and femininities through face-to-face interactions. Individual and collective practices are contained, shaped, and reformulated through structures of gender relations—and the morphing of those structures are done through those very practices (Messerschmidt et al. 2018; Connell 1987).

During the time *Gender and Power* was being written there were ongoing justifications for gender inequalities (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). Feminists countered arguments for ‘sex roles’ ideology while also developing methods to combat structural-based inequalities (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). Connell (1987) defined gender as organized actions within social relations, “a historically variable material framework” that allows for “collective consciousness and group coordination,” “as well as individual performances and personalities” to take on meanings at a micro-level (Messerschmidt et al. 2018:14; Connell, 1987).

Gender Performance

Beauvoir’s recognition of learnt bodily habits informed later theories of gender as a performance. Candace West and Don Zimmerman’s ‘doing gender’ refers to a series of accomplishments one can achieve that solidifies their gender. Although the theory has received a wide range of scrutiny, it is still considered a conceptual breakthrough for many sociological, gender, and feminist scholars (Messerschmidt 2009). One clear argument, presented by Deutsch (2007) and Risman (2009), refers to the process of ‘undoing gender’. In both conceptualizations, ‘undoing gender’ intends to move the theory of ‘doing gender’ out of the binary. ‘Doing difference’, developed by West and Fenstermaker (1995), extends the concept ‘doing gender’ to race and class. West and Fenstermaker (1995:30) move the theory forward as it helps to understand “how people experience gender, race, and class simultaneously.”

For Cook (2016) and Miller (2002) the application of “doing gender and “doing difference” was crucial to their understandings of female gangs. Cook (2016) underscores the expectations binding people to gendered scripts. People are held accountable when conforming (and not conforming) to gender scripts (Cook 2016). Thus, “through social life, we learn to ‘be a man’ or ‘act like a lady’ and when we fail, or refuse, we are held accountable for this failure or

refusal” (Cook 2016:10). In social settings, such as forming gangs, accomplishing your gender not only is a situated accomplishment, but it can mean life or death. In the case of Miller’s (2002) analysis of women in gangs as identifying as “one of the guys,” she highlights the importance of not overperforming masculinity. Instead, these women have a series of resources when drawing upon masculine gender scripts to allow them to properly perform masculinity (Miller 2002).

Gendered performances and gender scripts are insightful when researching gym-bros and fit-fluencers. Gendered performances help to highlight how gym bros and fit-fluencers overtly draw upon masculine scripts. The overtly masculine resources drawn for gym bros may include, for example, hyper-masculine poses in pictures. Even self-identifying as a “bro” or “chad” here might enhance one’s masculine identity.

Gender Relations

In Connell’s (1987) book *Gender and Power* she includes a section labeled “Unitary Models and Sex Difference Research.” In it she coins the term “sexual character,” the psychological conception of gender that frames men and women in opposition to each other, especially in their physical and mental traits. These distinctions fall under the purview of ‘sex differences’ and ‘sex roles’, where explanations of sexual character are formed and solidified (Connell 1987). In this though, Connell (1987) questions the unitary value of ‘sex roles’ and ‘sex differences’ in differentiating and distinguishing characteristics between women and women. What Connell (1987) critiques is thus the framing of men and women as oppositional to each other through the purview and verbiage of ‘sex differences’ and ‘sex roles’.

Femininities and masculinities are not produced separately—rather, achieved together through processes of gender order (Connell 2005). There are various states of existence where

gender order can be seen, as in the division of labor, power relations/emotional relations, and “symbolization.” Symbolization here involves the incessant nature of mass media in its role of reproducing gendered imagery (Connell 2005). For Connell (2005), gender is dynamically and historically produced. External and internal tendencies cause shifts in the gender order (Connell 2005; Lennon & Alsop 2020). As maintained by Lennon and Alsop (2020:89), “external tendencies include the development of mass communication, processes of urbanization, the proliferation of new technologies, and the mechanisms of capitalist production that in turn are both gendered and impact on gendered structures and practices.”

Relative to our gender is the relations we form with those of differing genders. *Gender and Power* compose gender relations into three substructures: power, production, and cathexis. Connell (1987) lays the groundwork for viewing masculinities and femininities arranged in face-to-face social interactions, which in turn transforms into globalized displays of patriarchal dominations. Individual and collective practices are contained, shaped, and reformulated through structures of gender relations, as well as the morphing of those structures by those very practices (Messerschmidt et al. 2018; Connell, 1987). For example, Connell (1987) notes the long history of sex differences in divisions of labor, separating families into holders of “gender regimes” capable of extending and taking away power (i.e., mothers with their children, husbands with their wives). Gender regimes, or “patterns of gendered relations” in any given institution works at a local and global level for Connell (Lennon & Alsop 2020:88). Gender relations in a society refers to ‘the gender order’ whereas gender relations in an institution refers to ‘gender regimes’ (Messerschmidt et al. 2018:36). The importance in this is that gender is grounded in collective agency, which in turn can be “constrained and enabled” by social structures (Messerschmidt et al. 2018:36).

The 1970s and 1980s saw a rise in academic understandings of male sex roles—in particular, the ways in which boys and men are socialized into this role (Connell 2005). As Connell (2005) underscores, empirical research during this time looked at the emergence of plural masculinities; or the differences in which gender is constructed in different cultures; instances of hierarchal and hegemonic social relations (such as the discourse on hegemonic masculinities); collective masculinities, or masculinities in groups and institutions; men’s bodies as “arenas” for uncovering masculine patterns; constructions of masculinities through group/individual actions/activities; masculinities as contradictory “states of being”; and the dynamics which arise during the processes by which masculinities are reconstructed during historical moments.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is the prevailing form of masculinity due to its narrow-idealized ideas of men (i.e., boils down men to their physicality, interests, and authority) (Sumpter 2015). As stated by Pascoe (2003:7), “hegemonic masculinity, the type of gender practice that, in a given space and time, supports gender inequality, is at the top of this hierarchy.” As further stated by Connell (2005:55), “the conditions thus exist for the production of a hegemonic masculinity on a world scale, that is to say, a dominant form of masculinity that embodies, organizes, and legitimates men’s domination in the gender order as a whole.” Hegemonic masculinity thus allows for dominance of men over women to continue through patterns of practice (not just identities or sets of role expectations) (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Men and women who produce forms of masculinity and femininity are privileged under hegemonic masculine systems, and benefit by reproducing such a system (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

The group is the “bearer” of masculinity (Connell 1995:108). In Sumpters (2015) research on men’s meat consumption he overviewed how men locate their masculinity within meat consumption habits. There was an apparent embodiment of hegemonic masculinity through increased levels of meat consumption and homosociality, instead of creating oppositional forms of masculinity (Sumpter 2015). Last to note from this study was the meat alternatives consumed by vegetarian men, who were perceived to be more “feminine” due to their eating habits (Sumpter 2015). Vegetarian men continued hiding behind the guise of hegemonic masculinity by eating masculine versions of meat substitutes (Sumpter 2015). Thus, chosen nutrient supplements, diet restrictions, and the insertion of steroids into one’s body to obtain a desired “look” might indicate points of hegemonic reproduction in the daily lives of fit-fluencers and gym bros. Within this discussion of hegemonic masculinities, there are nonhegemonic masculinities that arise, with their own distinct characteristics.

Non-Hegemonic masculinities

Another type of masculinity outside of hegemonic masculinity is complicit masculinity. Complicit masculinity describes men who benefit from hegemonic masculinity but do not enact it (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). Subordinated masculinity describes men who may be positioned powerfully in terms of gender but not in terms of class or race (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). An example can be seen in Kristen Schilt’s *Just One of the Guys?*, where she looks at the persistence of gender inequality through a case study of transgender men. Men find themselves complicit in the continuation of gender inequality through workplace situations (Schilt 2011). Schilt (2011) found that—while choices made by men and women may differ—these choices were made within normative gender expectations, holding men and women accountable if they are not followed.

Hybrid masculinities are selective incorporations of identity and self, taken from marginalized and subordinate masculinities and femininities into gender performances, practices, and identities (Messerschmidt et al. 2018:258). Hybrid masculinities in *Gender Reckoning* (Messerschmidt et al. 2018:256), is “the selective incorporation of identity elements typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities into privileged men’s gendered performances and identities.” Recall Sumpter’s (2015) work on masculinized meat consumption. Although those men were vegetarian or vegan and did not eat meat, *they still felt the pressure to*. Hybrid masculinity follows this same logic, where the processes of power, domination, and gender relations are obscured and reproduced, even when individuals might reject forms of hegemonic masculinity that uphold it. Although the men in Sumpter’s (2015) disagree with the consumption of meat, they still abide by such a practice *in their own way*.

When performing hypermasculinity, there is a production of gendered identities and orders (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). The podcast *Fresh and Fit*, launched by Walter Weeks and Myron Gaines, boasts 1.36 million subscribers and states that it is “the #1 Men’s Podcast in the WORLD! We provide the TRUTH to Females, Fitness, and Finances.” A phrase repeated continuously throughout their podcast by Myron is “chivalry is dead and women killed it.” In one podcast titled “Women need to hear this” he goes on to state that feminism has allowed for women to gain more power, thus causing them to become more “masculine.” The “gains” made by women are framed as negative, further implying that men will be able to make less “gains” if feminism continues to empower women. The concept has been used to explain misogynistic behaviors and identities reproduced in groups (Messerschmidt et al. 2018). *Fresh and Fit* falls under the many podcasts intentionally perpetuating a “hypermasculine” image, with its hosts

going so far to even claim that they themselves would be categorized as “high value males” or “alphas.”

Cyborg masculinities refer to men who take on “mechanical tropes” in describing themselves (Potts 2005). In other words, this type of man becomes a byproduct of his “human-drug relationship” (Potts 2005:4). Consider *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelly. The novel follows a doctor who devotes his life work to creating and crafting a “perfect” man. In the case of bodybuilders and the like, the act of steroid use and testosterone injection may establish a sense of masculine identity alongside “correcting” any undesirable traits. As stated by Haraway (1991:152), “they could not achieve man’s dream, only mock it. They were not man, an author himself, but only a caricature of that masculinist reproductive dream.” The conceptualization of the cyborg includes distinctions between animal-human, machine, and the physical and non-physical interactions humans have with materiality (Haraway 1991). What is further explored here is the “figuration of formation, a material and metaphorical shaping of hybrid worlds” (McCormack 1999:159). In other words, as claimed by McCormack (1999:159):

Images of cyborg fitness are therefore not static snapshots of hybrids. Rather, they are part of dynamic processes through which potentially inhabitable and embodied worlds are ‘worked out’. They suggest associations, forms of living, ways of being, metaphorically and materially realizing complex, hybrid relations. Such figurations work to naturalize the formation of ‘monsters’, neither human nor non human.

To become a “monster” includes a willingness and construction of embodiment (both physical and psychological), as well as the obtainment and circulation of material possessions. As McCormack illustrates, ideas of “embodied fitness” of human and machine relation (e.g., the utilization of gym equipment by humans) can be explained through the construction of cyborg

figures. As I intend to illustrate, gym bros go through the same, complex processes of “embodied fitness” with their relations to technological advances, potentially developing a digitized masculine persona.

Typifying these various masculinities does not necessarily mean that they individually define a person. Rather, they can be taken as adaptive characteristics of masculinity (Kelly and Aunspach 2020). Refer to Millers (2002) research again: there are a series of resources when drawing upon masculine gender scripts creating a standard on how to properly perform those scripts. Thus, these typified masculinities include resources and tools allowing men and masculine people to maladaptively accomplish masculinity.

On and Offline Fitness Spaces

The aspect of sharing, especially in the digital age, allows for parts of us, as demonstrated online and offline, to be accessed and spread more widely (Belk 2013). As further underscored by Belk (2013:486) “Both the act of sharing and the sense of joint possession enhance the sense of imagined community and aggregate extended self in a digital age.” What Belk (2013) is describing here is shared *experiences, identities, and selves* through joint usage of possessions (computers, phones, etc.). What is further demonstrated here is the group identity formed through sharing posts, images, and videos online (Belk 2013).

Extended Self

Belk (1988) further argues that contamination is the process of a person “rubbing off” on a possession. Here, the same process of contamination can be applied to peoples attachment to digitized “possessions” and material objects. A concern for Belk (1988:151) “is not with the medical sense of germ contamination and spread of disease, but with the symbolic contamination involved in involuntarily incorporating another into one’s extended self.” This is not to say that

the process of contamination is inherently negative, only to ask the question of who benefits from such a practice and why? Said differently, who is benefitting from collaborations between fit-fluencers, organizations, and brands?

Consumption. Consider again McCormack (1999) and the *Geographies of Fitness*. Having a ‘fit body’ is not fixed (McCormack 1999). Discourses on flexibility include aspects of job security (e.g., available working hours), increased productivity and motivation management of employees, individual responsibility, and the mobilization in the manufacturing and marketing sphere (McCormack 1999). With regards to job security, time management, and performance management, strict schedules and goals must be met, creating a demanding consumeristic and competitive environment. The same can be said for “gains,” as well as the fitness and nutrition regimens strictly followed and endorsed by fit-fluencers and gym bros. “Gains” involves constant attention, perseverance, and strategizing, just as with corporate organizations and highly competitive work environments. As underscored further by McCormack (1999:162):

It seems more and more to be the case that one must demonstrate a certain degree of corporeal fitness in order to fit within the fast, fluid, and flexible model of corporate fitness, thereby reducing the risk of being marginalized as dead weight without value-adding potential.

Chopra and colleagues (2020) in their research of influencer marketing and consumer behavior reveal insights into the selective measures undertaken by organizations and marketers in their collaborations with influencers. In this selective process it was found that authenticity (or the perception of authenticity) is important when selecting a particular influencer to promote a product or brand. Consumers here are more likely to buy and use a product of an influencer they are comfortable with and find “trustworthy” (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter 2022; Chopra, Avhad, &

Jaju 2020). As McCormack (1999:162) argues: “neo-liberal discursive and political economies of fitness generate a plethora of marketing opportunities for corporations seeking to sell corporeal solutions for individuals struggling to cope in an increasingly fast and flexible world.” Just briefly scrolling through GymTok will have anyone stumbling through motivational audios and “transition” TikToks (usually depicting long-term body transformations). Within the folds of inspirational quotes and fitness updates are “geographies of fitness” streamlined into mainstream forms of digitized masculinities.

As introduced by Abidin (2015) “influencers are everyday, ordinary internet users who accumulate a relatively large following on blogs and social media through the textual and visual narration of their personal lives and lifestyles, engage with their following in the digital and physical spaces, and monetize their following by integrating ‘advertorials’ into the blog or social media posts.” Social media is a means through which sites of information and discourse can be stored, maintained, and shared, further influencing our everyday activities. Those that use social media can be directly influenced by those they follow through the process of sharing information, news, opinions, and goals (Gammoudi, Sendi, & Omri 2022). The influencer marketing landscape consists not only of the growth of the engagement by followers with influencers, but the marketing strategies undertaken by organizations and the like to profit off their popularity (Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju 2020). Different pockets of communities have emerged out of the “influencer marketing landscape” with influencers dominating these spaces as “experts” (Abidin 2015; Chopra, Avhad, & Jaju 2020; Gammoudi, Sendi, & Omri 2022).

Gym-Bros

Gym bros must uphold certain standards of “enoughness” (Haak 2021). In Becker’s (1963) *Outsiders*, he describes the process of rule breaking and rule enforcing through an

ethnographic study of marijuana users and dance musicians. These groups create ideologies framing their actions (e.g., smoking marijuana) as permissible. Those who condemn and enforce these rules, which create “outsiders,” have their own defining ideologies and justifications for enforcing said rules (e.g., creating anti-marijuana legislation). The idea of “enoughness” separates gym bros from others. Thus, group identity for gym bros is deeply tied to their own view of themselves and their “enoughness.”

The aspect of “enoughness” is not entirely a negative ideological pursuit for gym bros. Heffernan, Woznicki, and Taylor’s (2022) research on bodybuilders found participants creating and experiencing positive spaces within their bodybuilding community. These spaces can be categorized, found in the text, as “friendly,” supportive, with barely any instances of “toxic masculinity” (Heffernan 2022). Just as what was seen with fit-fluencers being motivators and supporters for millions of followers in Durau and colleagues’ research can be seen with Heffernan and colleagues’ (2022) research. Important to note is the positive forms of masculinity that may arise from fitness spaces such as these. It would be imperative to not only explore the negative sides of fitness communities online and gym bro culture, but also determine the unique forms of positive masculinities arising from such spaces, like comradery, friendly competition, and supportive outlets.

Fitness “Experts” and Gender. Durau and colleagues (2022) included the aspect of gender to help moderate the effectiveness of fit-fluencers. In their findings they concluded that a central characteristic for many of these influencers was that they were viewed as trustworthy, and often their presence on social media helped to motivate those viewing their content to exercise (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter 2022). With regards to body image, the findings indicated less relevance for men than women (Durau, Diehl, & Terlutter 2022). However, studies

surrounding fitness and bodybuilding culture also note the strained relationship men can have regarding their body.

The evolution of “influencers” online has allowed for carefully selected users on social media sites to become experts. Their “expert” knowledge with fitness and health produces an influencer marketing landscape, where they are given the “platform” to offer advice, sell and promote products, and market their work-out routines to their millions of followers. “Gym-bros,” or “gym-rats,” although recognized sometimes as influencers themselves, identify more with the terms. “Enoughness” for “gym bros” is deeply tied to ideological ideas of masculinity in the community.

Understanding how men and women locate themselves in relation to one another is a crucial part of this research. Not only does distinctly drawing upon gender relations help to flesh out the masculinities formulated by fit-fluencers and “gym bros,” but it helps to flesh out how these men define their masculinity and manhood with femininity. The idea of “cyborg” masculinities here helps me as a researcher understand how masculinity online has evolved to be an assemblage of past, present, and newly imagined masculinities. What is to follow then is an in-depth analysis of not just the physical possessions bought and promoted by fit-fluencers and “gym bros,” but how these agents of knowledge help to “influence” masculinity, body, and health.

Chapter 3 - Step-by-Step

This is a social media content analysis of gym-bros, and avid gym-goers on the subsection on TikTok, referred to as #GymTok. GymTok is an online space where users on TikTok can seek out advice and motivation fitness videos. Due to its popularity, GymTok videos are downloaded and re-uploaded to other social media platforms, like Instagram and YouTube. By focusing on a case study of fit-fluencers and “gym bros,” I aimed to describe the transmission mechanisms of the meaning and practices of masculinity between virtual and non-virtual interactions and practices. Gym-bros and fit-fluencers are anyone on GymTok giving out advice on fitness and health. Careful attention was paid to TikToks during COVID-19. The community on GymTok was blossoming well into COVID-19, with people working out at home or at the gym. Therefore, videos captured during COVID=19 capture the growth in popularity of GymTok.

Data

Data was collected from comments and short-form videos found on TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube. TikToks were only included under certain hashtags, like #GymTok. Data was further narrowed down to gym-related and fitness-related videos during the COVID- 19 (from March 2021 to March 2024). I included these dates specifically to show the growth in engagement and viewership on #GymTok well into the COVID-19 pandemic. I began collecting data in early January 2024, scrolling through, saving, and noting the content on GymTok. The process of collecting data went until mid-February. Oracle (an analytics tool), Word processing, and Excel were each used to organize, store, and analyze the data. Overall, the hashtags I ended up including in this study can be found in **Appendix A, Table A.3**. These hashtags were consistently used alongside the hashtag “gymtok.”

Sampling

Over 100 TikToks and 200 comments (across TikTok, Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube) were included in the study. Ten videos on YouTube shorts and two sub-Reddit's were included in the sample. I selected the most liked and responded to comments on several of these short-form videos. Further sampling was done when selecting popular gym-bros and fit-fluencers on TikTok and Instagram. 12 fit-fluencers were included in the study. The threshold for selecting fit-fluencers depended on whether they had a large following (100K+), and their viewership of TikTok (at least a million likes on their TikTok page), as well as whether they had their own brand, merchandise, and ties of corporations like GymShark. I looked at their biographies on Instagram and TikTok—determining whether they have their brands and products “linked” there. These influencers slightly differ, only in their commentary and “sketch” style TikTok's on gym culture. Regardless, each of these influencers have presence on TikTok by being able to gain such large viewership.

Coding. The entire series of TikToks, YouTube shorts, and Reddit threads were coded for masculinity, health, and body themed words (with consideration for the appearance of participants with disabilities, injuries, and body conditions). I noted the language used within the GymTok community, writing down any key terms and ‘slang’ that define masculinity, health, and body in the community. This list of terms can be found in **Appendix A, Table A.1.**

I considered certain categories, like gender relations, masculinity/manhood, and audience-influencer based interrelations in my initial coding. For gender relations, I questioned how men and women interacted with one another. Part of this was looking at how men reacted to women sharing/being in the same space (gym) as them. Early masculinities/manhood codes consisted of categorizing how masculinity was shaped for fit-fluencers and gym bros. These

codes consisted of hyper-masculine imagery and what they considered “being a man” meant. This progressed into me reckoning with gender overall online, not just masculinities and manhood. For example, I found it difficult to exclude mentions of femininities, as women fit-influencers and “gym girls” were common on GymTok. Lastly, audience—influencer interaction in the beginning were framed through the aspect of trust and authenticity. These two variables remained, while others like audiences supporting fit-fluencers, or fit-fluencers wanting to invoke motivation for audiences emerged from online fitness spaces.

As the research progressed, I included codes like movement, appearance, inspiration, and progress. It helped in the coding scheme to use terms gym-bros were using, like “natty,” “juiced,” and “gains.” Eventually, I ended up with a culmination of codes, which can be seen in **Appendix B Figure B.2.**

Composite Narratives. I aimed to represent and define narratives on GymTok thoroughly and fully. This involved compiling videos in key descriptors, where I observed consistent body language, actions, words, and movement. The intention here was to develop a composite narrative woven together stories and videos. This, in turn, would allow for data to be representative of multiple participants, allowing for complex ideas and participants’ voices to be heard. Last to mention, composite narratives allow for anonymity and present complex, situated accounts from users (Willis 2018).

Missing Data. Although prior research discussed narcissism among bodybuilders, I chose to exclude the code from my research. My focus here is on health, and any bodily conditions/injuries. Instead, I included the code “appearance” as to not only address an individual’s tendency to focus on their appearance, but also those individuals who are insecure, sensitive, and verbally frustrated with their appearance.

Data Analysis

Thematic, abductive analysis was adopted in the study. Abductive research combines both inductive and deductive approaches (Thompson 2022). According to Thompson (2022), abductive research seeks to reveal gaps in theoretical knowledge. These gaps are often unexpected and not anticipated by researchers. Therefore, abductive research allowed for creative ways for constructing theory and themes. This research aimed to include empirical data and extant theoretical understanding (Thompson 2022). A combination of both data driven results and theoretical analysis makes the approach both “recursive” and developed within areas where phenomena is “adequately explained by extant literature” (Thompson 2022:1411). Thompson (2022) describes an 8 step approach to thematic abductive analysis, which includes: “transcription and familiarization,” “coding,” “codebook,” “development of themes,” “theorizing,” “comparison of datasets,” “data display,” and “writing up.” For example, when writing up definitions to codes, I had to be explicit when defining the code “injury” and when I applied it (i.e., when participants mentioned having an injury) and when I did not apply it (i.e., injury was not mentioned by participants). The data display, which showcases my four themes, maps out how each code connects to each theme (found in **Appendix B Figure B.2**).

Emoji Analysis. A brief emoji analysis was included with the analysis of comments on TikTok. This helped to draw upon the “emotions” and feelings of participants in the study. Emojis convey emotions, tones, and context (Bai et al., 2019). Common emojis were included, especially if they helped to explain a code (like masculinity). For example, support from users to gym-bros and fit-fluencers using the fire emoji. The list of emojis common on GymTok is in **Appendix A, Table A.2**.

Social Network Analytics

I drew some key marketing, consumer, and demographic insights on TikTok from Statista, a statistics database comprising data from over 18,000 sources. According to consumer insight on Statista (2024), it is estimated that 3.96 billion users are on social networking sites. TikTok has 1.5 million users currently, while Instagram has 2 million users. 2.5 million users are active on YouTube and 1.22 million users on Reddit (Consumer Insight 2024). Refer to the table below, which shows the top five social networking sites in the United States.

Demographics on TikTok

TikTok is a platform for short-form mobile video. TikTok is most popular with Generation Z and 55 percent of users on TikTok are female. Furthermore, consumers on TikTok have upper secondary education (39%), while also having higher levels of income (37%) (Consumer Insight 2024). Middle earner consumers make 31 percent of users and lower income users make up 31 percent of users (Consumer Insight 2024). 30 percent of users are more likely to live in a partners and children household, while 15 percent live in a single household and 12 percent live in a single parent household (Consumer Insight 2024).

Some key insights into consumer lifestyle on TikTok include life values, main interests, hobbies and leisure activities, sports activities, and sports followed. 48 percent of TikTok users report being successful as more important than other social media users (Consumer Insight 2024). 50 percent of TikTok users report a happy relationship as equally important than to other social media users (Consumer Insight 2024). 41 percent of users on TikTok report health and fitness as a relatively prevalent interest (Consumer Insight 2024). 38 percent report fashion and beauty as a relative interest (Consumer Insight 2024). Fitness, aerobics, and cardio are more popular activities for TikTok users (15%) than other social media users (Consumer Insight 2024).

In terms of consumer attitudes, 32 percent of TikTok users have bought products because an influencer advertised the item to them (Consumer Insight 2024). Furthermore, 15 percent report having difficulty distinguishing between advertisement and content. What is more interesting here is 39 percent have liked company posts and 32 percent follow companies on TikTok (Consumer Insight 2024). 65 percent have liked posts by other users, 61 percent have followed other users, and 60 percent comment on peoples' posts (Consumer Insight 2024).

Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit. This is not a sole analysis of TikTok alone, but how TikTok content can be transportable to other social media platforms. TikTok's can be downloaded and reuploaded on Instagram reels and YouTube shorts, i.e., short form videos. GymTok videos have been reuploaded in this manner, most of the time with the TikTok logo still visible. Reddit functioned in a different manner for my analysis. I utilized the discussion aspect on Reddit to garner current opinions on fitness culture, as it appears today. In those discussions, some Redditors post their frustrations toward certain fitness "trends" on TikTok.

For fit-fluencers, gym bros, and the average gym goer/consumer, it is common for them to have TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and YouTube accounts. Fit-fluencers especially utilize all these platforms, as they are establishing their brand through multiple 'routes'. Fans of fit-fluencers will sometimes follow them on multiple platforms, just as they will follow companies on multiple platforms. Fit-fluencers further post to each on these accounts regularly, thus 'pushing out' content constantly. This can be demanding, as platforms like YouTube vary in what type of content is most often posted than say Twitter or Instagram. Companies are like fit-fluencers here, as they hold multiple accounts and constantly post to each.

Algorithms. Algorithms vary from platform to platform, but it remains that what is liked will be consistently seen. A range of platforms, like TikTok, will even track how long users

spend watching content. Algorithms are meant to cater to users. Cater can look like here as showing items and products similar to the ones users have previously posted. Catering can also make it so that multiple platforms are aware of your interests. For example, Instagram may show you gym products from GymShark after you googled the company. This is not new information, but it is nonetheless important to articulate, especially when discussing the limitations of my research.

Some key concerns with the structure of platforms like TikTok is the ability to filter content. I created my own account, and rather than building an algorithm to show me fitness TikTok's, I sought them out on GymTok and FitTok. While this was sorted out, I reckoned with the chance of comments sections being monitored and filtered. Furthermore, the strict user guidelines by TikTok regulate and monitor's content. Taken together, while TikTok is user friendly, there are still certain elements to the platform that researchers need to be aware of when researching communities on there.

Considering the Ethics When Doing Online Research

There are some ethical concerns to consider when pulling comments, discussion posts, and videos/pictures online. As Adams (2024) writes, there are three salient considerations that researchers who are conducting online based research should consider. Consent and autonomy of online participants, acknowledging risk and vulnerabilities of participants, and evaluating research context were all considered here (Adams 2024).

The use of participant data—by drawing upon online comments, videos, discussions threads, and images—is without the explicit consent nor permission from the original posters (Adams 2024). The common argument made, as noted by Adams (2024), is that these materials lie in the public domain, thus, they are “free game” for researchers. This removes any ethical

considerations for approval of this type of data. Any intellectual property and content are both owned by TikTok, and the creator/licensors (TikTok Terms of Service). However, content is also allowed to be distributed and transmitted to third-party services (like Instagram or YouTube), even without the original creator uploading them themselves. This poses an issue in terms of true intellectual property, as content may become “viral” without the consent nor recognition of the original poster. The transfer and use of content, not only by third parties, but by researchers such as myself “removes any user-autonomy in the handling and control of such user data” (Adams 2024:51). This perspective is important—as data is transferred and archived and used—whether intended or unintended—in negative ways. The original posters of such comments have their thoughts forever archived in this manner, with the inability to contextualize or “take back” their original comments. These comments may even be deleted by the original posters but live on as a permanent record through researchers’ findings. All things considered, it is important to acknowledge participant harm with the removal of autonomy and consent by use of their “words.”

Furthermore, according to the TikTok Terms of Service, “material that, in the sole judgment of TikTok, is objectionable or which restricts or inhibits any other person from using the Services, or which may expose TikTok, the Services or its users to any harm or liability of any type.” For my research, I acknowledged the use of TikTok and user content, especially when there is a liability to harm and exposure. Many consider the platforms and communities they are posting their content to as “safe spaces.” As stated by Adams (2024:52):

While Reddit users may consent—as discussed earlier—to their postings existing in the wider Reddit context, the isolation of postings to represent and unaltered permanent record, may cause significant anxiety for already vulnerable individuals and groups

should they recognize that their comments are now represented outside their original context, immortalized and unedited; viewable to the public, and potentially used to support arguments or findings for which users did not consent to (and—completely conceivably—may not necessarily agree with).

The same can be said of TikTok, where users may necessarily be aware of their content being distributed to other platforms but are not necessarily aware—nor agree to—their content being used by academics, and for such wide audiences. Their content—in this way, has potential and risk of being represented outside of the intended context and use.

The most serious consideration as posed by Adams (2024) is the vulnerability, harm, and risk to participants with the data not being sufficiently anonymized. There is a considerable risk to identifying unsuspecting participants, as comments, and even “anonymous” accounts can be traced back to original posters. Even descriptors such as the content of a video runs the risk of being identified. Since some of the TikTok’s and influencers that I included in my research have such high viewing, there is a potential risk for “participants” being identified. Furthermore, TikTok functions different than Reddit, as most TikTok users link their accounts and use their personal pictures/videos. Even the use of comments has shown to be reverse-searchable (Adams 2024).

A Message from the Author

As a feminist, gender scholar interested in masculinity studies, I am aware of the potential for bias. Being an outsider in this regard always carries the risk of limited access (Connell 2010). However, I also recognize that fit-fluencers and gym bros are not totally disinclined to share their stories online. I am able look at fitness culture through a particular lens, lending to masculinity studies in a unique manner. Feminists have struggled with understanding

men and their perspectives (hooks 2015). Early feminists' movements (and some current ones) have been deemed as inherently anti-men and misandrist. It is a goal for this work to present feminist scholarship and research as something to be useful in the pursuits of studying men and masculinities. The core of this is showing the passionate, loving perspective feminism provides.

I have some great men in my life that have taught me a great deal of lessons. They have taught me how to love and be loved, just as the women around me have. They have taught me to be caring, compassionate, and kind. I want to make my respect for men clear through my work. Thus, I am coming from a place of curiosity and patience. I want other to have the opportunity to grow up with positive male influences, just as I did. One of the ways of ensuring this is understanding the positive (and negative) aspects of modern masculinity and manhood today. By selecting fitness culture as my main field of study I also want to draw upon the assumptions often made about young men and boys surrounding their bodies and physical activity. It is important to flesh out truly healthy ways men and young boys can express themselves, both on- and offline. The internet, of course, had its own unique influences on me. Early Instagram made it known what "attractive" bodies should and should not look like. I was not raised as a man, nor did I go through "boyhood," but that does not mean I necessarily must separate in my experiences with them.

Posts, comments, and content may contain sensitive information. I aimed, however, to not apply characteristics to individuals who utilize GymTok, rather, my goal was to understand broader issues of health, body image, and fitness. I implored several measures to help keep these participants' lives private. I modified and edited comments made by users and creators on TikTok. I included bare-bone descriptors for the videos, to make it difficult to pin-point which specific TikTok I am discussing. I did not include names of influencers here, to keep their

anonymity. Visual images have been removed entirely, as it would risk the user's identity.

Instead, broader consistent findings will be noted across the fitness community online. I chose to edit/remove titles to Reddit discussion posts, and only include (broadly) the communities I pulled from on Reddit. You will see the following applications and considerations in the next chapter, the results section.

Chapter 4 - Final Stretch

People mainly associate the gym and exercise with weight loss. To see you and your transformation to a healthier version of yourself is incredible [Anonymous TikTok user].

Understanding fitness culture as it appears on social media platforms like TikTok, YouTube, Instagram, and Reddit allowed for a multitude of viewpoints, positions, and understandings to arise. On GymTok, gym-bros and fit-fluencers have various discussions, all pertaining to how they promote and perceive masculinity, body, and health. What will follow is a brief composite narrative of the videos I most found on GymTok.

Viewers are bombarded with fitness and health related videos upon opening TikTok and searching “gymtok.” Users briefly scrolling through GymTok may come across TikToks where the creator will show an older picture or video of themselves. If the creator is a young boy or man, this picture is often him appearing skinny, attempting to flex. The music in the background of these videos is intense, with loud bass. After a couple of seconds, the picture or video will change, revealing a “newer” version of the creator. For these young boys and men, they appear more muscular and confident. They are posing, with the veins in their arms popping. Sweat is dripping off their face, and onto the tank top they are sporting. They appear exhausted with their chest rising and falling.

In other videos, gym-bros start by adjusting the camera, making sure that they are in focus. They back up, showing their full body. This is where they pose in their gym attire, which they purchased from GymShark, a fitness company popular among gym-bros and fit-fluencers. The brand GymShark is linked in their bio. Clicking the link to GymShark will take you to their website, where you can find the same attire the gym-bro is wearing. If you are seeking to get gym attire cheaper, you can use the code provided by the gym-bro for a reduced percentage off

the order. For young boys and men, they are wearing shorts and a tank top. For girls and women, a matching gym set. A matching gym set is a matching top and bottom. These types of sets are similar to other gym attire found on fitness companies websites and are popular amongst women at the gym.

The lighting varies in GymTok videos. Some TikToks are made with a good camera and lighting. The subject in it may appear with rippling muscles and a dominating frame. These videos are often cinematic, with the lighting dramatically falling upon the figure, alluring viewers to continue watching. Lighting can also be natural, with subjects and participants working out at the gym and filming it. These videos often are busy, with other people walking in and out of frame. The sole focus shifts from the participants/creator and onto the gym, with work-out equipment, mats, and other objects in eyeshot.

These videos represent the visual, ‘aesthetic’, ideal imagery users on GymTok enjoy. The millions of views, comments, and ‘stitches’ can attest to the popularity of the videos. Thus, the TikToks here help to visually stimulate ideas of masculinity, body, and health.

The categories laid out in Chapter three will now be further split into three subsections: self, relation, and collective. For self, I will present findings regarding how users view themselves, the “transformations” and physical individual “aesthetics” they strive for. Relation covers how users view themselves in relation to others on the platform. This is a range of viewpoints, including how users view other users, how audiences view gym-bros, how gym-bros view each other, and finally, the relationship between corporations and fit-fluencers. Furthermore, under this section I will include gender relations. This includes how women and men are situated in relation to each other. The last subsection will cover collective identities online. Part of this underscores the support found in the GymTok community, as well as other

fitness communities online, and the advice shared amongst group members. Motivation is also an important aspect here, as the visual aspects on TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram serve as a tool to elicit motivation for audiences and gym-bros.

Self

Self presents itself through one's progress that they see. Some TikTok's present progress through slides, where the "creator" will post pictures of themselves throughout their workout journey. Progress is also seen through what I refer to here as check-ins, where the creator will update the audience on their growth. Growth here can be considered both physical (e.g., muscle growth) or mental (i.e., spiritual growth). For example, as one creator on TikTok states:

This is your sign to start going to the gym. My progress might have been better if I didn't take a break. Even though it isn't much progress, I've changed physically but more mentally. Before, I used to struggle waking up and going to the gym. I used to see it as a chore but now *I can't function properly if I don't workout.*

Working out—with connection to progress—is described here as something where, without it, this user cannot function. Their day-to-day life as they describe it is better when working out.

Functionality can be interpreted multiple ways across TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, and Reddit. On the subreddit r/AskMen, a redditor posed a question asking other users on the platform their personal stories on how the gym helped them. One commenter expressed how they had been in a motorcycle accident causing them to lose their leg. This commenter—who self identifies as a 'gym bro' writes:

I started working out at 21, but at 25 I was in a life changing motorcycle accident. This caused me to lose my leg. It took months to heal. I eventually had to relearn how to walk again while using a prosthetic. I was eager to get back to working out because working

made me feel like myself. Lifting was a way to rebuild my life and show myself I was still alive. Now I hope to inspire people at the gym.

As I have previously stated, bodies are not fixed. Injuries, accidents, and unforeseen circumstances happen to all of us, as happened with this person. Though, the loss of their leg did not deter them from working out. Instead, lifting helped to “rebuild” their life, to remind them that they are still alive.

Another user on TikTok posted a video of their progress as an Olympian. Only difference in his videos versus the other on the platform was his visible disability—him being in a wheelchair. What these users are teaching us here is that not all parts are needed to make a whole—they can function regardless of their injuries or disabilities. Nor do injuries and the like hinder their ability to workout. On the flip side, some view body and mind as singular parts of a whole, meaning that all parts of the body must be functional to be active.

As one user on TikTok writes (about her sister, who is a bodybuilder with Down Syndrome):

She has a unique perspective, an abundance of love to give, and a spirit that refuses to be limited by anyone else’s expectations. She teaches us that our differences should be celebrated, not feared, and that every individual has something beautiful to offer.

Some of the TikTok’s posted to GymTok exhibit that emphasis on self, and self-expression. As the quote above emphasizes, there is something every individual has to offer. This message especially becomes helpful for motivating users in their own progress. So, self becomes something to be expanded, emphasized, and worked out.

Progress is not linear here. Rather, some consider a combination of progress with different body parts or movements. Take, for example, the common term used by this

community “leg day.” Workout regimes are commonly split into segments, where you are supposed to focus on different muscle groups, such as your back or chest, to contribute to the overall progress. “Leg days,” push, and pull workouts, are steps—steps taken towards an end result. Taken together, each part of the body is almost “chiseled to perfection,” as a user commented on one TikTok.

A recurring comment on multiple “transformation” TikToks and YouTube shorts referred to the user “customizing their character.” The implication of customization here implies a similar process that is undertaken when creating characters in role-playing video games, where you get to select different parts of your character (e.g., eye color, arm length, hair style, and color, etc.). Another user commented on a “transformation” study saying “bro... she created a new character.” This idea of customization coincides with fit-fluencers embodying ‘superhuman’ strength, agility, and fitness. Users who embody “gains,” are also described as “leveling up,” i.e., accumulating points in a skill, as seen in role-playing games. In this context, the process of body “customization” acts as a form of wish fulfillment or fantasy.

Take for example a TikTok portraying a man diving under water and lifting an old anchor from the ocean floor. Sharks are actively swimming around him while he is performing this stunt. The TikTok has—at the time of writing of this paper—3.4 million likes and over 33K comments. Some comments say (paraphrasing) that ‘bro is fighting Poseidon’ or ‘man is training with Aquaman’. The tags under the TikTok are: #Gymtok, #Bodybuilding, #Gymislife, and #Weightlifting. These style videos usually portray the ‘impossible’. It involves extreme actions, such as stunts and heavy lifting (e.g., lifting a tire, rock climbing, etc.). Another comment under a video by a TikTok bodybuilder with down syndrome says:

All things aside genetically speaking, what he has achieved and what is being done is impossible.

The creator to this TikTok responded with “Anything is possible.” As another creator captioned their TikTok characterizing themselves as a supervillain, the common trend of achieving the ‘impossible’ presents itself within this community.

Similarly, the term “gigachad” appears across TikTok and YouTube shorts and is mainly mentioned regarding extreme long-term transformations that border on absurdity. These transformations follow the same framework, with the creator recounting their thought processes/choices before making the decision to ‘transform’. These decisions might be small and momentary, like a haircut, or huge like “bulking up” over years. Regardless, these videos generally end with the result being considered by the audience as a transition from the “incel” to the “gigachad.” Some comments on TikTok vary in context and subject; although a lot of them combine the term “gigachad” with being a man:

Every man has their own gigachad waiting to be awakened.

What a man [👊🍷] gigachad.

Transforming oneself through certain techniques shows up consistently across GymTok. These techniques can vary from specific workouts and nutrition regimens (such as consuming supplements) but also merge into extreme changes to the body and appearance. “Mewing” is a postural technique meant to accentuate the jawline and change the face structure. The jawline is a focal point for many “gym bros” and fit-fluencers. One influencer helps to demonstrate “mewing.” They do this by not only showing the posing technique but using a “mew” ball to grow the muscles of the jaw and face.

Gymmaxxing is a branch off “looksmaxxing,” a practice in which an individual “maximizes” their physical appearance. Gymmaxxing is essentially described on TikTok, and other social media platforms, as maximizing physical appearance through working out a lot. Both are described to be a goal for many of the young men on TikTok. Gymmaxxing and looksmaxxing also are described by viewers as a clear indicator that the person undergoing the technique is ‘putting in the work’. More extreme variants of these techniques coincide with the concept of “cutting”—in other words, dieting or reducing one’s caloric intake. Starvemaxxing is the practice of reducing calorie intake through starving oneself. As one commenter on TikTok says: “Been doing this since June. I lost over 20kg till now, but I won’t stop until I can see my ribcage in the mirror.” Another extreme technique meant to have fast results on the body is the intake of steroids or “roids.”

Although gym bros and fit-fluencers overwhelmingly call for “natural” transformations, as well as “healthy” techniques in working out, steroids are still promoted by some on TikTok. Self here is portrayed as “natural” for fit-fluencers and avid gym-goers. Many fit-fluencers, for example, claim to be natural in their social media biographies (bios for short). Even though they may claim this, some audiences question the validity of the statement, especially if they went through huge transformations in a short period of time. The subreddit “r/NattyorJuice” holds many discussion posts on this very topic, where people can comment whether they think a bodybuilder is “natty” [natural] or not. Posters will go to this subreddit to discuss famous fit-fluencers. Such posts have been made about most of the ones I included in this study. Considering the codes of “trust” and “authenticity” here enlightens us to how certain audiences relate to fit-fluencers.

It would be a mistake to not focus the consistent mention of “gains” on GymTok. Gains are not only equated to physical gains made in the gym through lifting weights and gaining muscle mass, but also are equated to long-term, overall physical, mental, and spiritual progress. Gains are framed as something to not only aspire for but seek to perpetually accumulate. As stated by one creator on TikTok: “Gains all yours!!” The idea behind gains is summed up well with one fit-fluencer’s comments: “If you can just push to the limit regardless of what your external circumstances are... that what it is all about. That is what the enlightened lifter is capable of with every lift.”

Returning to the idea of functionality in connection with the body and what it can achieve. Gains here are only considered to be fulfilled when the boundaries of the human body are pushed to their limit. This idea is where the phrase “no pain, no gain” comes in, as the aspect of pain must be present for results to emerge for fit-fluencers, gym bros, and avid gym-goers. The capabilities of what individuals can achieve in terms of muscle mass, physical gains, and overall better “mindsets” is framed as “limitless” and obtainable, but only through endless hard work, time, dedication, and effort. It is within this “grind” mindset that gains can start to be not only evident with individuals, but with audiences and outsiders. What is being produced here through the modification of self is a “better, healthier, happier” version of the individual.

Relation

When considering relations, it is important to underscore that these do not necessarily mean just relations amongst gym-goers online. Instead, relations can be gendered relations (e.g., relations between men and women), relations with possessions (e.g., gym equipment and apparel), relations between fit-fluencers and fans, relations between fit-fluencers themselves, and finally, relations between fit-fluencers and corporations. Relations can also play a key role in

how the GymTok community builds understanding of masculinity, body, and health. I will be presenting each of these findings in this section.

Gendered Relations. The gendered interactions online include that of relations between men and women in shared spaces (both on and offline). For example, some “gym girls” will post TikToks discussing their experiences with harassment at the gym. The reaction to these style of TikToks range, with comments either being in support/relating to the woman’s experience or comments questioning the validity of her experiences. In one such TikTok a woman is waiting for a man to go away so she can continue her squats. The comments under the video include:

You are basically squatting where thousands of men will see. Why are you telling us?

Just give that dude your tiktok. He can look at it there.

Another TikTok is similar, as it shows a woman working out while a man watches her do her sets. In the TikTok, the creator explains how she felt “creeped out” by the interaction. One of the commentors states: “I’m not calling her a liar but I see no dude.” Other variations of these types of comments show up under these videos, questioning the “truth” behind these women’s experiences with sexual harassment at the gym.

Comments under these posts can be supportive too, with other users commenting their own experiences with “gym creeps.” These comments include:

This shouldn’t be happening...

I had this happen to me and I told this guy “can I help you?” and he responded “what I can’t look?” I said no and left.

On a couple of subreddits, like r/NoStupidQuestions, redditors discuss these occurrences. One such redditor writes:

I've had enough encounters with men that make me uncomfortable at this point in my life that I can tell they are wanting more. I think I've only had one instance with a guy that made me uncomfortable at my current gym, but I haven't seen him in a while. He didn't even approach me, he just seemed super odd and it felt like he kept picking equipment right next to me. He kept doing this even when there were other options available. Dude was also walking around with a laptop so it was all around just weird and gave me vibes I've gotten from creepy dudes at my work (I work as an engineer, so I guess it comes with the territory a bit).

What this redditor is discussing here is not only related to relations made in the gym, but spatial interactions, where she feels as though the gym is a "territory" where such interactions may occur. Another redditor explained her experiences with going to the gym stating:

As a woman, I can generally tell when a man is looking at me in a creepy way or if they're just looking. People look at people a lot at the gym, I know I do it. I don't linger my eyes for a long period of time, but it's hard to not look at other people when you share a space with them. I think some aspect of that is just being a human. Just don't be weird about it. Hell, I'm a lesbian, so yes, I do look at women there too, but once again, its duration of the look that ends up being creepy and less about just quick glances. Most of the time if someone is looking at me, I don't even really notice because I'm too busy focusing on what I'm doing.

Further down this subreddit thread posters describe the "trend" of men looking at women at the gym being "blown out of proportion" from few viral TikToks. This in turn causing men to think women at the gym are "out to get them" if they look in their direction. The few clips of women

discussing their experiences with “creeps” at the gym has sparked into certain “trends” from content creators on TikTok.

Some male fit-fluencers will post “sketches” depicting a range of interactions with women at the gym. One such sketch involves a woman staring at him while he works out. These sketches, although portrayed as “humorous” are meant to mock women who post videos of them at the gym getting harassed. The various comments that fall under this style of TikTok reflect that of women’s videos on experiencing harassment in the gym. These include:

I’m sorry this happened to you. Gym creeps everywhere 🙄

I’m sorry you had to go through this man.

Bros a victim... smh 😒

Tired of men being treated like this... 😞

I swear men can’t just do and wear what they want without being objectified 🙄

Possessions. Possessions help in participants’ perceptions of themselves, especially if they find their extended self being represented through a physical object, like a piece of clothing. Discourses on apparel, supplement recommendation, and at-home work-out sets is consistent across GymTok. Matching “cute” gym sets are quite popular for gym-goers and “gym girls.” These gym sets can come from a range of companies, like GymShark or Lululemon. Regardless of the brand, what is important here is how these outfits “make” gym-goers feel while going to the gym. For one commenter, “seeing the girls wearing cute sets helped me with my confidence when I was losing weight. Motivation ❤️💪🏻💪🏻.” The connection between one’s possessions, like matching work-out outfits, directly relates for some as a motivator. Although, some also verbalized how outfits can affect their perception of their own body. Take for example another commenter on TikTok who said: “I needed this 🧘🏻 I feel like I look toned in my little gym set

and then catch myself at a bad angle in the gym mirror and it ruins my whole mood 😬." The video this user commented on was of a woman in her outfit showing her "true" body (i.e., it being flawed and not as toned). There is a certain level of exclusion that comes with not only what is obtainable in terms of muscle and "body goals," but also certain possessions. As one user states, "I stare at them all the time and then take notes of what they are wearing, I look for it in Amazon... and never buy it cuz I think I can't wear it 😊😬."

Furthermore, going through GymShark's "matching set" collection on their website, the cheapest set (on sale) costs a combined sixty dollars (excluding taxes and shipping). The sets though do not come together, rather customers must buy tops and shorts separately. For Lululemon, another popular brand, the cheapest women's "matching set" option is a forty-eight-dollar crewneck T-Shirt, and high-rise leggings, which go for eighty-eight dollars total. Again, these "sets" do not come together, rather you must buy them separately. Lululemon even has an "Outfit Inspiration" section under each item that helps customers match their sets.

Possessions can also be objects ingested and consumed, like supplements and steroids. Several TikToks promoted the use of steroids. For example, one TikTok showed a person's progress on steroids. This makes being "natty" not just speculative for gym-bros. Another TikTok showed a gym-girl doing a shot of TREN. In the bio of the videos, she writes: "It's sad to see so many people having no idea women use TRT to stabilize their hormones, just like men. Read a book." Some of the comments under that TikTok are: "nice TRENsition" and "average roids dominant physique." Supplements are another common product promoted by gym-bros. Ryse Supplements, Myprotein, Flex pro meals, and Hugesupplements, just to name a few, are brands marketed by, and in collaboration with gym-bros. These items are marketed as "healthy" alternatives.

Follower—Influencer Relations. The follower—influencer relationship includes different, complex dynamics. These complex dynamics include whether followers trust influencers to take their advice—and seek out tips and tricks on working out. One fit-fluencer on GymTok posts TikToks regularly with him helping his clients. Some of the comments left on his TikToks are:

Can we appreciate the help and advice he gives to not only the guy, but us as followers.

That was really helpful.

Good tip 🔥

Trying this tomorrow 🔥 🔥

Followers also want to know whether the influencers are being authentic. Authenticity here includes whether followers/viewers feel like the influencer is being honest about their “gains.” In other words, whether the fit-fluencer is “natty” or not. In this way, the follower—influencer relationship is crucial, especially when fit-fluencers need followers to validate, and authenticate their role as an influencer. Refer to this interaction between a fit-fluencer and a user:

[TikTok user] This is so inspiring, thank you.

[Creator] I have to keep the world informed 🤝

“Gym dads” is a term within fitness community to refer to a gym goer/fit-fluencer that portrays a paternal figure for followers and gym enthusiasts. One fit-fluencer holds this role for many of his viewers/followers—even followers going as far as calling him dad. Some of the comments under this fit-fluencers videos include:

Can I be your son?

Become my dad.

Bro already has a million sons.

The follower—influencer relationship here is familial, with many followers not only looking for advice, but also seeking out a role model. Take another comment, for example:

Lost my dad a couple years back, and he used to pack me the most awesome lunches every single day before school. This made me think of that for the first time in almost 15 years, and I cried like a bitch in the car before work. Thanks, [creators name].

Fit-fluencers then depend on followers to validate their authoritative position. Followers further help to validate fit-fluencers authoritative position with fitness and health.

Some male fit-fluencers and “gym bros” help to advise and inform their followers and users on how to be a man. Since fit-fluencers and “gym bros” are taken as “agents of knowledge,” their influential role also allows for them to advise others on what it means to be “manly.” Take, for example, an interaction between a fit-fluencer and a follower:

[TikTok User] I do not know why I keep failing myself. I say I’ll be the best man I can, but I never do. What should I do?

[Creator] You must express some gratitude for yourself brother and shift your mindset a little. Try focusing on what you are succeeding at and don’t beat yourself up!

Influencer—Influencer Relations. Fit-fluencers do not differ from regular influencers in that they have to share the space [GymTok] with other fit-fluencers. Sometimes this “sharing of space” comes easy, with them forming collaborations and friendships with other fit-fluencers. Other times though competition among influencers can arise. Some fitness accounts will go out of their way to critique other fit-fluencers on their work-out routines, their skill, and even whether they are “natty.” Not only does this build a division between fit-fluencers but causes fans to question the authenticity of the fit-fluencer being critiqued.

Influencer—Corporation Relations. Fit-fluencers and corporations have a mutual relationship, where corporations like GymShark pay fit-fluencers to inform their viewers/followers to buy certain products. In this way, corporations must keep updated on popular fit-fluencers, and follow consumer reactions towards these influencers. To keep up with consumers, corporations will often interact with fit-fluencer TikToks, and fitness TikToks from users. These corporations will do this by commenting under these TikToks and reposting users' videos. This further allows for traction on these corporations' TikTok pages, and their websites.

GymShark is a good example of this, as the company utilizes TikTok to interact with customers, users, fit-fluencers, and fans of fit-fluencers. On GymShark's Instagram, for example, a series of slides was posted. Each of these pictures included motivational quotes and statements. Some of them are: "the gym will heal your heart," "you never regret going to the gym," and "my selfcare is going to the gym." They will even go so far as to collaborate with fit-fluencers, having them model their products on their website. This ensures that the relationship between corporations and fit-fluencers is not just transactional, but deeply personal to either's brands/images they want to promote. In this way, fit-fluencers have an important role to play for these companies, for without them, these companies would not be as popular on TikTok.

Collective

It is a unifying experience for many gym-goers and avid fitness gurus when they go to the gym and work out. This unifying experience creates solidarity among many of them, where they form spaces (both on and offline) where they can share their stories, work outs, advice, and experiences. Gains are also unifying, as the pain, sweat, and work from "gains" can be experienced and lived collectively for them.

Furthermore, both on and offline fitness spaces allow for mental growth. Consistently, many fitness gurus and gym-goers on TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, and Instagram described the gym as therapeutic. They equated going to the gym and working out with a therapy session.

Some comments in this regard state:

The gym has saved my life 100%

It's an escape! I'm glad you found the gym man, so many people turn to shitty habits keep killing it

For some it's to fill the emptiness inside us

The unifying, collective experiences made at the gym allow for new identities to form, as well as newfound knowledge to blossom. It allows for many to explore themselves. The fitness community makes it possible for one to explore themselves alongside others. In other words, *it allows them to feel a little less alone.*

Looking for advice on fitness online, whether you are on GymTok, or Reddit, can be rewarding—in a sense, because of the support and solidarity gained from being part of the fitness community.

Keep going. Everyone is like that at first. When I first started, I couldn't bench the bar either. Just keep going. You have only been doing it for a short time. You're not going to see results that fast. Watch some videos on the exercises and practice on form; it's better to do low weight with good form than high weight with terrible form. I'd recommend getting a buddy to go to the gym with you, that's great motivation. Or you can always ask someone at the gym to check your form. It's scary, but trust me, gym guys are the nicest. Keep going dude you will get there! It will take time.

People seek out these communities on these platforms with the intention of bettering themselves. Many verbalized their hesitation with going to the gym and asking advice from gym-goers there. They also verbalized their relief when their hesitations were met with support and outreach. A lot of these statements keep with the same sentiments—that “you got this!” and “prove it to yourself!” It is the same sentiment as “pick yourself up and try again,” and “it takes months not years to reach body goals.” Many who are active in the fitness and gym community would say that those early instances of doubt, pain, and insecurity are part of the process. What matters is ‘YOU’.

Gym-bros and fit-fluencers create this transformative space on GymTok and FitTok, where they share their journeys, motivations, and advice to working out and eating healthy. However, appearance is a big part of their community as well. A lot of gym-bros and fit-fluencers must keep up with ‘aesthetics’ (or ‘fads’), having a toned, muscular body, wearing fashionable work-out outfits to the gym, and buying and promoting supplements, and diets in support of those fads. The online space between users creates a complex dynamic, in terms of relations between users, fit-fluencers, gym bros, and companies. This becomes more nuanced considering the intersectional characteristics of users and how they communicate with one another online (e.g., interactions between men and women online). Collectively though, avid gym-goers show their support within the community. The gym community is unified and collectively understood by its participants because they share their experiences, struggles, and journeys.

Chapter 5 - Cool Down

Bodies undergo transformative and enduring modifications over a lifespan. This is why many on GymTok, and other communities online dedicated to fitness and health, describe maneuvering wellness, fitness, and health as a journey. Such a term—journey—implies an eventual ending, a destination. Do fit-fluencers, gym bros, and avid gym-goers ultimately have a concrete end goal? Is there ever a point of truly “getting there” with their body and fitness?

Going on a Fitness “Journey”

As McCormack (1999:163) states, ‘the body’ is to be “mapped and charted.” Thus, the body becomes a site to be understood and controlled, within the constraints of physical and mental stimuli, like routines of working out and dieting. Consider constellations, each with defining characteristics and shapes. Constellations are made up of stars that are brightly or dimly lit in the sky. For a gym-bro and fit-fluencers, their journey involves looking to a constellation of body parts, all of which encase ‘the body’. They ‘map and chart’ each star (read: body part), seeing if one can be brightened.

Embarking on the fitness journey also holds a level of mastery, dedication, and commitment, to the body and the results (McCormack 1999:163). This is where advice and motivation come in, as both are sought out by others to help to “prove” they have mastered the craft. Garnering followers and experience are another avenue that gym-bros and fit-fluencers take to establish their authoritative role when it comes to fitness and health.

Four themes emerged from these findings to help answer the research questions. The four themes are promise of change, gym lifestyle, networks of gym-bros and fit-fluencers, and the temple of gains. I will connect each of these themes to the research question: “how are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other

related fitness videos/posts? These are in no way meant to reduce the community, rather they are meant to be exploratory in nature, to help researchers navigate investigating fitness and health online.

Promise of Change

The idea of change here coincides with the evolution and transformation that fit-fluencers, gym bros, and avid gym-goers undergo. It is also considered the point of mental and spiritual growth, where they consider their selves almost “renewed,” beyond the point of recognition. Change can be daunting to many who are starting off their fitness journey though. As one commenter on GymTok writes: “I’m ready to make the change, I just don’t even know where to start.” This makes the desire for change confusing, as many on GymTok seek out advice and motivation. Thus, the role of gym-bros here is important because they are the beacons for change. Many seek out advice, workout routines, and motivation to help them start their own fitness “journey.”

RQ: How are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other related fitness videos/posts? Understandings of masculinity, body, and health are promoted and perceived by the *promise of change*. McCormack (1999) describes the process of athletes centering themselves within their workouts and training, practicing self-responsibility, determination, and self-regulation. Fitness and health are—in other words—vested in the hands of individuals. McCormack (1999:162) goes on to say, “in this context, dependence, illness, and unfitness can be construed as evidence of a moral irresponsibility, an apathetic indifference to the imperative to self-educate, and self-improve.” The same can be said for fit-fluencers and gym bros in the way they present these “do it yourself!” “YOU are the

change” inner-community messages. Self-perception turns inward, into the individual and their steps in making changes in their diet, work-outs, etc.

Gym-bros and fit-fluencers must be viewed as trustworthy. Gym-bros and fit-fluencers must prove their methods cause change. This is where the aspect of authenticity comes in—with fit-fluencers and dedicated gym bros being the “real ones” who “know the change.” Both gym-bros and fit-fluencers are perceived as knowing the change.

As mentioned by McCormack (1999:159), “at the same time, cyborg figures also submerge their own monstrous nature, by appealing to the governmentality of the embodied self, and by providing maps by which sovereign subjects can take charge of themselves through the use of machine objects.” In other words, gym-bros use weights, supplements, and other technological fitness objects to enhance their body. ‘Submerging’ allows them to re-shape, or “customize” into the desired being. The ‘submerging’ into a ‘monstrous nature’ allows for ideas of masculinity and manhood to emerge (McCormack 1999). Body and self become one to be revered, much like the ‘superhero’s’ and ‘supervillains’ gym-bros desire to be like. The idea of gigachad underscores this, with some gym-bros and commentators stating him as the ‘ideal’ man.

Health is at risk due to the physical and bodily changes one must go through here. Because the body and person are recontextualized with the notion of having to undergo extreme change, people might skip steps, or outright ignore well-informed advice on how to have a healthy body. Unhealthy dieting and eating habits are one example of this. Health becomes something to be controlled and modified, instead of something that is temporary, or *flexible*. Though, as will be stated later, the diversifying of bodies on GymTok helps to recontextualize the body.

Gym Lifestyle

If I can't go to the gym, I can't do life. -Anonymous TikTok user

Lifestyle emerges as a theme due to the relevance of the gym, and modern technological advancements (e.g., cameras) for fit-fluencers and gym bros. Lifestyle can be considered two-fold; the lifestyle of going to the gym and working out, and the lifestyle of going to the gym and filming themselves working out. There is, of course, a distinction between the two. The distinction being the addition of capital (i.e., monetization, money, and followers) and authoritative gains from posting workout videos online, rather than only physical gains.

RQ: How are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other related fitness videos/posts? The gym-bro lifestyle helps to promote understandings of masculinity, body, and health. Gym-bros are viewed by their millions of followers as 'living like a man'. The idea of domination here and masculinity is explained through the capital obtained by gym-bros on GymTok. Furthermore, because gym-bros have influence, they can be an outlet for young boys and men to seek advice on 'how to be a man' from. In other words, they represent the lifestyle young boys and men want on GymTok.

Lifestyle can be considered as the meaningful experience gained at the gym by many, and how it further affects everyday life. Consider again the framing by some fit-fluencers, gym bros, and avid gym-goers as the gym being "therapeutic." The implication here is that choosing this lifestyle (i.e., fitness and health lifestyle) provides *something*. It imbues *meaning* into participants' understandings of body and health. Thus, a "gym life" becomes a healthy life.

For avid gym-goers, they prioritize the gym. This means their daily routines and habits center going to the gym daily, monitoring what they eat, and adhering to strict regimens. For gym-bros and fit-fluencers, this becomes a bit more complex, as they must keep the daily routines that avid gym-goers have, while also keeping a strict posting schedule. They must

monitor their content, ensure that their fans are engaging and boosting their views, and keep up to date with brand deals and collaborations.

Gym-bros and fit-fluencers help to promote a corporate lifestyle. Similarly, in McCormack's (1999) discussion of corporal fitness, a corporate lifestyle includes the embodied practices bodies undergo that are like the embodied practices undergone by corporate bodies, companies, and entities. Part of this includes the "gains" mindset, where bodies are constantly being productive. The same can be seen for fit-fluencers and gym bros through the messaging on GymTok and FitTok.

Having social media accounts assumes, to a certain degree, sharing online spaces with others who also have social media accounts. Belk (2013) describes the process of creating a virtual space as "re-worlding." In other words, living a virtual life among others online. Of course, Belk (2013) relates the idea of re-worlding here to consumer online spaces. Though the same is applicable for fit-fluencers and gym bros. As Belk (2013:486) writes, "this aestheticization of life take place online as the participant soaks in the digital spectacle in 'window shopping' for real world goods." McCormack (1999) mentions a similar idea of "body shopping." The "lifestyle" of fit-fluencers and "gym-bros" is one not only consumed but sought out actively. It might be said that in the same way we 'window shop' in a crowded shopping center, users on GymTok and FitTok are "body shopping" and lifestyle shopping.

Networks of Gym-Bros and Fit-fluencers

What about the relations between bodies? How are they arranged in this particular type of "space"? Stated differently, what are the "patterns of relations" that appear for gym-bros on GymTok, as well as other online fitness spaces? As stated by Puar (2013:61), "the placement within the space itself have not necessarily altered, but the intensified relations have given new

capacities to the entities.” The relations, for example, between audiences of TikTok, gym-bros, and corporations have become intimately bound—where gym-bros and fit-fluencers have become the bridge between users and corporations. Gym-bros build a ‘network’ with other gym-bros, forming friendships and a ‘brotherhood’. This network extends out to others seeking to join the community. In some ways, gym-bros become ‘agents’, holding a wealth of knowledge for health and fitness. Their millions of followers, brand deals, and corporate relations attests to this role.

RQ: How are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other related fitness videos/posts? Networks help to build relationships among gym-bros, and avid gym goers. By being in similar dispositions with one another, gym-bros can mimic, or be “contaminated” by the others around them. This process not only includes the material objects (read: possessions) gym-bros share amongst each other, but the inner-knowledge only known to their community. This is also where differing selves can be extracted and highlighted among gym-bros.

This inner knowledge helps to transmit ideas of health and the body amongst gym-bros. Gym-bros seek out advice from other gym-bros on whether their form is correct, their diet is suitable, and whether they should consider supplements. Dialogues form around health and the body, with groups of gym-bros coming together to discuss and promote different eating habits and physical techniques. Take, for example, jaw strength training. Jaw strength training has been promoted by several gym-bros, with them even linking (in their bios) jawline strength training tools. This is also where language emerges for gym-bros and avid gym goers—as they use terms like “mewing,” “maxxing,” and “natty” to communicate and recognize one another.

Building a network also involves a certain level of exclusion. Consider Belk's (1988:156) comments: "the incorporation of others into extended self can involve a demeaning objectification of these other persons." This idea of "incorporating others into extended self" applies to gym-bros and who they allow in the community. Although there is a level of 'comradery', the sketch videos found on GymTok mocking sexual harassment at the gym counteract any sort of brotherhood, isolating and excluding women "gym-bros." In other words, these types of videos send signals to women viewing them of when and where they are allowed to be in the gym, and further, what they are allowed to wear when traversing the space. What this also implies is how young men and boys are "consuming" this type of content; and furthermore, why they like and follow gym-bros who create this style of content.

In a more compounding sense though, gendered ideals of masculinity and femininity are being moderated through this interconnected relationship between audiences, fit-fluencers, and corporations. Take, for example, fit-fluencers modeling GymShark's work out gear. Although it is subtle, the implications found in the "aesthetic" bodies being able to model a major corporation's clothing is profound, especially in how it constructs masculinities and femininities alongside beauty standards. As much as feminists have worked to dismantle the unequal beauty standards pervading women and young girls, the same forms of unequal expectations have been shifted onto young boys and men.

Temple of Gains

Gym-bros on GymTok repeatedly discuss their progress as making "gains." Gains here simply means the culminated time, energy, and dedication an individual has put into a given physical activity. More broadly, gains can be manipulated and reconfigured. Take, for example, "natty" (read: natural) gains, where an individual does not need physical advancement drugs

(like steroids) to help them build muscle. An individual has a choice here in how they go about achieving gains.

RQ: How are understandings of masculinity, body, and health promoted and perceived on GymTok, and other related fitness videos/posts? Understandings of masculinity, body, and health are promoted and perceived through the obtainment of gains. The idea of gains helps to underscore the ideal form for a gym-bro. This also means that gain involves a certain level of pushing beyond what an individual's body and health can handle. Hegemonic masculinity would help to explain the process of gains, as gains helps to promote idealized, overly masculine qualities. An example here is pain. Gym-bros must undergo extreme forms of pain, thus failing to take breaks and rest. Gym-bros are consistently seeking out hegemonic forms of masculinity because gains forces gym-bros to relentlessly self-critique themselves. Their self-perception dwindles here, as their achievements are measured along the line of "enoughness."

Gym-bros who appear to have gains have a certain look, or aesthetic. Gym-bros physically look like they've made changes to their body (like gaining muscle or losing weight). They have gone through training regimens, sculpting each part of their body (read: functionality). The techniques and training processes they use are also important, as they allow for a desired look or *result* (e.g., strength training). Gains can be considered for gym-bros as 'leveling up' in their fitness journey. It is a personal, individual achievement.

Refer back to the section on cyborg masculinities, the process of "contamination" can also be connected to the embodiment of fitness and "gains" between people and machines and with people and enhancement drugs. Stated plainly, gym-bros and the like go through a series of processes to "become" the machine, to contaminate and be contaminated. The idea of "enoughness" for gym bros then is not only the processes of becoming part of the community

and developing group identity, but to fully consume and be consumed by other members ideas of “enoughness” alongside their own. Thus, exhibiting “enoughness” solidifies gym bros in the “temple of gains.”

Rethinking Modern Fitness and Health as a Feminist

I diverge from Durau et al. (2022) conclusions—in that boy’s and men’s body images are relevant to them. I agree with Itulua-Abumere (2013:44), as the boys and men in online fitness communities “are trapped between old-style, machismo and nurturing ‘new man-ism’.” The boys and men bodies on GymTok are ‘arenas’, open to critique, ridicule, and judgement. There is a “correction” of undesirable traits for gym-bros and fit-fluencers in their construction of selves. This “correction” assumes a ‘norm’, where extreme body modifications and changes are underscored over health ways of living and well-being. Similar to Haraway (1991), Potts (2005), and Puar (2013), the young boys and men on GymTok, and other social media fitness spaces, seek out ways of “working out” their masculinity and manhood from online experts. This association informs young boys and men of the “ways of living” and the “ways of being” like a “gym-bro” and fit-fluencer. Although should young body and men be seeking out ‘ways of being’ like a gym-bro and fit-fluencer?

Neoliberal Narratives

Ways of living and ways of being are marked by one’s self-responsibility and self-reliability. These sentiments are shared in the online fitness community found on TikTok, with messages like “you can do it” and “anything is possible” being used to help motivate users to work-out. Fit-fluencers and gym bros assume there is a “right” way of working out and staying physically fit and healthy. Therefore, their journeys to fitness are considered by many TikTok

users to be “success” stories. Gym-bros’ bodies are taken as physical and symbolic markers of success.

As Andreasson and Johansson (2019:10) argue: “Fully in line with neoliberal values we have thus have a process of globalization, through which the doping market is gradually being relocated from being socioculturally embedded to being disembedded and commercial in an international and most often virtual and anonymous arena.” What is being seen now is a ‘marketing landscape’, where commercialized products are being mass produced, bought, and sold online. This transformative space has allowed for gym-bros and fit-fluencers to assume the authority of entrepreneurs and brand-owners.

Audiences are risking being seen as inactive by not buying into these products and following fit-fluencers and gym bros’ advice. This equally important message of not being active speaks to the supposed lower quality of life a person will have. For example, as one fit-fluencer puts it, people should work out because working out releases endorphins, thereby making people happy. Thus, embodiment and circulation of material possessions is needed for the configuration and naturalization of the physically fit, *functional*, ideal “monsters.” A healthy body becomes a *functional, active* body. An unhealth body becomes a *lazy, flawed* body. The merging of the human—machine becomes key, as seen in the use of steroids, and the reflection of technological fitness possessions onto their extended self.

Heteronormativity

Social media platforms like TikTok have played a significant role in reproducing heteronormative gender-based inequalities (Farci & Scarcelli 2024). This remains to be seen on GymTok, as evidenced by the short “sketch” videos feeding into stereotypical ideas of women and men in the gym. This is also seen in the masculine imagery by “gym bros” and male and

female fit-fluencers. The idea of a “gym crush” always appears in a heterosexual pairing. “Gym crush” sketches act to control and reestablish heteronormative ideas of sexuality in the gym. These “humorous” sketches usually depict men picking up women at the gym (and vice-versa) and how-to-videos on attracting a “gym crush.”

On the other hand, social media platforms have allowed people to challenge traditional masculine and feminine tropes—thus subverting gendered expectations and norms. Women bodybuilders on TikTok are not afraid, for example, to build muscle, and appear powerful and physically dominant. Though the emergence of “gym girls” has led to the objectification and sexualization of women in gyms, it remains true that these women are attempting to transform ideas of what it means to be a woman, a bodybuilder, and a “gym bro.”

Some male fit-fluencers have attempted to subvert traditional notions of masculinity by becoming close to their fans, sharing their feelings, and verbalizing their emotions. Although these men also discuss their struggles with their own body image, and their desire for more muscular frames, there are still attempts made at aligning their masculinity with more comradery, and physical and mental well-being. Because some of these gym-bros share intimate and personal details about their fitness journeys, they create a space where their fans deeply look up to them. Due to this relationship, they take on a “male role” for many of their fans, becoming a paternalistic relation.

Heteropaternalism. Black and Native American feminist theories have widely discussed connections between settler colonialism and heteropatriarchy and heteropaternalism (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill 2013). While conducting my research and attempting to draw upon discourses on masculinity and fitness, I found little mention of heteropaternalism (if any). I find this as something potentially to consider, as the relations between followers and male gym-bros were

heteropaternalistic ones, in which followers would treat male fit-fluencers as a “father figure.” It is worth considering how gym-bros and fit-fluencers draw upon heteropaternalistic masculine scripts. TikToks depicting these “father-figures” defined these types of individuals as “protectors” in the community. In other words, they had the paternalistic role of guiding others, as well as helping others by informing them how to use machines/what workouts they should do.

Young Boys and Men’s Health and Bodies

As feminist thought progressed, it became clear that problems facing women were not solely caused by men (hooks 2015). It became evident that sexism, patriarchy, and male domination had to be approached in complex manners—simultaneously recognizing the role everyone has in upholding these dimensions of power and oppression. The feminist movement has made attempts at addressing how the patriarchy has been harmful to men (hooks 2015). This was not without relentless critiques upon male domination, and how it has stripped away rights from men, further imposing sexist imagery onto their personhood (hooks 2015). In Floyd Dell’s 1913 book *World Builders: Studies in Modern Feminism*, he writes: “feminism is going to make it possible for the first time for men to be free.” I, of course, hold this same sentiment, and only would add that without feminism, men cannot rid themselves of sexist masculine imagery that continuously prevails. Young boys and men today can be a bit *freer, healthier*, and a lot more *loving and patient* towards their bodies.

There are multiple perspectives and stories reshaping discourses on masculinity, body, and health. Users acknowledged the importance of speaking out against the treatment of women in the gym. Other acknowledgments include those of diverse bodies. This, in turn, with the community aspect on TikTok, allows for multiple dialogues to be built.

Diversifying the Body. There are multiple instances where diverse bodies were shown. Those with disabilities did not refrain from sharing their stories and fitness journeys. The diversifying of bodies done on GymTok allowed for a range of ideas, perspectives, and voices to be seen and heard. Take, for example, videos showcasing bodies that were not sculpted, did not fit into the “ideal” frame. The comments on these videos included many telling the creator of their appreciation of the post. These types of posts were described by users as being “representative.” Users said how they felt “seen” in this style of posts, and that they could easily relate because their body looked like the creator’s body. This is where feminist ideas of intersectionality come in—as some users on TikTok fully embraced core ideas of intersectionality, which further allowed for others on GymTok and FitTok to be heard and seen.

One key consideration to hooks (2015) core insight on what masculinity might look like outside of sexism is the aspect of diversifying bodies. Diversifying bodies would help to locate masculinities outside of sexist notions of [overtly masculine] bodies. It would help to understand how sexist notions of bodies harm boys and men. The idea of diversifying bodies subverts sexist masculine images, like seen with gym-bros, and create alternative bodies, free from the binds of patriarchal masculinity.

Building Dialogues. TikTok has built itself on being creator and user friendly. This shows the interactions between fans and creators. This is also shown in the public discourse on GymTok under fit-fluencers and gym bros’ posts. There is not a lack of critique on fitness and health videos/posts. Users on GymTok, if given the opportunity by creators, will build dialogues in the comment sections of videos. Users can not only comment on their disagreements with a creator’s posts, but they can also “stitch” these videos with their own TikToks. By “stitching”

TikToks, users become creators themselves, starting a dialogue on the “advice” given by fit-fluencers and gym bros.

Building dialogues can also be interpreted as giving users the ability and accessibility to resources on fitness and health. This can be a slippery slope, as some fit-fluencers and “gym bros” might not have the qualifications to be giving out such advice. Feminist epistemologies are built upon making voices *known* and *heard*. Feminisms draw from personal narratives, experiences, and collective thought. The narratives found on GymTok are not far from developing this type of knowledge, as they already rely on personal experiences and “journeys.” What matters though is the collective thoughts that come out of this space, and whether they truly reflect ways in which people live a healthy life.

Addressing masculinity, body and health is imperative—especially when encountering discourses on a “crisis in masculinity.” Though, a “crisis in masculinity” is not a well-thought-out term for describing the health and body crises of young boys and men. Rather, underscoring young boys and men’s health and body as crucial for their overall well-being allows for counteractive measures to address mental health, body dissatisfaction, depression, and loneliness. The act of remitting sexist masculinities transitions the “crisis of masculinity” narrative into a crisis in health and well-being for young boys, men, masculine presenting people and AMAB people.

Limitations and Future Research

This research is far from being exhaustive of online fitness culture. I am only reading some narratives because of the sanitization of content and comments on TikTok. Creators on TikTok are allowed to filter and remove comments. This means some of the comments selected and included in the study have been seen by the creators. This also means that any comments

critiquing and questioning gym-bros approaches to fitness and health could be removed. Thus, some creators on TikTok may appear like they have overall positive feedback in their comments. The reality might very well be the opposite. This makes it difficult to gauge fan and influencer relations here.

Content is also continuously monitored on TikTok. GymTok is—in other words—showing content approved by TikTok. This makes it difficult to determine the prevalence of, say, drug usage or depression among those that use the GymTok and FitTok hashtags. TikTok filters any content they may deem as “breaking” community guidelines. Community guidelines for TikTok include anything deemed harmful and overly mature. As TikTok Terms of Service underscore:

In addition, we have the right—but not the obligation—in our sole discretion to remove, disallow, block or delete any User Content (i) that we consider to violate these Terms, or (ii) in response to complaints from other users or third parties, with or without notice and without any liability to you. As a result, we recommend that you save copies of any User Content that you post to the services on you personal device(s) in the event that you want to ensure that you have permanent access to copies of such User Content.

Although I have taken measures to carefully select each comment, video, and discussion post, there are still issues of selection bias. This goes for me, as research, in how I am selecting content, but also how TikTok, Reddit, YouTube, and Instagram are filtering content. TikTok makes it easier, as they categorize their videos though the use of hashtags. On the other hand, YouTube shorts and Instagram reels make it difficult to filter and select content, as both will include videos without the hashtags selected. All in all, research was done to the best of my

ability to properly represent fit-fluencers, gym bros, and avid gym-goers on the carefully selected social media platforms.

Future Research

TikTok Ban. At the time of writing this paper house, lawmakers in the United States approved legislation to force ByteDance—a parent company to the social media app TikTok—to sell TikTok to a buyer that satisfies the requirements of the U.S. government (Nover 2024). The support for the ban of TikTok was bipartisan, with both democratic and republican parties agreeing on the “threat” it poses to American citizens (Nover 2024). The concern here is whether ByteDance, a Chinese owned company, is selling American users’ data (Nover 2024). If the bans work, this would subsequently limit American users’ ability to access it (Nover 2024).

TikTok has made a demonstrable impact on the lives of American citizens, as well as people globally (Nover 2024). It would also be important to note that without the app, this research would not exist. Effectively, what does this ban mean for researchers like me seeking to unravel a community unique to TikTok? What does it mean for American researchers desiring to repeat such research?

TikTok is a site of exploration and discovery, and it is one with a growing number of communities. There are a recorded 170 million users on TikTok who are based in the U.S. What will happen to them? What social media platforms will evolve out of this ban? How will American users utilize these platforms differently, or similarly to how they are using TikTok?

Researching Social Media Platforms. Future research into social media platforms should consider the place these apps have with their users. Researchers should consider not just how users are utilizing social media apps like TikTok, but *why*? Why was TikTok so popular for American citizens? Why was it so impactful globally? Part of this answer lies in not only

accessibility, but the “user friendly” analytics. Essentially, users can be and do what they please. This “user friendly” display has its limitations though, with TikToks “terms of service” and limitations. TikTok, in other words, makes it easy to ‘consume’ content, to have users to format their own “For You Pages.”

The very construction and makeup of social media platforms allows for the enjoyment of videos like fitness and health videos. TikTok was *made* to be *used*. The “user friendly” display of TikTok works for the user, it allows for the users to *assemble* their own algorithm, create their own “For You Page” that best represents them. What would this mean for Americans, who have utilized this app for several years, to lose their own “For You Pages?”

Future research should do well to highlight the rise and fall of social media platforms. Researchers need to pay close attention to the prominence of such a platform for people by region, geographical location, and country. They should further pay close attention to the communities that arise from these platforms, and how they have cultural and national relevance. Social media apps like TikTok are not merely a means for communication, but a steppingstone to shaping and influencing local and national culture.

Researching Online Fitness Culture. Future research should consider and frame fitness and health in tandem with gender marketing strategies. Researchers should consider the commercialization and gendered construction of space for fit-fluencers and gym bros. Furthermore, future research can look at appearance and beauty standards, alongside understandings of body for young men and boys in their fitness “journeys.” Lastly, researchers should consider trying to explore the use of drugs publicly (like steroids and trenbolone) for the achievement of an “ideal” body.

An interesting phenomenon that I discovered while traversing TikTok and Reddit was the prevalence of “gym girls.” Future researchers should consider how femininity and masculinity is practiced and “done” for gym girls, as well as their consumption practices (e.g., the use of trenbolone). Gym girls are also continuously sexualized and objectified in these online spaces. There are even subreddits dedicated to posting mature, pornographic content of “gym girls” working out. This was, of course, beyond the scope of my project.

Concluding Thoughts

My aim here with this project was to provide clearer understandings of online fitness communities’ presentations of an extended, gendered selves. I conducted a thematic abductive analysis on GymTok, a subsection of TikTok, pulling videos, comments, and discussions related to masculinity, health, and body. This analysis was done so through an intersectional, feminist lens. Thus, I not only drew upon gender, race, and class, but disabilities, injuries, and body conditions. I found, broadly, four themes to in exploring fitness culture online. These three themes are *Promise of Change*, *Gym Lifestyle*, *Networks of Gym-Bros and Fit-fluencers*, and *Temple of Gains*. These four themes helped to answer my research question, which considered how masculinity, body, and health is promoted and perceived by gym-bros and fit-fluencers. I further questioned what masculinity, health, and body would look like from a feminist perspective. From this, I found fitness culture online to *diversify bodies*, as well as allow for *dialogues to be built* among users on GymTok. Diversifying bodies helps to locate masculinities outside of sexism, where more boys and men are afforded the freedom of healthy bodies, and their well-being is ensured. My research reconciles with modern day masculinity, and the supposed ‘crisis in masculinity’ to shift conversations on masculinity and manhood around the health and well-being of young boys, men, and AMAB people. By centering health, body, and

well-being at the center of this 'crisis', scholars can better address modern day patriarchal masculinity, So, a question remains thus, would I rather be a cyborg or remain as I am? The answer depends, really. Would 'as I am' even be considered truly me? What I do know is, I would rather be a healthy cyborg.

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Appendix A - List of Terms, Emojis, and Hashtags

Appendix A Table A.1

Terms/Slang	Definition
Natty	Another word for natural.
Achievable Natty	The body is, in other words, achievable without the use of steroids and "dopes."
Looksmaxxing	"Maxxing" your looks. In other words, looking the best you can look.
Gigachad	An extreme version of a "chad." A very "jacked" individual.
Incel	Involuntary celibate.
Juice	Another term for steroids and "dope."
Gym Bro	A man who visits the gym to the point where it could be considered an "obsession."
Gym Rat	Some who spends too much time at the gym. They usually care a lot about strength and muscle training.
FitFam	The collective fitness community.
GymShark	A fitness company that sells health and fitness related products.
Fit	Being physical "fit" or well-toned/muscular.
Jacked	Similar to fit. It is when an individual appears to have a lot of muscle mass.
Primal	Or "going primal." Mostly used in reference to a specific diet and work-out routine that depends on a lot of meat consumption and "primal" ways of working out (e.g., flipping tires, chopping wood, etc.)
Alpha	Usually considered to be an identity for many individuals. Represents an independent, self-motivated person.
Roids	Another term for steroids and "dope."
Slacking	Being lazy or not pushing yourself in regards to working out and training.
Gym crush	A person who you feel romantically attracted to who you are friends with at the gym.

Appendix A Table A.2

Emojis	Meaning and Common Usage
	Fire emoji; usually is used when a creator posts videos of them achieving their goals/beating personal records (PRs).
	Sad emoji; common in comment sections with women sharing their sexual harrassment experiences at the gym. Also common with men mocking these comment sections.
	Nervous emoji, used by user to show their uncomfot/uneasiness with a given topic (e.g., body image).
	Crying emoji; common with users talking about their own body image.
	Heart emojis; commonly used in female influencers comment sections.
	Disappointed emoji; common in comment sections with women sharing their sexual harrassment experiences at the gym. Also common with men mocking these comment sections.
	Gigachad emoji
	Hand-in-hand emoji; shows support among users.
	Cheering hands emoji; commonly used with transformation videos, or videos where users have reached their fitness goal.
	Bless up emoji; used by users to signify praise and support. Also used among "gym bros" and fit-fluencers who identify their fitness and health alongside their spirituality.

Appendix A Table A.3

Hashtags
#bodybuilding
#physique
#gym
#gymTok
#gains
#gymlife
#fit

#lift
#gymtips
#personaltrainer
#fitnessjourney
#fittok

Appendix B - Supplemental Data and Data Display

Appendix B Figure B.1. Coding Display

Functionality
Maxxing
Trust
Advice
Support
Self-made
"Natty"
Authenticity
Motivation
Therapy
Injury
Disability
Failure
Achievement
Inspiration
Community
"Juiced"
Engagement
Appearance
Transformation
Superhuman
Gender relation
Movement
Muscles/Sculpted
Masculinity (To be a man)
Masculinity (Paternalism)
Progress
Body Dissatisfaction
Loneliness
Enoughness

Appendix B Figure B.2. Data Display

