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"I'm Never Going to be Arnold Schwarzenegger": A Study on Fitness Culture in Relation to Young Men's Self-Perceptions

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A Study on Fitness Culture in Relation to Young Men's Self-Perceptions

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by

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Dedications

This project is dedicated to my incredibly smart and witty advisor, Jussara dos Santos Raxlen, who encouraged me every step of the way. I would also like to thank Ruth Zisman and David Shein for always believing in me. And of course, this project is dedicated to my brother Logan, who inspired me to think more critically about the contemporary world and challenge my beliefs.

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Introduction

Apps like Instagram and TikTok are oversaturated with fitness influencers, and the film industry relentlessly flashes images of a lean, muscular male body over and over again on screens. Front covers of mens' health magazines boldly claim that they can help any guy get a six-pack in six weeks and give their girlfriends the best orgasm of their lives (Alexander 2003). Colloquially referred to by Gen Z as 'gym bros,' the gym bro strives for bodily perfection through determination and will power. In the West, the male body has been presented as strong and disciplined for centuries dating back to ancient Greece (Rubarth 2014); exercising in gymnasiums and participating in contact sports are not new practices. However, it seems that there is more attention than ever on Gen Z men who love the gym. This contemporary phenomenon should be critically examined by sociologists studying gender and the development of masculine identities.

What is a gym bro?

When trying to define the gym bro, the internet yields countless definitions. Reddit, a website where users can anonymously post and ask anything about anything, provides invaluable insight as to what people are thinking in the digital age. Given that Gen Z is "the first generation never to know the world without the internet," online forums like Reddit are a good place to look for what Gen Z thinks about Gen Z (Katz 2022). The r/AskMen subreddit, a discussion thread where anyone can ask any question about men, has 6 million members. The top of the page reads, "WELCOME TO THE NEW YEAR YOU SMOOTH-BRAINED NEANDERTHALS," a bit jarring but also hysterical. One curious Reddit user asked, "what is a gym bro?", to which another user replied, "They take pictures of themselves in the mirror at the gym, with

headphones on. They are on juice [anabolic steroids] and everyone knows it. They enter local "natty" [natural] bodybuilder competitions. They work a bullshit menial job." A different user identified the gym bro as, "A guy who can bench press a refrigerator but cannot lift a book" (Reddit.com/r/askmen). Reddit users seemingly think that the gym bro is uneducated and vain. With the rise of fitness influencers like Sam Sulek and the Tren Twins (see Appendix B), marketing of protein powders and pre-workouts, and watches that track steps, sleep patterns, and heart rate, fitness has become rigidly ingrained in many young mens' lives (see Appendix C). To better understand how the gym bro came into fruition and the role of fitness culture in the production of masculine identities, this study explores the intersection between fitness culture, identity, young men, and their bodies.

Defining Fitness Culture

Fitness culture serves as the framework for understanding the gym bro. In a study conducted by Gibbs, Salinas, and Turnock (2022), these researchers defined 'hardcore fitness culture' as "spaces with a focus upon excessive strength which offer a selection of heavy weights… and place themselves in opposition to 'commercial' or corporate [gym] chains… these institutions [are] inherently masculine given that… the customer base [is] predominantly male" (pg 2). However, this definition is a bit too rigid to be fully applicable to participants in this study. Participants were rather fluid when it came to the types of gyms they exercised in. They often bounced between commercial gym chains, university gyms, and local, specialized gyms. Additionally, participants did not only lift; they participated in a variety of fitness practices including running, mountain biking, and tennis. Encyclopedia Britannica defines 'physical culture' as:

> Philosophy, regimen, or lifestyle seeking maximum physical development through such means as weight (resistance) training, diet, aerobic activity, athletic competition, and mental discipline. Specific benefits include improvements in health, appearance, strength, endurance, flexibility, speed, and general fitness as well as greater proficiency in sport-related activities (Fair 2018).

These definitions work together to provide a preliminary definition of the gym bro. He is committed to a lifestyle of healthy habits and longevity but still stuck within the confines of neoliberal rhetoric and mainstream conceptions of masculinity, a complex set of meanings which I will define in the next section.

Defining Neoliberalism

To understand young mens' relationships with fitness and identity, neoliberal rhetoric plays a critical role. Sociologists and political thinkers alike have developed many definitions of neoliberalism, but this study uses two in conjunction. First, neoliberalism should be interpreted in the most traditional sense as an economic, political, and cultural ideology. Meredith Nash's work explores neoliberalism in CrossFit gyms. She writes that neoliberalism is "free-market policies, privatization, competition, efficiency and growth" (pg 3). While this study does not interpret neoliberalism as a purely economic philosophy, Nash's definition of neoliberalism – its logic of efficiency and growth – are relevant to participants' self-perceptions. Neoliberalism, in essence, is the idea that the individual is accountable for themselves and only themselves. They should always strive to be productive and do their best work in the most efficient manner possible.

In McGuigan's work, he interprets neoliberalism not only as a political, economic, and cultural philosophy, but also as a way of understanding ourselves in the circumstances created by post-industrial, hyper-capitalist America (2014). The culture of neoliberalism promotes

competition, consumption, and individualism. McGuigan writes, “The neoliberal self is connected to a generational structure of feeling, a selfhood counter-posed to the old social-democratic self… The neoliberal self is situated in relation to production” (pg 234). The term “structure of feeling” that McGuigan refers to was originally coined by Raymond Williams in his work on *Marxism and Literature (1977),* where he explains it as a way to go “beyond formally held systematic beliefs" (pg 132). Williams writes, “We are concerned with meanings and values as they are actively lived and felt” (132). So this “generational structure of feeling” is more so how we are able to understand ourselves not in an abstract, ideological way but instead in a way that is rooted in lived experience. This relates to neoliberalism because neoliberalism as an ideology has become our lived experience, permeating our “structure of feeling.” Again, neoliberal ideology infiltrates ideas about the self and encourages the individual to constantly be productive and progressing. The enmeshing of neoliberalism with one’s self was critical to participants’ self-perceptions and developing identities. Participant identities were largely tied to feelings of discipline, self-improvement, and personal, all of which are consistent with neoliberalism.

Why Gen Z Men?

Participants were born in Generation Z, which was a deliberate choice as a researcher when selecting interviewees. Gen Zers were those born between 1996-2009 (Grabinger, Sladek 2014). However, it should be noted that the classification of Gen Z is being used only for analytical purposes. Generations are a social construction that cannot be confined by dates, but they are still social cohorts with shared cultural meanings, values, and experiences. Gen Z men make a compelling sample because many young men do not yet fulfill traditional masculine roles

such as husband, father, or professional given their age. Historically, these roles have allowed men to express their masculine identities and gendered positioning in the world (Kimmel 2017). Interestingly, researchers Grabinger and Sladek suggest that Gen Z "marks the end of clearly defined roles, traditions and experiences" (pg 1). Gen Z is allegedly causing a substantial shift in traditional ideas of masculinity. For example, 1 in 7 fathers raising a Gen Z child are stay at home dads, compared to 1 in 100 in 1970 (Grabinger, Sladek 2014). Ideas surrounding masculinity and what it means to be a 'man' are evolving.

Additionally, Gen Z is driven by technology and social networks, understanding the real world and digital world as one. Tirocchi writes that "[Gen Z] has made media its distinctive feature… it was born at a time when they became an indispensable reality and an important environment for the construction of identities" (2024). Tirocchi suggests that Gen Zers have had a more difficult time forming their identities because of their inability to distinguish the online world from reality. Additionally, social media promotes individualism and self-marketability, which neoliberalism embodies (Tirocchi 2024). Contrary to this, research on Gen Z suggests that this generation has its own unique values such as interconnectedness, solidarity, transformation, and rejection of labels (Francis, Hoefel 2018; Katz 2022; Tirocchi 2024). Gen Z is compelling to the sociologist because young people subscribe to the unwritten rules of social media, but their need for interconnectedness and community creates a generational paradox: individualism against interconnectedness. This study then poses the question, *what is the relationship between exercise, the male body, and the masculine identities of Gen Z men, and how is it reinforced or challenged by fitness culture?*

Literature Review

Gender v. Sex

Before unraveling the male gender role and presentations of masculinity, it is critical to distinguish between gender and sex. Gender and sex are often thought of as synonymous, but when operating within a sociological context, masculinity and femininity should be interpreted as the byproducts of social interactions and practices, not biology (Connell 2005; Pascoe 2012; Rubarth 2014; West, Zimmerman 1987). These interactions take place on a daily basis, which is how gender becomes ingrained in the individual. Gender is an "achieved status" and part of social routines (West, Zimmerman 1987). Connell writes that, "[gender roles] are defined by expectations and norms, sex roles by expectations attaching to biological status" (2005). West and Zimmerman made this same point in the 1980s, writing that "gender [is] an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements and as a means of legitimating the most fundamental divisions of society" (pg 126). From a young age, for example, boys and girls are taught how to behave in school. Boys are told to be 'tough' while girls are told to value their physical appearance (Schwartz 2021; Wienke 1998; West, Zimmerman 1987). During adulthood, these gendered practices and routines are solidified.

Some authors have argued that masculinity itself is divorced from men entirely and instead is an identity reinforced through heterosexual and homophobic practices such as locker-room talk, homophobic language, and misogynistic names like 'pussyfoot,' 'sissy,' and 'stuffed shirt' (Kimmel 2017; Pascoe 2012). Many sociologists have concluded that homophobia is central to hegemonic masculinity along with heterosexuality and toughness (Alexander 2003; Andreasson 2015; Kimmel 2017; Schrock, Schwalbe 2009; Schwartz 2021). Discussion about

heterosexuality has less to do with sexual orientation and more to do with dominance and control over girls' bodies (Pascoe 2012). Additionally, Pascoe suggests that young men are only able to create masculine identities by failing at them first (Pascoe 2012). Through failure, they are able to grasp what it means to be truly masculine. In this paper, masculinity will be interpreted as a set of discursive and interactional practices rather than a biologically predetermined status.

Historical Evolution of Masculinity

The history of masculinity is integral to understanding how contemporary masculine identities are formed. 'Sex role' theory may have been born in the 1930s, but masculinity dates back to the origins of civilization (Connell 2005). For example, masculinity in ancient Greece was associated with courage, rejection of fear, and being head of the household (Rubarth 2014). Masculinity as located in and expressed through the body has ancient roots. Young Spartan men trained rigorously as soldiers, exhibiting great physical strength and discipline. It was common for young men in ancient Greece to die during training or by punishment for infractions (Rubarth 2014). The expression of masculinity through a physically fit body is not a new phenomenon; the male body and masculinity are historically inseparable.

Michael Kimmel argues that American men have been searching for a new masculine identity since the mid-nineteenth century. Before America's transition to a consumerist economy, Kimmel identifies two types of masculinities. There was the "genteel patriarch" and "heroic artisan." The "genteel patriarch," according to Kimmel, was a man of the landed gentry. He is associated with elegance and sensitivity rather than intellectualism; he is in touch with his emotions. The "genteel patriarch" above all was a present, loving father who tended to his children. The "heroic artisan" also prided himself on being an attentive father who loved and

provided for his children, so much so that he passed down his craft to his sons. The "heroic artisan" participated in political life, was a proponent of democracy, and involved in his community. These two roles do subscribe to traditional masculinity in the sense that the "heroic artisan" passed down his craft only to his sons rather than daughters. The "genteel patriarchy" was essentially a landlord; he was the owner of his property rather than his wife. However, these two roles differ starkly from Kimmel's third proposed masculinity: the "marketplace man."

Kimmel suggests that in late stage capitalism, we find "marketplace manhood" (2017). The "marketplace man" is primarily concerned with generating as much capital and clout as possible. He does not have an intimate relationship with his children or wife; his life and identity are rooted in "accumulated wealth, power, and capital" (pg 8). The "marketplace man" has no emotional intelligence, and if he does, it goes unexpressed. He is thought of as absent in all areas besides professional life and is infatuated with "self-making" (pg 9). Manhood and capitalism have become intertwined in recent history, creating men defined by material things and their life-styles. This shift to "marketplace manhood" caused a gender identity crisis for American men post-industrialization. Men were able to soothe themselves by hunting, eating red meat, and idealizing the Wild West (Alexander 2003; Kimmel 2017). Leisurely activities and a reinvented lifestyle provided them with a new masculine identity (Kimmel 2017). The rise of sport also allowed men to reject femininity and embrace strong, capable bodies and masculine competition. I conceptualized participants in this study as Kimmel's "marketplace man" because they valued progress, productivity, and discipline above all else. Achieving fitness goals was their way of finding success; being fit was like a form of masculine currency.

Hegemonic Masculinity

Masculinity, masculine identities, and the 'male' role are deeply historical concepts, and the body of sociological research surrounding these concepts is always expanding. In this study, R.W. Connell's working definition of hegemonic masculinity will serve as the overarching framework. Numerous studies utilize her theory, ranging from research on bodybuilding and steroids, to guns, and *Men's Health* magazines (Andreasson 2015; Gibbs, Salinas, Turnock 2022; Nash 2018; Pascoe 2012). Connell argues that masculinity is the inherent subordination of women by men, but perhaps more importantly, men subordinating each other (Connell 2005). This subordination can be attributed to differences in race, class, and sexuality. Therefore, masculine identities should be understood as diverse or "plural" (Alexander 2003; Connell 2005). As Connell eloquently puts it, "Hegemony relates to cultural dominance in the society as a whole… Marginalization is always relative to the authorization of the hegemonic masculinity of the dominant group" (pg 10). Masculinity is a set of practices or actions, and the repetition of these actions is what enables men to continuously oppress women and other men (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005). Connell notes that hegemonic masculinity is enacted by a minority, yet it is the normative. It involves institutions, culture, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).

Neoliberalism and the Body

Furthermore, neoliberalism is a commonly used theoretical framework for understanding the male body (Alexander 2003, Gibbs, Nicholas, Salinas, Turnocks 2022; Kimmel 2017; Nash 2018; Ricciardelli 2011). An ethnographic study on CrossFit gyms, otherwise known as "boxes," found that while men and women are equally active in CrossFit gyms; the founding principles of CrossFit reflect both neoliberal ideology and hegemonic masculinity, with its origins rooted in

military training (Nash 2018). For example, the ‘no pain, no gain’ mentality is widely accepted in the CrossFit world as fact. Despite half of CrossFit members being women, 75 percent of coaches are men. Members are predominantly white, between the ages of 25-35, and active in the professional world. CrossFit members, I argue, embody hegemonic masculinity: white, fit, young, and rich. Unsurprisingly, the brand is worth $5.5 billion, marking the inextricable relationship between capitalism and fitness.

Neoliberalism has inarguably altered the way most people understand health and fitness. According to Nash, the CrossFit affiliation model is “embedded in libertarian free-market ideology” (pg 9). Fitness practices now reflect self-improvement, determination, and success (Nash 2018). As previously stated, the idea that men should be self-made and self-sufficient is not a new development and dates back to the beginnings of late stage capitalism in the US (Kimmel 2017). Many Gen Z men fully subscribe to this philosophy when it comes to fitness and improving one’s health, physique, and self-discipline, which will be later discussed in the findings.

Feminist philosopher, Susan Bordo, has written about the plasticity of bodies, which is relevant when trying to understand the intricate relationship between neoliberalism and the body. She argues that women's lives are thought of as “plastic possibility” and “weightless choice” (1993). Women are able to change their eye color with contacts, the construction of their faces or breasts with plastic surgery, and their bodies with unconventional diets, treadmills, and bootcamps. Women in her work attributed this desire to their “feminine nature,” claiming that all women want to be more attractive (1993). This idea can extend to men within the context of neoliberalism and bodily malleability. As men’s grooming and appearance distinguish themselves from femininity, they too have started to think of their bodies as changeable and

something that could be altered to reflect their "masculine nature," ultimately supporting the idea that individuals should always want more for themselves and strive for excellence.

A key example of the intersection between neoliberalism, masculine hegemony, and the male body is *Men's Health* and other magazines geared towards men. *Men's Health* covers advertise full-proof exercise regimens and improved sex lives, reinforcing the idea that heterosexuality is integral to masculinity and that lean, muscular bodies are the most desirable bodies (Alexander 2003; Chow 2022; Connell 2005; Pascoe 2012). It should be noted that the 'perfect body' narrative is not only present in heterosexual discourse. In fact, on Grindr, a popular dating app for gay men, some users write in their bios "no fats, no fems" (Chow 2022). Despite deviating from the hegemonic norm of heterosexuality, there is still a fear of femininity and fatness in the gay male community. Regardless of sexual orientation, the quest for the idealized masculine body is ultimately unattainable and fueled by the neoliberal philosophy of never-ending self-improvement.

Fitness Culture: A Paradox

There is much sociological debate as to whether or not fitness culture and team sport are an asset or setback in the production of masculinity, especially when thinking about the values of Gen Zers. Gibbs, Salinas, and Turnock argue that gyms are a place for men to express their masculinity both productively and socially (Gibbs, Salinas, Turnock 2022). Men encourage each other to push themselves, chat while waiting for different machines, and spot each other on the bench press. While manual labor used to act as a communal space for men and provided them with a sense of collective identity, such as the factory or coal mine, scholars suggest that this male community can now be found in gyms (Gibbs, Salinas, Turnock 2022). One study on a

white-collar, self-proclaimed progressive gym claimed that there was a “hybrid” masculinity at play; men were supportive of one another but still interacted with hegemonic masculinity by excluding women , an idea further supported by gender-segregated sports in youth (Rabii 2021). This progressive gym’s philosophy encouraged “love, caring, stoicism, discipline, safety, and personal growth” amongst its members (pg 232). Love and caringness are not associated with the “marketplace man,” but stoicism, discipline and personal growth are. This parallels the generational paradoxes of Gen Z. Gen Zers believe in interconnectedness but also individualism, in the same way that this gym valued personal growth but also love and caringness. Moreover, the contemporary “marketplace man” is in constant competition with other men, always trying to be on top. Fitness culture is a compelling phenomenon because men are encouraged to uplift one another but at the same time feel the pressures of hegemonic masculinity and masculine hierarchy. Therefore, gyms become a space for men to offer each other peer support but also engage with neoliberal ideas like self-improvement, productivity, and discipline.

Team sports are yet another example of this masculine paradox. Little boys often participate in team sports such as basketball, baseball, and football. Connell writes, “In youth, skilled bodily activity becomes a prime indicator of masculinity, as we have already seen with sport” (pg 851). Boys' athletic capabilities become a part of their developing masculine identities. In one study, adult men reflecting on their childhoods explain sports as “natural” or innate (Messner 2008). The masculine notion of being physically capable or strong begins in male youth and continues into adulthood. Team sports do foster a sense of camaraderie for young men, like the gym, and promote friendship, but it is important to consider that boys who do not participate in team sports face isolation and loneliness (Messner 2008). This creates masculine hierarchy at an early age, a consequence of hegemony. The strongest, toughest boys are rewarded

and celebrated while boys who are not as strong or do not participate in sports are outcasted. Fitness culture therefore creates an inclusive and exclusive environment. Young men in this study fell into this paradox. At times fitness culture was a source of identity and security, while at other times it was a source of insecurity and stress. This study explores young mens' tumultuous relationship with fitness culture and its impact on their masculine identities and self-perceptions.

Methodology

Sample

Gen Z is a compelling group for numerous reasons. First and foremost, they are the first generation of the 21st century. Generations are influenced by major world events and cultural shifts which ultimately determine the values of that generation (Francis, Hoefel 2018; Grabinger, Sladek 2014). World events influencing Gen Z include but are not limited to 9/11, climate change, the 2008 economic recession, and COVID-19. As previously stated in the introduction, research has suggested that Gen Zers value individualism, lack of labels, resolving conflict with dialogue, and pragmatic decision making (Francis, Hoefel 2018; Grabinger, Sladek 2014). Gen Z's relationship with the digital world, need for both interconnectedness and individualism, along with unique world events sets this generation apart from Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers. I felt that this study should be limited to Gen Z men because they are searching for identity in both the social and digital sphere. Additionally, Gen Z men do not occupy the traditional male roles that older generations do given their age. I interviewed 14 men between the ages of 20 and 26 who self-identified as regular gym-goers. Most participants were college students, but three were

working post-grads. Although participants attended different universities, studied different disciplines, and worked in different professions, clear categories of analysis emerged in the data, which will be addressed in the findings section.

Limitations

While anyone who fit participant criteria was welcome to interview in this study, there were several limitations. First, I conducted research in a predominantly white, affluent area, so participants were mostly white, upper-middle class, and had a higher education. As Connell argues in her work, hegemonic masculinity is plural. White, straight, cis, upper-middle class men have more privileges than marginalized men (across lines of race, class, sexuality) and occupy the highest rank in the social hierarchy of male hegemony. This inherent privilege impacted the way these young men interpreted masculinity. For example, young men in this study could afford gym memberships and had the leisure of being able to spend several hours at the gym a day. Results may not be generalizable to all young men in the US, but data obtained in this study still provides important sociological insights regarding gender, identity-making, and fitness culture as it pertains to young men.

Because I am using both convenience and snowball sampling as my primary form of recruitment, participants often knew each other and were active in the same social circles. Some scholars may consider this a limitation, but it allowed the research to be more focused given that participants had relatively similar lived experiences and upbringings. In fact, most interviewees knew each other and often exercised with one another, making it easier to recruit participants who were willing and excited to participate.

Lastly, it was difficult to define what it means to "regularly" go to the gym. This might be interpreted as going to the gym three times a week and running a few miles on a treadmill or going to the gym six days a week for two hours and lifting heavy weights. I wanted participants to define what it means to routinely exercise, so some participants may not fit the 'hardcore' fitness definitions previously suggested in the introduction. However, all participants exercised for at least an hour most days of the week. Some participants exercised for longer and seldom took a rest day while others exercised every other day for a shorter period of time. Frequency of exercise was dependent on participants' schedules. The three participants in this study who were working post-grads exercised less frequently given their demanding jobs. Ultimately, all participants deliberately made time to exercise routinely.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via email, social media outreach, and in-person. I posted an Instagram story on my personal account that read, *Hi! I'm a senior at Bard College conducting a research study on young men and fitness. If you are between the ages of 18-25 and regularly go to the gym, I would love to talk to you!* One advantage to using Instagram is that posts can be shared by followers, so my peers were able to repost my outreach flier. Additionally, I asked my peers if they could connect me with any young men who go to the gym regularly and would be willing to participate in a study on fitness and identity. I either gave peers a flier with my contact information or recorded emails of potential participants and directly sent them a message.

This recruitment style is convenience sampling. Convenience sampling can be defined as, "individuals who fit the criteria of a study are identified in any way possible" (Sedgwick 2013). Because of both geographic and time constraints, it was easiest and most efficient to create a

sample of young men who were geographically close by. After finding a few participants through these various forms of outreach, I used snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is defined as "a recruitment technique in which research participants are asked to assist researchers in identifying other potential subjects" (Oregon State Research Office 2017). Snowball sampling is an appropriate recruitment method for this study because young men and their friends often have similar interests. So, it was likely that participants would be able to refer additional interviewees, which they did[1].

Interviews

Interviews were open-ended and semi-structured (see Appendix A). Participants were asked about their daily routines, motivations, and long term goals. After recruiting interviewees, I conducted interviews wherever they felt most comfortable and when they had time. As a researcher, I understand that my participants are providing me with information; they are the experts. So, it was imperative that I made participants feel comfortable. Participants were given a pseudonym in my research if directly quoted as well as in my notes, transcripts, and audio files. All notes and audio files were password protected on both my computer, Google Drive, and cell phone. Names of gyms, trainers, friends, or any other identifiable person/organization were given pseudonyms to insure confidentiality to the best of my ability. Participants were given a consent form in which they were informed about the study, the risks of participating, and a choice to opt out of being audio recorded as well as withdraw consent at a later date (April 1, 2024). Before beginning interviews, I reiterated what is on the consent form and let participants know they

[1] I would like to note that when reaching out to potential interviewees via email I did not reveal who recommended them to insure confidentiality.

could refuse to answer any questions that I asked and withdraw consent from the interview at any time.

Coding and Data Analysis

To code the data, I referred back to interview transcripts and notes. Every interview was audio recorded, and extensive notes were taken. After interviews were complete, I identified common themes found throughout the research process. For example, any slang used by participants was noted such as “getting big”, “training to failure”, and “locking in ", all of which will be explained in the findings section. I then compared and contrasted participants’ daily routines, exercise routines, long-term goals, and motivations to better understand what was most important to participants. Additionally, I took note of any overlap in the way that participants described themselves to me, which was often as disciplined and productive. Essentially, I identified patterns within participants' interviews, often listening to sections of interviews several times to fully and clearly understand what participants were trying to express.

Findings

The most prominent theme that emerged across interviews was use of neoliberal ideology and rhetoric surrounding fitness practices and self-improvement. Neoliberal rhetoric easily was identifiable by participants’ self-descriptions, usually claiming that they were “disciplined” and “productive.” Additionally, I asked participants questions relating to routines, motivations, and goals (see Appendix A). Two other salient themes were physical attractiveness and health, both mental and physical. Interviews ultimately revealed the nuances of fitness culture and contradicted social media interpretations and perceptions of the ‘gym bro.’ Participants in this

study were able to create meaningful, masculine identities during this transitional period of their lives through fitness.

The Contradiction

Social media frequently portrays the young, male gym-goer as vain, steroid-addicted, and hypermasculine (see Appendix B). The data found in this study counters social media representations and, instead, displays 21st century men as attempting to find a masculine identity through fitness culture. These young men were aware of stereotypes such as the "gym bro" and "gym rat" but often understood themselves as existing outside of these categories. In fact, one participant touched on this saying, "It's not exactly good for you to be beefed up… no one is doing steroids for their health. It's for appearance" (Ryan, 20, student). Participants believed that young, male fitness influencers were not living a healthy, productive lifestyle and were actually quite critical of it. One interviewee summed up the phenomenon: "I'm never going to be Arnold Schwarzenegger" (Griffin, 20, student). His delivery was playful, almost poking fun at himself. This interviewee was aware of the fact that he would never be a bodybuilder, which is something he had made peace with. While it would be nice to look like Arnold Schwarzenegger – tall, muscular, and conventionally attractive – that was never participants' objective. Participants were well informed about health and had realistic expectations for themselves, rejecting the physiques of bodybuilders. Data collected in this sample challenges media narratives about the traditional "gym bro" and conveys fitness culture as a complex phenomenon rooted in identity-making, self-esteem, and purpose.

Neoliberal Rhetoric (Discipline)

As McGiugan states, “The neoliberal self is situated in relation to production” (pg 234). Contemporary American culture encourages the individual to constantly improve, and young men have consequently internalized this pressure (i.e. social mobility, corporate ladders). I would argue that the gym serves as a space for neoliberal, masculine ideas of self-improvement. ‘Discipline’ was a word used by almost every participant and is consistent with neoliberal rhetoric. Ryan said to me, “[Fitness] definitely helped me to develop will power… I have better self-discipline” (20, student). For him, the gym was not only a place to improve his physique, but it was also a place to improve his mental stamina. The discipline that came from structure, consistency, and routine helped him perform better academically.

When I asked Quinn how fitness has impacted his life, he replied, “Discipline. I’m way more disciplined” (20, student). When I asked another participant what motivated him to go to the gym, he replied, “I feel like it gives me discipline and structure” (Jason, 20, student). Participants’ need to be disciplined reflects American neoliberal culture. There is a widespread belief that individuals should be totally responsible for themselves and circumstances, always productive and motivated, ideals exemplified by the American Dream. If an individual is willing to work hard enough, they can achieve social mobility and acquire capital and other material goods, which is important to the average American. In a sense, young men in this study were doing this at the gym. If they worked hard enough, they could be strong, disciplined, and successful in whatever they wished to achieve. As one participant put it, discipline was a “transferable skill” (Jack, 20, student).

Again, the gym served as a pathway for participants to improve themselves and achieve their goals, even when these goals were not fitness related. Goals sometimes had to do with an internal expression of the self rather than physical appearance. Instead of wanting to have a more

developed back or bigger arms, one participant expressed that he wanted to be "more dependable" (Mike, 22, student). Jason said something similar during his interview, "When I start a task I don't like to leave it unfinished" (20, student). Participants liked to complete things to the best of their ability; they always tried their hardest to excel. Another participant said that he wanted to become the "best version of himself" (John, 21, student). It was not enough for participants to simply be good at what they did, they had to be the best at what they did. Being the "best version" of the self remained somewhat ambiguous throughout interviews, but when looking at the language surrounding it, it can be inferred that participants wanted to be in-shape, disciplined, and successful in all areas of their lives.

Routine as Discipline

Moreover, after conducting all 14 interviews, it was obvious that regularly going to the gym provided participants with a regimented schedule more so than school or work alone. For the most part, routines consisted of three central components: professional obligations (school or work), diet, and fitness. Mike's routine looked like this:

> I wake up probably an hour or 45 minutes before I have to be out that door…Breakfast is normally oatmeal, peanut butter, banana or grits or something. Something close to a thousand calories. Eggs, high protein. And then go to class…. In between classes I'll try and sneak back home and make myself my first lunch. Normally chicken breast, I probably eat a pound of chicken a day, a little more…Then I go back to class. Come home. That's normally when I hit the gym around 5-6ish… I would say the average workout is around 2 hours… and then I get home and grind [completes school work]… Normally right after I get back from the gym I'll do lunch two [second lunch] like the protein shake with creatine… then a fourth meal or a dinner later on (22, student).

Mike's routine was the most extreme when compared to other participants. His days were meticulously calculated, beginning when he woke up and ending around bedtime. He later went on to tell me about his meal plans and his workouts, which operated on a strict schedule. Mike's

routine exemplifies rigid discipline in every step. He wakes up promptly before class, plans his meals in accordance with fitness goals, and always creates space for school work, which he refers to as "grinding." I should note that Mike is actively "bulking", which is why he consumes around 4000 calories a day. This is yet another example of discipline situated in routine. Not only was Mike exercising, he was monitoring his caloric intake and planning every meal, further exemplifying self-discipline and his dedication to fitness through routine.

Having a diligently planned daily schedule and repetitive fitness routine was a covert form of discipline exercised by participants. Jason identified routine as one benefit of exercise. When I asked him why fitness was important to him he replied, "[Exercise] gives me discipline and structure" (20, student). Participants' use of the word 'structure' can be interpreted as their personal daily routines. Another participant said, "[Exercise] provides more structure… It sets you up going forward" (Jack, 21, student). For Jack, the "structure" that he found at the gym was applicable to other areas of his life. Participants identified structure and discipline as separate ideas, but structure (routine) was a form of discipline.

Furthermore, working out enabled young men to better approach time management, which helped them with their studies and careers post-grad. As Rob eloquently said, "Having a solid schedule throughout your day is very important– you follow that schedule" (22, consultant). Participants indicated that they needed a regimented daily schedule because it was a pathway to accomplish their goals, whether or not these goals were related to fitness, academics, professional careers, or their personal lives. There were a few discrepancies among routines created by participants, but they were largely the same. Gym time was usually structured in a way that worked well with academic responsibilities or work schedules, such as Mike's routine. If participants stuck to their schedules, put in their best effort at the gym, and excelled in school

or work, they could then prove to themselves that they were disciplined individuals. Being disciplined was fundamental to participants' identities given that all participants discussed the importance of either routine or discipline in their lives[2].

Obligation, Motivation, and the Body as a Machine

The idea of forcing oneself to go to the gym was consistent across interviews. While most participants did feel fulfilled after an arduous workout, many discussed having trouble motivating themselves. Jack said, "If I don't force myself to go I just won't" (21, student). He later went on to tell me that he enjoyed going to the gym with friends because they would "hold [him] accountable." Ryan felt similarly to Jack, especially in terms of forcing himself to go. He said, "I hated working out when I first started. I kind of just did it as a means to look better honestly. And then I probably started getting into cardio stuff after like 6 months of forcing myself to do it" (20, student). Ryan set a goal for himself, and he wanted to achieve that goal. Despite not enjoying working out at the beginning of his fitness journey, he did enjoy his physical results. Participants frequently prided themselves on doing something they did not want to do; this was indicative of discipline and responsibility, which were fundamental to participants' identities.

Bodies were sometimes interpreted as machine-like. One interviewee literally described his body as a "physical machine" (Mike, 22, student). The body was a presentation of their masculine values and sense of self. Data collected suggests that participants wanted to have complete control over their machine-like bodies, pushing themselves until they reached their

[2] It is important to note that the socioeconomic positioning of participants allowed them to have the privilege of working out routinely. For example, many participants did not have to work full-time during college and were able to allot their free time to fitness.

limits. This is what participants described as 'training to failure,' a technique that they commonly used[3]. One participant defined 'training to failure' for me:

> The idea is that your muscles when you do physical activity tear, right? When they tear, they build back stronger and thicker and that's how you gain muscle… If you're going to the gym consistently and you're training to failure which is 0 reps in reserve and you're lifting lifting lifting and you're trying and all of a sudden you can't get the weight up, that's training to failure. Where your body literally can't do it anymore (Mike, 22, student).

Training to failure captures the essence of discipline for the young man. If he works himself to his absolute limit before quitting, he then can identify as disciplined. Quinn said, "You want to achieve failure at the end of your workouts because you're the most tired… but if I'm being honest at the end of my set I can't do another rep… I can't do another rep if I tried… I stick to failure to see how far I can go" (20, student). This narrative appeared across interviews. Peter said he liked to "destroy [his] body for the day" (22, consultant). Participants enjoyed working themselves to exhaustion. The idea of doing hard work and having complete mastery over the self reflects neoliberal ideas of discipline as well as capitalistic narratives in the US about men in the professional world.

Moreover, discipline was a pathway to reward. Quinn said, "I'm a big proponent of 'reward system.' If I do really well during the week– if I get to class on time everyday, if I do my work, if I do good work then I don't see why I couldn't let go a little bit" (20, student). If Quinn felt that he was disciplined throughout his week, whether academically or at the gym, then he was able to reward himself with something fun like drinking with friends or eating something 'unhealthy.' Tyler went on to say, "'Any time you do something you've never done before whether it's fitness related or something… I always find it rewarding at least" (20, student).

[3] Training to failure as an effective practice is a highly contested topic in the fitness world and exercise science (Nóbrega, Libardi 2016.; Santanielo, Nóbrega, Scarpelli 2020). Research strongly suggests that training to failure is not conducive to health or a safe practice.

Discipline and reward went hand in hand like upward mobility and the American Dream. For young men, working on their bodies reflects the mentality of hard work and allows them to then reward themselves. One participant even said, "You kind of have to struggle a little bit" (Griffin, 20, student). Struggle and overcoming struggle in itself was a reward for participants. It proved to them that they were strong, skillful, and physical machines.

Progress

Going to the gym regularly was all about progress. Brian put it very plainly, "Progress is progress as long as I keep consistent" (23, research assistant). Another participant described progress as, "something that is quantifiable and easy to track" (Tyler, 20, student). The narrative of progress was commonly used amongst all participants. Progress at the gym may be important to Gen Z men because they are not yet progressing in professional careers or as husbands and fathers, which are traditional, hegemonic male roles. These young men are in a transitional period of their lives. Another participant spoke to this: "I feel super productive after a workout… I love to try and be like my absolute best and do everything I do to the fullest. When I'm really productive… this is probably really arrogant, but no one else is doing this" (20, student). This statement embodies the relationships between neoliberalism, the male body, and fitness. Exercise allows young men to feel both productive and progressive. Exercise gave Quinn confidence in himself, but simultaneously, his personal philosophy represented quintessential neoliberal rhetoric. For the young man to unlock the "best version" of himself, he should be in a state of constant progression.

Despite the countless hours of grueling training, participants knew that their bodies were actively changing. Looking in the mirror was one way to do this, but also when they were able to

complete more reps with heavier weights and look at the number on the scale. Increasing one's weight was crucial to many participants and their fitness journeys. Brian said that "it was really nice to put work into something and see your numbers go up and see positive results" (23, research assistant). Participants did not explicitly express why increasing weight was important to them, but it was indicative of their progress. Perhaps this is because gaining weight is conducive to building muscle and a rejection of being "skinny" or "too small," which will be discussed later. Brian later went on to say working out gives him a sense of self-improvement and accomplishment. To some of these participants, the body was thought of as a project; they could sculpt their bodies to look however they wished with discipline.

Feminist philosopher Susan Bordo primarily writes on women's issues, but her essay "Material Girl" aligns with this idea. She argues that Western science and culture have convinced us that our bodies are malleable and unfixed. With enough work, whether this is done physically or at a surgeon's office, our bodies can be whatever we want them to be. She writes that women are, "rearranging, transforming, and correcting, an ideology of limitless improvement and change, defying the historicity, the mortality, and indeed the very materiality of the body" (Bordo 1993). Both women and men have come to understand their bodies as self-improvement projects. "Getting bigger," a phrase commonly used by participants, was not only about looking a certain way, it was about the dedication and discipline it took to get there. Peter said, "I worked to get to this point. If I stop working out I'm taking it for granted. Like dude, I worked to get to this point" (20, student). Part of what kept these young men going back to the gym was fear of losing progress and the bodies they had worked hard for. Neoliberalism encourages the individual to push themselves to their absolute limits, at times over extending the self for sake of being "the best version" of themselves. It turns all tasks into a means to an end rather than something done

for pleasure. Participants expressed that they enjoyed the gym, but this was sometimes a major contradiction. As previously discussed, participants felt they had to struggle or had a difficult time motivating themselves to go to the gym. It was unclear as to whether they enjoyed working out, if it was simply a means to an end, or both, creating yet another paradox. When speaking about fitness and body image, one participant said, "you're never satisfied… I think it's a self-induced torture" (Quinn, 20, student). There is an obvious dissatisfaction felt by participants, but at the same time, they strive to "lock in" and get in touch with their bodies, which will be discussed later on.

Routine and Identity-Making

As previously discussed, a regimented routine was critical to participants for multiple reasons, predominantly because it gave them a strong sense of discipline. It is important to understand how and when this routine was instilled in participants. Almost all participants reported playing team sports in their youth and in high school. Fitness then was embedded into their lives during childhood, making athleticism a fundamental part of their identities, as it is for most young men (Connell 2005). Sean, an ex-personal trainer turned firefighter, said, "Exercise is important because it's something that I established as a part of my routine early on in high school…When I first started personal training with clients I found that it was harder for them to be consistent because they haven't established it as part of their identity or routine." (26, firefighter). Participants' established routines carried on into young adulthood and were solidified as part of their masculine identities. Another participant spoke to fitness and identity more explicitly. He said, "If I don't go to the gym, that's kind of the definition of imposter syndrome… Lifting weights it's just an inherently male thing… Single white guy, college kid. What else am I

gonna do but lift weights?" (Griffin, 20, student). This participant clearly expressed that lifting weights felt natural to him as a young man. For him, it was the *only* thing to do. If he did not lift, he would not feel completely himself; fitness was inextricably tied to his masculine identity as a young man. In other words, fitness becomes embedded in routine, and routine becomes embedded in identity.

Back, Bis, Traps: Progressing toward Goals

Participants' workouts were as rigidly structured as their days. Each participant had goals they wanted to accomplish at the gym. Some said that they simply wanted to "get big" while others hoped to improve their physical strength and longevity. Most participants had what they referred to as a "split." A split is how a week's worth of workouts are planned. Workouts were broken up into different muscle groups on different days to facilitate strength training and minimize chance of injury. Usually, participants exercised three days in a row followed by a rest day. A few participants were more intense, seldom taking a day off. Simon broke down his routine for me:

> Monday I always go and do chest, shoulder, triceps for like an hour to an hour and a half. Tuesday its back, bi [biceps], trap [trapezius], forearms. Wednesday I go and do a leg, the entire leg… And Thursday I do a stability/cardio day. It's mostly a core [abdomen] day for me. Friday is usually where I do more so a cardio day because on Friday I consider it kind of a rest day. When I'm not at the gym I feel like I still wanna work out, so I go for a run (20, student).

Simon's time at the gym is incredibly structured. Despite taking off Fridays, he still made an effort to do some form of cardio. This speaks to how ingrained fitness is into the lives of participants. Some participants felt like they could never truly rest, reflecting their dedication to fitness. Moreover, participants explained in detail what equipment they used, what types of

exercises they did, and sometimes included the number of sets and reps. Very few participants went to the gym without a plan for their workout. The gym was a place of organization, efficiency, and self-making. Some participants preferred going to the gym alone so they could "lock in" and do their best work. Going with friends was sometimes considered distracting, however some participants did enjoy the community they found at the gym as earlier expressed by Griffin.

The layers of routine embedded into fitness practices are indicative of a few things. First, it allows participants to actively practice discipline which provides them with a sense of identity as they try to navigate young adulthood. Additionally, it enabled them to set achievable goals. These goals were mostly related to their aesthetics and health. Participants often discussed wanting to "get big," which was described to me as: "Just like big and muscular… When people work out or when people lift weights, their goal is to get bigger. Increase muscle size I guess. The correct term is hypertrophy" (Simon, 20, student). Simon was able to use technical language when discussing fitness because he is currently studying exercise science and is a certified personal trainer. While he later claimed that he was "intrinsically motivated" to make progress, he still acknowledged that the gym goer's ultimate goal is to be "big." "Getting bigger" was true for almost all participants. Peter said his fitness goal was "to get better at the gym. Lift heavier and lift more" (20, student). In Peter's case, he wanted to continuously make progress. Going to the gym and maintaining where he was at was not enough. It was important to constantly progress when it came to lifting, achieving one goal and setting another.

Mike provided a definition for "getting big." He said getting big is, "To have big muscles…There are standards of physical attractiveness that are very real… these physical traits that women find – or people who are interested in your sex to be inclusive– are interested in that

are just facts. People like people who look a certain way" (22, student). He expressed that people like a particular body type (big and muscular) as a fact, setting a standard for how he looked. Although Mike expressed that he wanted to look a certain way to attract women, Gen Z is more inclusive. He went on to say that this standard applies to anyone who works out regardless of sexual orientation. Ultimately, making progress was situated in neoliberal philosophy surrounding self-improvement and excellence while "getting big" was situated in aesthetics, which will be discussed in the next section.

As previously stated, seeing progress was crucial to participants. Interestingly, goals and progress worked in conjunction. By setting a goal and working toward that goal, participants were able to tangibly measure their progress as they got closer to their goal (i.e. weight gain, more reps, lower body fat). Jason said, "I like seeing the progress within myself if that makes sense… So, I guess for me it was mostly a physical thing [progress] starting out. I really wanted– so I started– do you know like bulking and cutting?" (20, student). He then explained to me what bulking and cutting is. Bulking is when an individual intentionally eats more than he can burn off in hopes of accumulating more muscle mass. Cutting is when an individual intentionally creates a calorie deficit to try and lose weight but retain muscle. Out of my 14 participants, none were able to explain whether or not there are any long term health benefits to bulking and cutting. It was presented as a technique to get stronger faster. Jason was practicing bulking and cutting to achieve his aesthetic goals, or as he describes "a physical thing." His ultimate goal was simply to look better. Moreover, bulking and cutting was the active practice Jason used to achieve his goal. Brian felt similarly, saying: "Working out gives me a great sense of accomplishment. It's a long term self-improvement project that you can see results on" (23, research assistant). For Brian, working out serves as a means to a few things. It allows him to feel productive in a meaningful

way while being able to physically see his progress. Working out, again, is the process used to achieve a goal. As Brian made progress at the gym, he got closer to the end result of his "self-improvement project." However, participants' self-improvement efforts did not stop with discipline and routine.

Aesthetics

Aesthetics was inherent to participants' sense of self. Their changing bodies were physical markers of progress. Looking good was pitched to me as a positive byproduct of fitness (i.e. "Looking good helps my confidence but it's not something that motivates me") (Rob, 23, consultant)). Generally speaking, most people care about how they look and have insecurities, but participants seldom expressed their insecurities to me in clear terms. Instead, insecurities subtly emerged while they were speaking, usually relating to being too "skinny" or "small," which were also never given a concrete definition. One participant said, "In the beginning I weighed 130 pounds and now I'm 200,", implying that weighing 130 pounds was too small (Jason, 20, student). Therefore, fitness was not entirely about health and longevity. Looking good was a way for participants to feel secure in their bodies and themselves, simultaneously proving that their hard work and discipline paid off.

Participants' relationships with fitness was complicated. For Quinn, it began with playing baseball in his youth, which was a common trend. Almost all participants started taking fitness seriously in late middle school or early high school because of team sports. When Quinn saw professional baseball players, he decided he needed to be bigger and stronger. He described being self conscious because he was skinny. When I asked Quinn how his fitness journey started, he said, "I was definitely very skinny…I guess my coaches or, like, somehow like I got into it…

and I'd see baseball players and I was like how the heck did they get that big? My dad's like oh I lift weights and stuff and I was like oh, yeah, I want to do that" (Quinn, 20, student). Quinn was very vocal about what he wanted to accomplish in the gym, again, approaching his body as a project or a machine. He said, "I was tired of being skinny… I was very skinny… I guess I was always self conscious about that too… but that's a different story" (20, student). He mentioned multiple times how skinny he was, almost embarrassed. Quinn was reluctant to tell me more about his insecurities, as were most participants. He did not elaborate on feeling self conscious about his size, writing it off as "a different story." Perhaps Quinn felt embarrassed for being insecure.

With the exception of two participants, all participants wanted to be bigger and were insecure about being "skinny" at one point. For example, Jason said, "When I first started going to the gym that was a big thing for me because I wanted to gain a lot more weight because I was a lot skinnier than I am now" (20, student). Another participant said, "I've always been pretty skinny… so I had some motivation to build muscle when I started working out. I've achieved some of that goal" (Tyler, 20, student). Participants consistently reported that they began working out because they felt that they were too "small" or "skinny." When I asked Griffin how he felt about himself before working out he said, "Dang I'm kinda small. I could put some muscle on, but the irony is that the bigger you get the more you obsess over it… I learned that being a physical therapist being more athletic and having a muscular stature leads to people trusting you more" (20, student). Griffin in part has to appear in shape so clients will trust him, but he still felt insecure about being small. He noted the irony of the situation. As he began making progress, he felt more insecure: "the bigger you get the more you obsess over it." While he understood that obsessing over getting big was a bad thing, his insecurities did not go away.

Griffin was not the only participant who expressed this fitness paradox. Tyler said, "I feel like before I started working out… I didn't really think too much about my body image, and then I started working out more and I was like, oh, I do like this because this is good for my body image. That realization did bring more of my own attention, I should say, to my body image" (20, student). Tyler, too, felt this irony. As he started working out more consistently, he paid more attention to his body and how he looked. Feelings of insecurity are not inherently bad, but it is worth noting that fitness as a practice caused some participants to think about their bodies more critically. Not wanting to be thin, or being embarrassed about being thin, further reinforces the idea that participants needed to be "big" and that being skinny was less desirable. "Getting big" was conducive to higher self-esteem, but at the same time, working out and setting aesthetic goals sometimes led to feelings of inadequacy when these goals were not met.

It should be noted that a few participants discussed wanting to be thin, but even then, they wanted to appear strong. Brian said, "I was skinny but I was so shredded," when reflecting on his days as a collegiate athlete. He went on to say, "I felt worse about my body and increased my body fat. I went from 6 percent body fat to a normal percentage…I felt less confident in my appearance" (Brian, 23, research assistant). So, when Brian put on weight, he felt less confident. Being skinny and toned, having 6 percent body fat, is what really made him feel good. Physical and mental health were motivations for working out across interviews, but aesthetics was still relevant to participants. Another participant began his fitness journey after a break up, followed by unwanted weight gain. He said,

> Sophomore year, me and my ex broke up… But after that I started drinking everyday so I wouldn't feel sad and sh*t… And at the end of it I gained a lot of weight… So I decided to start going to the gym, and like, it started off as a revenge tour type sh*t. And then now it just turned into– I wanna see how far I can get and like see how much better I can get if that makes sense (John, 21, student).

For John, he wanted to lose weight, but it quickly turned into seeing how big he could get. Even when the objective was weight loss, it came back to looking good or being big. Ryan explained to me that he started going to the gym to lose weight in highschool. He self described as "skinny fat" at the beginning of his weight loss journey. He explained skinny fat as when "you're not fat but you're not really defined" (Ryan, 20, student). He lost the weight he hoped to lose, but he was not where he wanted to be. He later said that he started going to the gym because he "kind of just wanted abs" (Ryan, 20, student). He wanted to be "hot" by the time he got to college. Being skinny was only a positive thing if one had strength and muscle definition. For participants, there was a constant aesthetic objective in mind, even when their primary objective was to improve longevity or reduce chance of cardiovascular disease.

Confidence

Interviewees expressed that working out made them feel more "confident". Confidence was often coded language for feeling attractive. For example Tyler said, "I like being confident in the way I look… I would like to gain another 10 pounds that's almost entirely muscle" (20, student). Tyler's 'confidence' was dependent on him getting bigger. Being confident and being big worked together. As participants set more goals, achieved them, and set new goals, they felt better about themselves. For Sean, impressions about what the male body should look like started in his youth. He said,

> I had a physique in mind that I always wanted to look like growing up and stuff with certain fitness role models. One of them was that Twilight series New Moon, Taylor Laughtner… and I was like wow that's an awesome physique. And also other ones like the Marvel heroes and stuff. I always wanted to look good in that sense. Like to have the physique of wide shoulders and stuff like that. I was never super obsessed though (26, firefighter)

His idea of the perfect male body was inspired by movie stars. He saw something that he wanted to emulate early on. After sharing this with me, he immediately said that he was never "super obsessed." This was also common across interviews. Participants would tell me how they wanted to look or how they thought they should look, but these statements were often followed by saying they were too bothered by it. One participant went on to say, "I've never had any negative comments about myself that I can recall, um, so I wasn't doing it out of spite or anything, I was just doing it because I wanted to look a certain way and move toward that goal" (Tyler, 20, student). Here, Tyler expressed that he does not have body image issues, and he made it clear that he has never thought negatively about himself or his body. Nonetheless, Tyler went on to say that he wanted to look a certain way, and he set goals to do so.

Confidence was a predominant theme across interviews, but each participant understood it differently. Mike said to me, "I liked the way [working out] made me look. I liked the way it made me feel. I liked the way it made me feel about how I look. And all of those things combined kind of kicked off my love for the gym" (22, student). While Mike did not use the word confidence to describe how he was feeling, it is implied. The gym allowed him to feel good about himself, which is essentially what being confident means. The confidence he found by going to the gym is what kept him going back, and loved his aesthetic results. Sean said something similar but a bit different:

> Fitness has kinda established a standard for myself to have in terms of what I want to look like and how I want to feel…I would say it definitely boosts my confidence whenever I'm done with a workout…it gives me a self esteem boost even when I don't feel confident. I tried to make sure it wasn't a crutch though, any time I had low confidence… Guys in my age group you know…They'll just kind of go to the gym and have that be the crutch… that's something I saw even training people (26, firefighter).

Sean, like Mike, enjoyed his physical results. However, the idea of fitness as a crutch is an interesting analogy. Sean attempted to explain that some men use looking good or being attractive as a solution to poor self-esteem. Instead of working on their self-esteem or confidence from an internal place, they try to fix it externally by going to the gym and seeking validation from others. Simon had a similar approach when thinking about confidence. He said,

> For me, personally, [working out is] for my own intrinsic value…I'm not somebody who is just gonna like, we're at the beach and I'm gonna pop my shirt off and I'm gonna be like oh my god everyone is looking at me I feel awesome, like that's extrinsic motivation– which is cool if that's what you're into. But that's not me (20, student).

Both Simon and Sean made it clear that working out was *not* a crutch for them. Instead, working out was a way to boost their confidence in a meaningful way, not one that was superficial. Again, participants in this study saw themselves as existing outside of the "gym bro" stereotype, as made evident by Sean and Simon. They do not work out for external validation; they work out because it makes them truly feel confident. This was an important distinction for participants to make. As previously mentioned, the gym bro is thought of as vain and unintelligent. Participants spoke eloquently and held a vast body of knowledge regarding fitness and health. Most participants thought about their physical appearance, but it was not their sole objective at the gym. They distinguished themselves from the social media gym bro with their politeness and intelligence. Their passion and commitment to fitness was apparent, and this was presented in a genuine way opposed to vanity or self-obsession. Furthermore, while participants did value aesthetics, physical and mental health were still majorly important to them and their identities.

Mind Body Connection

Participants were fitness experts. Given that some were majoring in exercise science, had worked as personal trainers, or were just in love with exercise, they were all knowledgeable about the health benefits of exercise. These benefits were presented as physical and mental. Some participants discussed exercise as a form of self-care or meditation. Mike described exercise as a meditative practice. He said, "I'll throw on music– yeah, I mean it makes sense. Mediation centers your mind on your body and on your physical existence…There is a thing at the gym called mind-muscle connection, and it is very real" (Mike, 22, student). For Mike, working out was a time where he could let go of the stress in his life and do something that he wanted to do for himself. He explained that there is a real connection between the mind and body that can be accessed through fitness. When he works out, he is able to focus on a muscle, isolate it, and work it to the fullest effect. He puts on his favorite songs and "locks in". When Mike works out, he grounds himself through his body. However, this statement contradicts what he had said earlier in his interview. Mike repeatedly stated that he wanted to look a certain way for external reasons, like validation from other men at the gym or women he was interested in. At the same time, going to the gym allowed him to better connect with himself and his body in a meditative way. These ideas may work in opposition to each other, one being rooted externally and the other internally, but nonetheless, they were both true to Mike.

Peter was yet another participant who described the gym as meditative. He said, "Yeah I guess [exercise] just feels purposeful, a little bit meditative. So it's like… even if I do jack shit for the rest of the day, like if I went to the gym, I feel pretty good. Cause I did something that meant something, and you kind of just lock in for an hour and a half… mental health hack" (Peter, 20, student). Peter ties together multiple themes here. First, exercise is intentional. In this way, it is a form of self-care. Like Mike, he is doing something for himself. He is bettering his

body and his mind, which works in relation to progress and being the "best version" of the self. Exercise enables Peter to feel like he did something with his day and proves to him that he was productive. He described working out as being "locked in," a phrase used by multiple participants. Contextually, "locking in" means getting focused. When this participant is at the gym, he creates a meditative experience for himself by truly focusing on one thing: his body. With that being said, most importantly, exercise was meaningful to Peter. The young men in this study often seemed to be searching for meaning at the gym. Sometimes it was for superficial reasons like looking better, but other times it was because exercise allowed them to feel like they were doing something truly positive for themselves and well-being. The meditative state they reached while working out can be thought of as self-care for Gen Z men.

Physical Health

Physical health was yet another motivation to work out. Despite being young, they were concerned with improving their longevity and physical ability. For example, when I asked Rob what motivated him to exercise, he replied, "I felt motivated to be healthier and stronger and better" (Rob, 22, consultant). Going to the gym was important to Rob because it not only helped him be the best version of himself, but it also allowed him to maintain an overall healthy lifestyle. Rob additionally discussed wanting to improve his cardiovascular health since he had pre-existing health conditions. However, the idea of being "better" is consistent with participants' need to be their best. Brian felt similarly to Rob. He said, "[Exercising] obviously makes you look better… but really it's so good for you" (23, research assistant). Of course participants enjoyed having abs or defined biceps, but they seemed to unanimously agree that the gym is good for one's mental and physical health.

Participants also ate well. Their diets were balanced, filled with lean meats and whole grains. Two participants even practiced vegetarianism, one for cultural reasons and the other for health reasons. When I asked Sean about his food habits, he told me that in May of 2020 he adopted a vegetarian diet. He wanted to source protein through plant based foods rather than meat. He went on to say, "I try to eat pretty clean – like as clean as possible" (26, firefighter). When participants used the word "clean" to describe their diets, it can be inferred that they mean healthy. Despite Sean not wanting to eat chicken breast and ground turkey, the two most popular sources of protein for participants, it was still important to him that he had a balanced, healthy diet.

Social media fitness influencers may flaunt their steroid use and unattainable physiques, but participants understood the genuine health benefits that consistent exercise offers. However, this sometimes got muddled for participants. One participant was particularly troubled by the paradox of health and aesthetics. When I asked him why he exercised, he said,

> I want to say it's because I want to be a healthy person and be capable… actually I will say that. I want to be a healthy person… I don't like the feeling of walking up a hill and being winded. I like being physically capable of things and in addition it's important to me because of how I look. It's important to me to look a certain way – it makes me feel good about myself, helps confidence… People are attracted to it for some reason (Mike, 22, student).

Here, Mike grappled with why he exercised. He was apprehensive to admit that part of him wanted to be fit for aesthetic reasons, not solely health. This participant often did "body math" such as calculating his basal metabolic rate (BMR)[4]; he was serious about fitness and taking care of his body. At the same time, Mike expressed to me that he liked the validation he at the gym

[4] Basal Metabolic Rate is defined by the American Psychological Association as, "the minimum energy expenditure required to maintain the vital functions of the body while awake but at rest and not expending energy for thermoregulation… (**BMR**) is measured in kilojoules (or calories) expended per kilogram of body weight or per square meter of body surface per hour" (2018).

received from looking good and from women. Later in the interview, he mentioned that as a man he does not receive many compliments. At the gym another man might compliment him on his form or muscle definition. This type of validation is obviously related to aesthetics, but it also relates to mental health. Being complimented can make a person feel good in a very real, genuine way.

Mental Meanings

Overall, participants articulated to me that working out made them feel good. This can be interpreted in many ways, but feeling good likely meant being confident, happy, and secure in themselves. One participant said to me, "It's great to get validation… oh you look good… but [working out] makes me feel good in a genuine way" (Simon, 20, student). For Simon, validation was nice, but working out is what truly made him feel good. More knowledgeable participants discussed endorphins and other positive chemicals that are released when exercising. Being fit in and of itself had an overall positive impact on participants' mental health. Being able to self-identify as disciplined, productive, healthy, and attractive allowed them to have a strong sense of confidence, which was a part of their identities. Peter said, "I didn't really have the intense body dysmorphia that some of my friends had in the gym…but I did like being on the fitter side… It feels pretty great" (Peter, 20, student). Peter addresses the darker side of fitness culture, body dysmorphia, but participants in this sample were aware of how harmful fitness-obsession could become. Some did acknowledge that superficial motivation alone could lead them down a tumultuous path, but this was not the case for any participant. As Jason put it, "I think health is important because it makes me feel better, it elevates my mood and mentality. And I'd like to think that by being healthy I'll live a longer life and age better" (Jason, 20,

student). For Jason, working out was about more than looking good or getting big. He strived to live a long life and maintain his mental health. He was able to recognize the internal benefits of working out, as did other participants.

A few participants discussed fitness more holistically. One participant stated, "I think it's important to workout for both mental and physical health… I think it's important to have good relationships with your friends and family. Being mentally and socially aware are important to health" (Brian, 23, research assistant). Exercise was a sophisticated practice in this way. Fitness kept Brian both mentally and physically healthy, which allowed him to maintain better relationships with his family and friends. The benefits of exercise usually spilled over into other areas of participants' lives, socially, academically, and professionally. Another participant went on to say, "[Exercise] adds another activity to my day… It diversifies…my lifestyle portfolio… I want to make sure I have a diverse lifestyle. Work, spending time with my friends, I have other activities, hobbies. Being a well rounded person in that aspect is pretty positively conducive to my mental health" (Rob, 22, consultant). Exercise as a part of one's "lifestyle portfolio" is neoliberal in the sense that individuals have to constantly be marketing themselves and improving, but there is something quite beautiful about the sentiment. For this participant, exercise made him feel more complete. By incorporating fitness into his life, he was the fullest version of himself. Exercise and mental health, and to an extent social health, were inextricably intertwined.

Conclusion

This study concludes that fitness culture played a formative role in the development of participants' identities. Participants strongly felt that they should be disciplined, constantly

progressing, and strive to be the "best version" of themselves, making the gym a space where neoliberal philosophy could be perfectly exercised. Having a secure sense of self is difficult to do in the age of social media given that the online world and real world are intertwined for the young person (Tirocchi 2024). Social media fitness influencers have set an unattainable standard for the young male body (see Appendix B). Despite this, participants were aware of the fact that these online influencers were living unhealthy lifestyles and chose not to emulate this in their lives. In a way, rejecting the traditional "gym bro" found on social media allowed participants to better define and understand themselves. They were not "gym bros" but instead capable young men who wanted to do their best and live healthily, which is quite admirable. Moreover, I would argue that finding an identity or sense of self is especially difficult to do as a young American in the 21st century. Neoliberalism in American life and culture is inescapable. This ideology not only dictates the American economy, politics, and culture but also trickles down into institutions like schools and the workforce. Perhaps subscribing to and accepting neoliberal ideology is a form of survival for the young men in this study or an act of self-preservation. If neoliberalism is the expectation, then adhering to it makes life for young men more manageable.

As stated throughout this paper, being able to self-identify as disciplined and productive enabled participants to develop a stronger, more complete sense of self. Fitness culture and its impact on young men should not be written off as either an asset or setback; it occupies both roles simultaneously. Identifying as disciplined and creating a daily routine had in some cases a positive impact on participants' self-perceptions. Their days had direction and purpose. However, participants existed in a state of never-ending goal setting, sometimes leaving them feeling dissatisfied. This is yet another paradox presented by participants. Their bodies and health were living, breathing projects that could continuously be improved upon and redefined.

While taking care of one's health and feeling confident are important to well-being, the pressure to always do better can become troubling, and in more extreme cases, destructive. Participants frequently trained to failure and were roped into the "self-induced torture" that is fitness culture.

Fitness culture served as an invaluable cornerstone to participants' self-perceptions and identity making during young adulthood. Fitness as a practice ultimately allowed them to connect with their bodies and themselves, achieve personal goals, and partly escape the liminality and unknowns of American young adulthood. All participants were genuinely excited about fitness, eager to talk about their fitness journeys, and share their knowledge with me. This study ultimately proves that there are inherent paradoxes embedded within fitness culture, but what is difficult to answer is how Gen Z men can grapple with these paradoxes. Sociologists of gender, neoliberalism, and the body should further explore the relationship between fitness culture, identity-making, and masculinity. More studies should be conducted regarding young peoples' self-perceptions, especially Gen Zers. It is unclear as to whether or not participants in this study subscribed to neoliberal ideals because they genuinely believed in them or because these ideals are so ingrained in American culture that they become embedded in individuals as fact. Sociologists should also spend more time exploring the values of Gen Z as the generation ages. Additionally, further research should be conducted regarding how Millennial and Gen X men think about fitness and how fitness culture has or has not impacted their self-perceptions despite occupying 'traditional' male roles.

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Appendix

Appendix A

Interview Questions

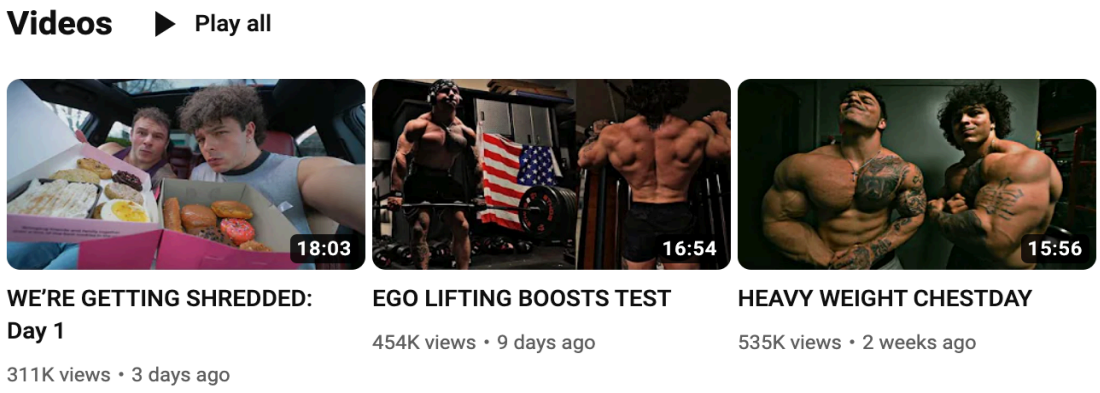
1. What is your typical day like?
2. What is your routine like? Can you walk me through it? How often do you exercise? How long do you exercise for? (fitness practices)
3. When you're at the gym, what equipment do you use? Which parts of the gym do you interact with the most?
4. What do you do for your health? How do you maintain a healthy lifestyle (if you do)?
5. What initially comes to mind when you hear the word fitness?
6. When did you start working out or exercising, and what motivated you?
7. Why is exercise important to you?
8. Do you take exercise classes or go independently? Do you go with friends? Both?
9. What is the environment like at the gym? How would you describe the environment?
10. How does working out make you feel?
11. How did you feel about yourself before you started working out and how do you feel about yourself now?
12. Do you feel that working out has changed your quality of life, and if so how exactly?
13. What words would you use to describe yourself?
14. Why would you use those words to describe yourself?
15. What are your personal fitness goals? Are you achieving those goals?
16. How do you feel about where you are in your fitness journey right now?
17. We are the social media generation, do you use social media? If so, how often?
18. What platforms do you use?
19. Do you follow any fitness influencers? If you do, who and why?
20. What are your long term goals for yourself? What do you want to achieve?

Stratifying Questions

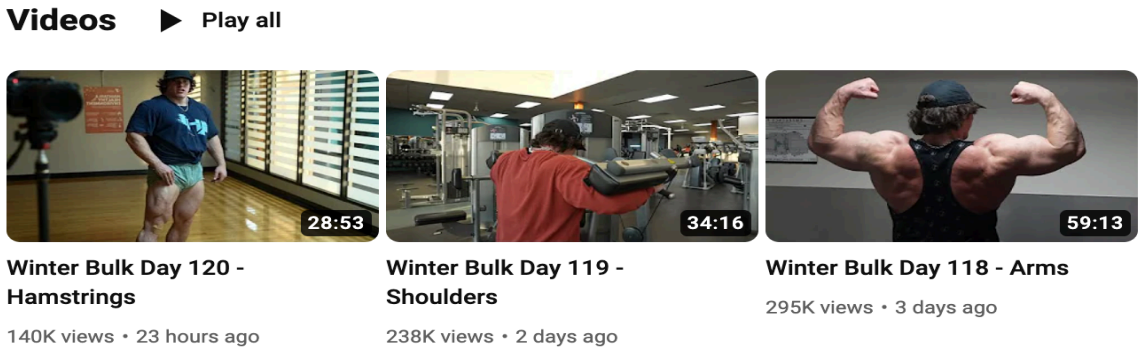
1. Age, gender, occupation, race/ethnicity, religion, political alignment, income, education, sexuality

Appendix B

The Tren Twins are brothers who produce fitness content. Their content is hypermasculine and primarily focused on "getting big". Their videos often depict them drinking protein shakes and lifting heavy weights. To see the Tren Twins' video content, visit their YouTube page (https://www.youtube.com/@thetrentwins). Another similar content creator is Sam Sulek. His videos showcase him lifting, flexing, and getting ready for the gym. To see his content, visit his YouTube page (https://www.youtube.com/@sam_sulek).



The Tren Twins, fitness influences



Sam Sulek, fitness influencer

Appendix C

The WHOOP 4.0 costs the consumer $239 annually. This watch tracks sleep and exercise, helping individuals work out more efficiently and take better care of their bodies. The homepage of WHOOP's website reads "Reach your goals, try WHOOP for one month free". Further down on the page it reads, Understanding your health and fitness at this level has been impossible—until now. WHOOP measures the data that makes the biggest impact on your performance, from sleep to stress to strain and recovery". This watch promotes productivity, progress, and goal setting in relation to health and fitness. Products like WHOOP are not uncommon amongst gym goers and are one example of the commodification of fitness.

https://www.whoop.com/us/en/whoop-trials/