MASS MEDIA AND MUSCLE: THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON YOUNG ADULT MEN’S EVERYDAY EXPERIENCES AND BODY DISSATISFACTION – A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY

A Thesis Presented to

the Faculty of the Graduate School

at the University of Missouri-Columbia

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

by

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JULY 2022
The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the thesis entitled:

Mass media and muscle: The impact of social media on young adult men’s everyday experiences and body dissatisfaction – a qualitative inquiry

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Acknowledgments

I could not have conducted this study without the academic and personal support of people I met along my academic journey at the University of Missouri. I would like to thank Dr. Jeannette Porter, my thesis committee chair, academic advisor and mentor, for her unwavering support, the candid feedback she has provided me throughout the research process, and her patience as I continually pieced together this thesis.

I would also like to thank the other two members of my committee. I am grateful to Dr. Brett Johnson, who has been a significant figure in my journey at MU who always made himself available to speak inside the classroom and during office hours about a range of topics, including First Amendment Theory, academic rigors and talking through key findings in my research as that knowledge emerged.

I also want to express my gratitude to Beverly Horvit, who worked with me as early as my first semester MU’s journalism master’s program to hone my study topic and research questions. Dr. Horvit never shied from providing feedback during office hours as I composed my research proposal and helping me compose a compelling reason for carrying out this study.

Aside from committee, I want to thank my editors, student peers and friends at the Columbia Missourian newspaper for pushing me to step out of my comfort zone in my reporting and copyediting endeavors. The Missourian has played a significant role in my academic life for the past two years and has given me a new perspective of writing I will continue to draw from past graduation. I will carry the memories and lessons learned from the paper into my next chapter in life. My hope is that this paper is a reflection of
some of the principles of newswriting and basic storytelling I worked on honing at the Missourian: extracting the color from the everyday experiences of other members in our communities and displaying with aptitude why their stories are worth sharing.

I want to thank MU’s Graduate Professional Council Professional Development Committee for the financial support they generously awarded me. When I applied for the GPC’s Research Development Award in early 2022, I did not expect to hear from them saying they approved my grant request. This grant has gone a long way to ensure I could hold incentives for potential recruits to reach out to me, thus furthering my research on this topic. And as a college student who decided to fund these incentives out of pocket while living paycheck to paycheck, I want to express my sincerest gratitude to MU’s Graduate Professional Council for seeing the value in supporting this area of research, as well as my motivation to contribute to the dialogue surrounding men’s body image.

Finally, I must express my gratitude and love to my wonderful parents, Paul Gendron and Johnna Gendron, who have supported me throughout my two-year-long career MU. Without their love and support, I wouldn’t have left home to pursue my degree at this institution.
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Abstract

**Intention:** The purpose of this thesis is to examine young men’s body dissatisfaction, as men are typically marginalized as a population less susceptible to developing body image issues and eating disorders. The purpose of this study was also to examine men’s relationship to social media and how that impacts their expectations and beliefs about their body self-identities.

**Methods:** For this study, a qualitative method procedure. The study population was men aged 18 to mid-20s. Recruits partook in semi-structured interviews and answered questions about their fitness lifestyle and experience with social media. Grounded Theory was utilized to identify meaning through data analysis.

**Findings:** Participants who had a worse body image tended to view more idealized imagery on social media and viewed the body as an object, while those who were more content or positive about their self-body image tended not to follow any specific social media figures and aspired for fitter bodies because it would improve their performance.

**Conclusion:** Solutions to social media imagery are discussed as well as compelling topics that emerged from the interview that can serve as the basis for further research.
Introduction and literature review

In September 2021, The Wall Street Journal released a series of striking investigative pieces reporting on never-before-seen research from Facebook’s inner team of researchers. Among these stories was one about Facebook’s photo-centric social media platform, Instagram, and how the company had data supporting claims that Instagram is toxic to teenage girls’ mental health and body image perception (Wells et al., 2021). And just three months later, the Journal released another story concerning TikTok, a platform centered around short-form videos, typically with music overlayed. In this report, the publication explores the rise of videos exposing young female teens to eating disorders; videos providing weight-loss tips have cropped up across the platform, with some creators sharing tips on how to curb food consumption (Hobbs et al., 2021)

These exposés highlight how social media has transformed from a harmless online space once restricted to Ivy League students to an accessible space where young and impressionable audiences collect much of their daily news and fanning the flames of dangerous ideologies and actions.

But more hides between the words on this first page spread; body image and health concerns have largely been discussed in connection to women, though these same problems plague men, too.

For decades, many types of media have continually perpetuated narratives connoting specific bodies as ideal; from the 1970s to 1990s, action figures progressively became more muscular (Pope et al., 1999), and pornographic magazine page spreads
leaned toward featuring more muscular men (Leit et al., 2001). In addition, children’s animated movies, as well as books, have consistently connoted slim or attractive characters as “good,” while the overweight are vilified (Herbozo et al., 2004).

In the year 2022, social media is at the height of its popularity, with platforms such as Instagram and TikTok continually growing in popularity with younger generations of users; a 2022 study found that the average daily time teens spend on social media is about an hour and a half. Additionally, the same study found that entertainment media screen time among 8- to 18-year-olds increased 17% from 2019 to 2021. In comparison, screen use in teens grew 11% and 3% for tweens from 2015 to 2019. This comparison illustrates how fast digital engagement is growing in a short amount of time.

Social media has become grounds for viewers to compare themselves to others; in a New York Times roundtable discussion, teenagers voiced how social media made them feel anxious or insecure about themselves (Healy & Garcia-Navarro, 2022). Specifically, the teens noted how these feelings derived by looking at other people portraying themselves in the best light. Moment by moment, exposure to social media continues to be a heightening concern for teens’ mental health, which has the potential to carry over into young adulthood, as will be discussed momentarily.

For young men specifically, the main object of comparison is the human body. And when men continually compare their bodies to others, this can lead to body dissatisfaction and image concerns. Male teens and young adult men already are at high risk for body dissatisfaction; in one study, a quarter of adolescent men whom researchers identified to be at a healthy weight were dissatisfied with their body shape. Additionally,
70% of participants believed they were too fat (Skemp et al., 2019). In another study, comprised of 4,000 adolescent and young adult male participants, around a quarter of the recruits expressed weight concerns, with 93% of those same participants saying they worried about their muscularity, too (Glazer et al., 2021). Glazer and colleagues also found that men’s muscularity qualms increased with age; these concerns, as well as the potential for eating disorders, peaked around ages 19 to 22 in their participant pool. Other researchers have suggested that adolescent boys’ body dissatisfaction grows as they age (Rhea et al., 2005).

Media connotes the body ideal for men as one that has attained noticeable muscle mass but low body fat (Lamm, 2018). Studies have shown that men who consume media are likely to compare themselves to others who possess the ideal body; adolescent boys who consume sports magazines feel a drive to achieve leanness (Slater & Tiggemann, 2014); male Hispanic college students exposed to Western media ideals have felt stressed to pursue them (Warren & Rios, 2013), and a content analysis of Cosmopolitan Magazine reveals that the Western publication produces far more pictures of nude men compared to its Asian counterpart (Yang et al., 2005).

Men in America are in constant view of idealistic imagery flowing through multiple media channels. These messages have been shown to cause harm to men’s physical and mental well-being. Professional bodybuilders are more prone to using steroids, develop eating disorders and experience depression compared to other athletes (Blouin & Goldfield, 1995). This issue isn’t relegated to just the U.S.; researchers have focused on body dissatisfaction in other continents, too. Lebanese weightlifters reported
using performance-enhancing drugs (PEDs) to achieve muscularity, despite known health risks (Melki et al., 2015).

Another study also found that both Taiwanese, U.S. and European men desired more muscular physiques (Yang et al., 2005) However, the researchers found that Taiwanese men were generally less concerned about body image than those from the U.S. or Europe; these territories are commonly referred to as “Western” territories, a term I will use to refer to these regions throughout this paper. Results showed that Western men desired far more muscle mass than Taiwanese men, a contrast that the researchers attributed to Western media messages prominently featuring images of muscular men.

Theories and key concepts

A concept central to this study is **body dissatisfaction**, which can be defined as a person’s disharmony between their body image — their perception or attitude toward their body—and their *ideal* body image — internalized beliefs, often prescribed by culture, that shape how that person wants their actual body to look (Heider et al., 2015).

Related to the ideal body is muscle dysmorphia, another pertinent concept to this study. This can be defined as a type of body image disorder characterized by the obsession of gaining muscularity or not having enough muscle (Zeeck et al., 2018).

These two concepts lead into this study’s theoretical approaches. The first is **social comparison theory**, a psychological theory that was first brought attention by researcher Leon Festinger in the 1950s. Festinger argues that when humans interact with
each another, they routinely compare themselves to others because humans have an innate drive to evaluate ourselves (The Psychology Notes HQ, 2017; Festinger, 1954). This process results in people viewing themselves favorably or unfavorably based on those with whom they interact — those could be people they see as “beneath” them or of higher status (Cherry, 2020).

Researchers have already applied social comparison to body image studies (Nikkelen et al., 2012). One study found that music videos were not very effective at causing social comparison, but television ads were strong mediums (Allen & Mulgrew, 2020). Another study revealed that men who tended to compare themselves to others experienced higher body dissatisfaction after viewing ads with idealized images (Galioto & Crowther, 2013). The researchers also speculated that media locks men into a constant state of social comparison, and thus puts them more at risk for developing body image issues. This illustrates why social comparison is a useful theory for this thesis.

Another framework to apply is a theory known as cultivation analysis, also interchangeably referred to as cultivation theory. This approach to media consumption, developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, initially sought to articulate how reality presented in TV affects viewers’ perceptions of actual reality (Gerbner & Gross, 1978; Gerbner, 1998). This theory has been used to explain many topics, including violence, but it can be used to explain how depictions of idealized bodies in media can perpetuate an unrealistic expectation of what everyday people look like (Grammas & Schwartz, 2009; Martins et al., 2011). Additionally, those who care more about their appearance are more likely to internalize media-prescribed ideals, and thus experience a greater drive for muscularity (Kling et al., 2016).
Media effects on women

The effects of media messages on women’s body dissatisfaction are documented more in comparison to males. It has been shown that viewing idealized media messages is positively correlated with women’s body dissatisfaction (Fardouly et al., 2018; Tiggemann & Anderberg, 2020). In addition, Anixiadis et al. (2019) found that women who favored thin-ideal images resulted in their moods shifting negatively.

In studying the effects of social media on young women, Perloff (2014) found that social media sites fueled women’s disordered eating habits. As the author notes, sites that encourage such harmful behavior are often selectively chosen by the user because they agree with the content they’re viewing, which locks the viewer in an echo chamber of messages that align with their preferences and attitudes.

When reviewing the range of images present on social media, it’s important to consider the options users have to edit images before posting. Many messages on social media are staged or fabricated, which can lead to negative outcomes for both the uploader of the image and viewers. It’s been reported that as many as 90% of women who post on social media edit or utilize filters when posting images of themselves (City University of London, 2021). Furthermore, editing selfies results in negative mood toward one’s body image (Tiggemann et al., 2020).

One Instagram influencer sought to criticize this “fake” world fabricated by social media. In a 2019 story in Glamour Magazine, Instagram influencer Cassey Ho (2019) analyzed the top 100 female influencers on the platform and found they aligned with certain physical characteristics. Ho then had a graphic designer alter her own shots to fit
into this standard of beauty, sharing both the unedited and edited shots side by side. In one of her posts, Ho states that it’s a problem that girls don’t know what images are real or what physical characteristics are the result of physical alterations.

Altering photos and the negative consequences to viewers’ mental health has been a hotly contested issue. Most recently, Luke Evans, a U.K. member of Parliament, proposed a bill in January that would require social media users to include an advisory label in pictures to indicate if they were changed (Noble, 2022). Commenting on the impact of his proposed legislation, Evans said:

> The government must consider primary and precautionary measures to help curb the dramatic rise in poor mental well-being, the mass individual self-loathing across the U.K., the serious mental health disorders like anorexia and bulimia that are becoming florid, and I believe my bill is a small and fitting way to start this journey.

Despite many of these concerns focusing on women, studies have shown that men who represent peak physical attributes – in this case, high muscularity and leanness – have been prominently portrayed in media over the past several decades.

**History of muscular images of males in media**

To study how men’s body preferences and media idealization have evolved over the years, it’s pertinent to first consider how the sport of bodybuilding changed social narratives related to body image. Bodybuilding as a competition rose in reputation in the
1970s and ’80s. During this time, several key competitors took their first steps to building their acting careers; Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno are a couple of the most well-known players.

In the two decades separating the early 1970s and late ’90s, media images gradually shifted to depict the male body as more muscular, which seems to align with physical standards set by bodybuilding coverage. Action figures of comic book and *Star Wars* characters were much more muscular in the ’90s compared to the years before (Pope et al., 1999). Similarly, *Playgirl* centerpieces in the 1990s depicted men more muscularly than the photos printed 20 years prior (Leit et al., 2001).

As media messages have evolved to connote muscularity as a favorable male trait, a history of shaming “ugly” or “fat” bodies exists, too. Funnell and Dodds (2015) analyzed the James Bond series of films and found that Bond’s villainous adversaries were characterized as unattractive, deformed or disabled. These traits serve to stereotype these physical qualities as undesirable. More recently, Herbozo and colleagues (2004) found that animated movies from the ’90s heavily associated virtuous qualities to thin or attractive characters, while the antagonistic characters were obese or had uncouth physical qualities.

Video games may also act as a predictor for body image issues in early age. One study found that games aimed at younger children portrayed characters with more exaggerated muscular body proportions compared to games aimed at older audiences (Martins et al., 2005). Game developers have even discussed crafting exaggerated physiques for their characters. One example can be linked to the horror and action franchise *Resident Evil* published by Japanese developer Capcom. For the 2009 game
*Resident Evil 5*, the developers designed its male protagonist, Chris Redfield, to be much more muscular compared to his appearance in previous installments (Figure 1).

Significantly, a director at Capcom stated in a 2017 video interview that he and other developers made character models by hand and that they deliberately exaggerated character proportions (Resident Evil, 2017). However, in the 2017 game *Resident Evil 7*, developers gave Chris a more realistic appearance because the studio utilized photo-scan technology to create in-game assets, and they couldn’t find an actor who had Chris’ body type.

The history of men’s objectification in media carries over to the current media landscape. And in many cases, much of the content featured on sites such as Instagram, Snapchat or YouTube – which are primarily visual mediums – can mislead or deceive viewers about what fitness or physical goals are realistically achievable.

![Figure 1: The character Chris Redfield from Capcom’s *Resident Evil* series of video games is depicted with varying physiques across multiple iterations of the character.](image)
Branding, supplements and enhanced performance

As previously noted, many young women use filters or spend time editing images of themselves before posting. These aren’t just acts of insecure people hoping to impress a few followers; many who market their bodies for a living stand to lose much if they don’t adhere to the standards of attractiveness that prevail in their preferred media (Ovide, 2022). Professional fitness influencers and actors go to great lengths to conflate their appearances or sensationalize fitness achievements because their respective markets incentivize such behavior. Some have even opted out of roles because of pressure to conform to a heightened standard of fitness.

It isn’t uncommon for fitness influencers to edit their appearances via Photoshop, such as to adjust lighting or make oneself look tanner, according to Yahoo! News (Parker, 2018). In a similar vein, MEL Magazine has reported about influencers using “fake weights,” which is workout materials that are much lighter than they appear to be, to feign impressive lifting achievements (Bateman, 2018).

In addition, users on social media who claim to be natural lifters – people who achieve their bodies without using drugs – are often at the center of viewer scrutiny. These individuals claiming natural bodies are so pervasive in online fitness subculture that they have a name: “fake nattys,” with the “natty” being a shorthand term for “natural.”

Social media posters have a high stake in looking their best physically. Their followings are largely reliant upon how good they look, according to Vox writer Alex Abad-Santos (2021). The more popularity these users gain, the more sponsorship and
market share they stand to gain. These people also want to use their image to sell products such as clothing lines or workout supplements. For instance, bodybuilder and open steroid user Rich Piana (Figure 2), who died of a heart attack in 2017 at age 46 (Wildenradt, 2017), manufactured his own brand of workout supplements called “5% Nutrition,” which are still packaged and sold today. Piana modeled his image, as well as supplements, around his claim that 5% of people do what it takes to reach their goals; this fact is recorded on one of his headstones (Figure 3) (findagrave.com, 2017). Clearly, Piana’s public image and personal mentality served to inspire his own chain of merchandise, as well as push a controversial message about what a “successful” person looks like.

Figure 2: Rich Piana is depicted.
A similar marketing scheme plays out in the entertainment industry, too. Contemporary Hollywood is rife with actors striving to achieve the muscular ideal. One must only look at the current craze surrounding superhero movies to notice this. Reporter Tatiana Siegel with *The Hollywood Reporter* (2013) reported that as much as 20% of male actors achieve their physiques with the help of PEDs or anabolic steroids. Prominent industry players such as Dwayne Johnson, who was the highest-paid actor in 2020 (*Forbes*, 2020), have been open about their steroid-use, though this is often uncommon. Others such as Chris Pratt, Mark Wahlberg and Chris Hemsworth have found
resounding success after starring in roles that highlight their physical transformations (Abad-Santos, 2021).

Maintaining a heightened level of fitness has proven unsustainable for some actors. Wrestler and actor Dave Bautista, who plays Drax in Marvel’s Guardians of the Galaxy movie, has voiced his concerns over playing a shirtless character. The 52-year-old said one of his reasons for departing from the role after the series’ third installment is because “the shirtless thing is getting harder and harder for me” (The Ellen Show, 2021).

The use of PEDs is popular among the general population, too, and they are used often in the pursuit of cultivating better-looking physiques. Darkes and colleagues (2007) found that only 6% of the nearly 2,000 male respondents who took the survey reported using steroids for sport-related purposes. By far, the three most important reasons participants used steroids were to increase muscle mass, strength and “to look good.”

PEDs aside, celebrity figures and wealthy social media influencers have access to resources that working class or many students don’t. For instance, consider personal trainers, dieting and even the precious resource of time. In a Men’s Health interview (Mancuso, St. Clair, 2021), It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia actor Rob McElhenney (who gained weight for the show’s seventh season in 2011 then got “jacked” for the 13th season in 2018) facetiously commented on his workout and diet routine as an actor:

Anybody on the planet can do this. First thing’s first: if you have job—like a 9-5 job—quit that. Do you like food? Forget about that. Because you’re never going to enjoy anything you eat. Alcohol? Sorry. That’s out. … You’re good friends with the trainer from Magic Mike? Arin Babaian. So
you want to give Arin a call. And you want to make sure he’s at your house and takes you to the gym at least twice a day, because you’re gonna want to do your muscle-building in the morning and then your cardio in the afternoon. Now, do you have a family? Like a significant other or kids? Yeah, forget about them. You’re not going to have time to deal with them. So that’s really all you have to do. And make sure you have a studio pay for the entire thing, because it could become exceptionally expensive. So, I think if you just do all those things, then you too can have an absolutely unrealistic body type, such as me.

McElhenney also commented on how the Hollywood ideal has changed, noting how Brad Pitt from the 1999 film Fight Club would be deemed “frail” by today’s standards. Additionally, McElhenny said that regaining his shredded body from 2018 would be tantamount to starving himself.

Although the current problem in men’s media representation lies with influencers’ inauthentic images, part of the problem also rests on viewer awareness: Do audiences recognize what is fake and who is enhanced? It’s unclear whether male viewers can adequately identify what bodies or fitness achievements are naturally achievable and which aren’t.

**Fitness and Western identity: muscularity equals masculinity**

It must be noted that much of the issues surrounding media messages and body image intertwine with Western media specifically. Studies show that Western messages
propagate idealistic imagery far more often in comparison to media in other cultures. Researchers comparing Taiwanese men to Westerners completed an analysis of men featured in magazines from both regions, and they found that only 5% of Asian men pictured in a sample of fashion magazines were undressed, while 43% of Western men were featured with no clothes (Yang et al., 2005).

It has also been shown that pervasive messages are effective at persuading viewers to conform to perceived standards of attractiveness. In line with cultivation analysis, one study found that young Hispanic men who moved to the U.S. felt pressured to internalize Western body ideals, resulting in body dissatisfaction (Warren & Rios, 2013). Another study found that Asian men felt more dissatisfied with their bodies after viewing idealized Western messages (Grammas & Schwartz, 2009).

Explanations have been proposed as to why Western men yearn for bodies high in muscle mass for seemingly cosmetic purposes alone compared to men outside Western culture. In a study about Ariaal men’s drive for muscularity in Kenya, Campbell and colleagues (2005) propose that muscularity fulfills men’s desires to be masculine figures. The muscular body has become one of the last ways to verify one’s sense of masculinity, Campbell argues. The conception of the male “breadwinner” has become mostly obsolete in most Western societies, contrasting African or Eastern cultures, Campbell surmises. Some have even cited social media as a specific mediator that drives men to prove their masculinity, resulting in a “crisis of male ego” (The Press and Journal, 2018). This leaves men with no avenue to perform masculine roles, thus forcing them to portray their manhood mostly through physical appearance.
In addition, fitness as a lifestyle emerged following technical advancements in society. The fit body came to represent specific admirable values in Western territories. Amanda Mull (2020) from The Atlantic points to the industrial revolution as a turning point; people no longer walked to work but drove. Labor shifted from physically intensive to mental work. As a result, fitness came to express values such as discipline, enterprise and independence, all of which are held in high regard in America.

Body image, to an extent, has been woven to cultural, and in some instances religious, identity. In her book Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture, Farrell (2011) explores the links that have bound men’s identities to their bodies. She argues that society viewed men who became fat — or who succumbed to civilization’s pleasures — had weak minds. Through a Christianistic lens, Farrell examined how the fat body came to be seen as dirty and impure (Farrell, 2011, p. 46).

**Consequences of pursuing ideals**

Pursuing physical perfection presents several problems for men. As previously touched upon, PEDs are used by both professionals and recreational weightlifters to achieve better-looking bodies. Specifically, steroids have become much more prevalent in today’s bodybuilding industry, despite them being criminalized and users understanding the harm they bring (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020). A strong association exists between anabolic steroid use and coronary artery disease (American Heart Association, 2017). Steroid use also leads to higher plaque build-up in the arteries as well as impaired heart function and lower heart valve pump capacity.
Blouin and Goldfield (1995) found that men who are more dissatisfied with their bodies are more likely to use anabolic steroids for recreational and appearance-based purposes. Furthermore, professional bodybuilders are much more likely to have higher drives for thinness, endure depression and self-image issues, and develop body eating disorders such as bulimia compared to other athletes. One study found that men in Lebanon – an Arab territory that disperses Western media content – who used steroids reported heavier drug use and smoking in comparison to men who didn’t use them (Melki et al., 2015). Notably, four out of five users said they were aware of steroid’s adverse side effects but continued to use them. One out of five users revealed they sought medical attention at some point due to using them. Another study interviewed Australian men who used steroids. The researchers found that most of the 14 sources exposed themselves to idealized social media idols, partook in illicit drug use at one point or another and felt feelings of inadequacy in adolescence (Piatkowski at al., 2020). Significantly, this study is one of the only ones that explored the lived experiences of men who viewed idealized images and had a drive to achieve muscularity, which is a notable hole in the current literature on the topic. I want to build off this study’s model and further share the voices of men concerned with their body self-images and not just men who specifically weight train, but those who may follow alternative avenues for health and exercise. In addition, men who I interview aren’t restricted to those who use supplements, which was a recruiting qualifier for Piatkowski’s and colleague’s study. In addition, I will be pulling extensively from my interviews so that the reader will become familiar with each young man by the end of this paper.
Research questions

Western media remain a source of messages harmful to the developing minds of young men. Messages in media continue to support social stereotypes and serve as predictors for body image disorders and drug use. Furthermore, researchers of male body image have collectively agreed in their own studies that body image is less documented in male populations compared to female ones. In addition, most studies follow a quantitative approach, leaving little to know about men’s lived experiences, their emotions when viewing idealized media messages and their level of media literacy and awareness of such messages.

This study is significant because it explores an underexplored population on a well-documented issue that is often shown to lead to adverse mental health and physical outcomes. In addition, my research looks more closely at the lived experiences of participants in an attempt to understand their viewpoints.

In addition, I believe I am the right person to be studying this topic; I am a 24-year-old, straight white male who has consistently strength trained and pursued active recreations for roughly six years. I have pursued attaining a fit physique in an attempt to develop my own self-image and have consumed idealized content online and in media that has, in ways both positive and negative, impacted my perceptions of realistic body standards, as well as mental health. I am also somewhat familiar with gym subculture, as I have been in acquaintance with many other men who belong to the community. Prior to this study, I have had many conversations with young men who have expressed their fitness goals and body image expectations, and so I am confident that I have a solid
foundation of the attitudes and beliefs men in gym culture hold and reinforce to one another. Therefore, I believe my own experience will serve to better enlighten readers on the experiences other young men have, as well as potential dangers their stories indicate toward a larger Western culture that glamorizes fit bodies.

My research questions are as follows:

Q1: What is the experience of men aged 18 to mid-20s who are exposed to media images depicting the ideal male body, and how do their beliefs affect their self-identities?

1. How often do men in their late teens to early 20s consume media featuring idealized content?

2. Does this population perceive idealized messages favorably or unfavorably?

Q2: How do recruits distinguish naturally achievable bodies from enhanced ones?

- Do they believe the ideal body is sustainable within an everyday lifestyle, and if so, why do they believe this?
Methods and study design

Participants and recruitment

Participants eligible for my study had to meet the following requirements. To participate, someone must:

1) identify as a man
2) be aged 18 to mid-20s
3) exercise regularly
4) use social media at least semi-regularly and have a basic understanding of entertainment media.

These requirements were set so that I could study a narrow population of candidates who follow a niche subculture, but I left characteristics loose when enforcing eligibility. For example, I didn’t specify how regularly participants had to exercise, what they did to exercise (weightlifting, cardio, sports). I also didn’t set a benchmark for how often participants had to be on social media or what kinds of content they viewed.

As part of my recruitment strategy for my IRB-approved study, I made sure to highlight an incentive: the opportunity to win one of two $100 Amazon gift cards in a raffle.

To promote my study, I designed a flyer on a free design website, Canva.com (Appendix A). The site contained basic tools such as adjusting text size and font, basic shapes and color templates and stock photos. I implemented these into my flyer to make
it more appealing, but I strayed from making it too complicated or cluttered. I ventured to include only the most essential pieces of information on the poster so that participants understood my research without having to read too much. The poster included a summary of my research interests – body dissatisfaction and social media usage – participation criteria, my contact info and the study’s IRB number.

Initially, my plan was to primarily recruit from the MU Rec Center, as many students using the facility meet the study criteria. However, I ran into a roadblock getting approval to promote my study at the center, so I decided to broaden promotion to gyms, residential areas and communal spaces across Columbia.

Across several weeks in February, March and April, I visited exercise facilities in person and provided them copies of my promotional flyers. I promoted at a variety of spaces, including national chains and local facilities ranging in training styles. I provided my flyer at three separate CrossFit establishments, a 24-hour national fitness chain, a facility that specializes in a class-based exercise environment, a powerlifting gym, an athletics performance gym, and three other local fitness spaces. Aside from gyms, I asked the residential life department of a local state school to hang my flyers in the dormitories, and I received separate approval to promote in two graduate apartment buildings. Additionally, I received approval to for the flyers to appear in a classroom facility, a student center and on-campus library. Finally, the residential life department of a local private college hung up my posters around its campus.

To widen my study’s exposure, I added posts about it online, mainly on Facebook and Reddit. For Facebook, I sent messages out onto some of the official “Mizzou Class of” group pages. For Reddit, I advertised on the r/mizzou and r/columbiamo subforums. In
addition to public online spaces, I signed up to appear on two weeks’ worth of MU Info
emails, which are sent to all faculty, staff and students across the university. I gained
approval from the J-School so it could appear as my study’s sponsor. Having my study
appear on it twice cost $100.

Before proceeding with interviews, all potential recruits were asked to fill out a
Google Forms survey. This questionnaire had individuals share their personal
information, age, exercise routines, often-used social media platforms and times to meet
for an interview. The screener was designed in a way so that participants could finish it in
as little as a minute because I worried that a longer form was unnecessary for my study
and could even deter some people from finishing it. Additionally, the survey’s purpose
was to determine whether people were eligible for the study, and I needed only a few key
pieces of information to determine if someone was or was not a suitable fit.

During early weeks of recruitment, I averaged around 1-2 interviews per week. About
midway through recruiting when I shared my study with many Columbia fitness
facilities, I consistently averaged 3-4 interviews per week in late March and April.

Following each interview, I asked participants to refer my study to someone they
might know. I followed this routine to better my chances of securing interviews; it was
possible that my participants were acquainted with other gymgoers or had friends who fit
my loose eligibility criteria. Unfortunately, I only recruited one person via snowball
sampling.
**Procedure**

Meeting locations: For the formal interviews, I rented study rooms either at Daniel Boone Regional Library or Ellis Library at MU.

Written and verbal consent to record: Before starting any interview, I had recruits sign a consent form and asked for their verbal consent to record interviews.

For the actual interview portion of my meetings, I read off a semi-structured interview script (Appendix B). Based on interviewees’ responses, I followed up with probing questions, prompting them to further explain answers or have them clarify aspects to their answers more clearly.

Additionally, I also made an effort to bring participants into conversation with one another. I did this by sharing nuggets of information that prior interviewees had shared with me at certain moments. I often followed this strategy if an interviewee said something surprising that nobody else said before. I think doing so helped participants to explain why they answered differently and encouraged them to reflect on other opinions and attitudes. The strategy, I believe, let a richer conversation to unfold.

I was not afraid to share details about my personal background and exercise lifestyle; I worked to show participants that I’m a member of their subculture, which I think is pertinent to cultivate a comfortable interviewing atmosphere.

At the end of each interview, I gave recruits the opportunity to provide any concluding thoughts. I did this to free up any thoughts they might have had that they didn’t previously express or to allow them to circle back to a point they made prior and reiterate, placing emphasis on it.
Data analysis

For each interview, I used the recordings to create a transcript through my Otter Pro account, a transcript-generating software. I read through each interview and fixed typographical errors that the software created, and I also created interview summaries in Microsoft Word for each participant.

As I wrote summaries and collected data, I applied Grounded Theory, which states that meaning emerges from data (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Charmaz, 2014). Patterns and recurring themes arose across interviews, and I took note of those as I composed summaries via keywords. For example, if a participant expressed their personal body preference, then I named that strip of information “Body Ideal.” The same was true for most other pieces of data, which allowed me to draw meaning from all interviews collectively.

Finally, I combed through every interview and constructed final outlines for my discussion sections.
Findings

This study’s findings section is split into six chapters: background, fitness goals, body image, motivations and drives, social media, and media literacy. I have ordered the chapters in this order to reflect how I structured the interviews overall. Each chapter will contain its own subsections that explore the primary themes participants discussed throughout their respective interviews. These answers and findings will inform my conclusions for the study’s discussion component.

The next four chapters of my findings concern mostly information participants answered about themselves, while the last two chapters will explore with more focus my participants’ relationships to media.

Background

A total of 17 participants were recruited and interviewed. I spoke with a diverse cast of men, many expressing unique perspectives and reasons for exercising.

For the following roster, participants were given pseudonyms as to maintain their anonymity. The order represents the sequence in which interviews took place. I have attached key attributes to each person to best set them apart from one another and emphasize characteristics that stood out most throughout each respective discussion.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Caleb</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Ran cross-country and played soccer in high school; expressed slight discontentment with his body and being skinny; displayed a high sense of awareness toward basic human needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chip</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Began lifting at age 18; one of his main reasons for working out is to boost self-esteem; mother is a former powerlifter and taught him basic exercises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ken</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Started lifting during his freshman year of high school; expressed an aversion to being overweight and wanting to be toned.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Does fencing at a local university; desires to be slimmer but didn’t explain why he thinks it looks better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Omar</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Formerly overweight; exercises to increase his quality of life and avoid risk of illness; describes himself as self-oriented and confident.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mitchell</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>Was introduced to sports at age 3 and exercising at age 12; has competed in wrestling and succumbed to losing weight rapidly; displayed contradictory feelings and ideas toward his body image, motivations, and attitude about social media.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Ethnicity: White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Described himself as being obese and having been raised in poverty and raised by a family indifferent to exercise; displayed an aversion.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Background</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hao</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>High school student who also takes classes at the university; started running track with friends in February; has little no drive to achieve muscularity. Ethnicity: Asian (stated he is from China)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>André</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Has performed in track and field and javelin throw; does calisthenics, practical workouts for exercise; stated that messages in TV, movies impacted his perception of social standards and norms in the past. Ethnicity: White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Felt depressed around the period of time he started working out; feels that working out allows him to achieve something more with his life; stated messaging in anime, other media impacts his drive to exercise. Ethnicity: Hispanic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ritten</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Has lifted weights for two years; self-identifies as ‘lazy’ and his body as ‘garbage’; has a drive to achieve high muscularity and size. Ethnicity: Middle Eastern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Trainer at a local athletic facility; his past experiences being overweight and social interactions motivated him to exercise; feels pressure to be slim to conform to a perceived standard of what trainers should look like. Ethnicity: Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Has lifted weights for 10 years and competed as a strongman and powerlifter for five years; pursues strength training for its health.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>From</td>
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<td>---------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Douglas</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mason</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sebastian</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gabe</td>
<td>23</td>
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</table>

In the upcoming findings chapter, I will relate several concepts recruits discussed that will inform readers more about the nuances of these men’s pasts and their introduction to fitness. In addition, I will cover participants’ relationships with family and friends. I have
included these topics here because they were recurring points across several interviews. In addition, these aspects of participants’ backgrounds will become relevant in this study’s discussion chapter.

**Past**

Many participants were previously or currently involved in extracurricular sports and competitions; many were active in sports either in middle school or high school in such sports as soccer, football, track and field and long-distance running. Most stated they were introduced to weightlifting in high school or college.

Weightlifting experience ranged from as long as 10 years to a few years to less than a year or even a few months. In terms of exercise regimens, most were traditional gymgoers, and a majority of the roster were college students at the local university. Two men were powerlifting athletes, and another was a physical trainer at a local facility. Two men stated they at one point seriously considered bodybuilding.

Some didn’t report lifting weights; a few pursued alternative fitness regimens. The track-and-fielder Andre followed calisthenics and valued practical strength over using barbells or other weighted bars. Hao had been running high school track for only a handful of weeks at the time I spoke to him. Growing up in China, Hao did not follow a conventional strength-training routine, making him an exception among in many aspects among the roster. In addition, his nationality also is significant because most participants were U.S. citizens while Hao was not, and his outlooks on fitness and health differed greatly from other participants. These findings will be relevant in later sections.
Relationships and family

Most men stated that close relationships with friends and family were valuable to them. Being acknowledged by these social connections were also important to them, such as Stephen, the man who said characters from manga motivate him to exercise. The 24-year-old noted how his family’s lifestyle impacted his activity:

So I've been morbidly obese my whole life. When I was eight years old, I weighed 230 pounds. … And I grew up in poverty. I think a lot of it kind of came from my parents; [they] didn't really know what eating healthy was or necessarily that exercise was even important. So I spent most of my time sitting in front of my computer, playing games, Runescape, that kind of thing. It wasn't until I moved out and went to college that I realized, like, I can actually do the things that would make me look like the [manga] characters that I want to look like.

Family history came up across interviews. One person exercised with his dad in high school, and another’s parents went to fitness facilities regularly. The 24-year-old Chip was raised in a family with a fitness lifestyle even before his teenage years. His mother was a powerlifter in her youth, and she helped him learn basic exercises when he started lifting weights at age 18. Chip spent time in gym day cares in his younger years while she exercised. In terms of media, he recalls his mother reading fitness magazines, and he saw fitness imagery and workout videos on TV.

Beyond direct family influences, a few participants noted pre-existing health conditions that run in their family. The men spoke about how these conditions played a
part in their fitness goals. This topic will be brought up again at the end of this paper where I will cover topics for future research.

**Attitudes and perceptions of self**

Many participants identified characteristics about themselves that influenced their other fitness or sports interests. One such characteristic was competitiveness; a few participants said sports or weightlifting served as outlets to compete with others.

Some people said they had low self-esteem and perceived exercise as a vehicle to improve their self-confidence. Ritten called himself “lazy” multiple times throughout the interview. Another said that in his family he is expected to do more with his life instead of being “nothing.” In both scenarios, pursuing fitness appeared to function as a remedy for these undesirable traits.

Others said they felt more positive about themselves and had senses of higher self-esteem. Omar, who exercises to improve his general health and reduce risk of disease, said he is a self-oriented and confident person and isn’t interested in receiving outside validation. Edward, a five-year veteran strongman athlete who specializes in overhead pressing, was enthusiastic about his sport; his excitement about fostering a welcoming community was apparent throughout our discussion. He was also active in the local university’s strength club, stating he took on a mentorship role in the group.
Fitness Goals

The men expressed a range of schedules and goals that ranged from concrete to loosely defined. They specifically commented on their workout schedules, such as exercises or amount of time they dedicate to exercise, as well as dieting and actions they took to track progress.

As for their desired outcomes, a few notable themes were pervasive: cultivating aesthetics/attractiveness, feeling good, and preserving health, and building performance.

Routine

Participants’ schedules ranged from exercising six days a week to just a couple. Some reported having focusing on certain body parts on different days. In addition to weight or strength training, some participants implemented cardio into their routines; in some instances, they said they did this because they want to lose weight.

One recruit, Ritten, who wants to gain as much muscle mass as possible, forces himself to have at least one rest day a week, saying he “tends to overdo it in the gym.” He said he sometimes became fatigued early during his workouts because his body wasn’t receiving ample recovery. In his first year lifting, he was “cold and tired” all the time.

Many participants picked up their routines from different sources; some educated themselves by watching YouTube videos or searching Google. Others had friends or family who taught them, or they continued following routines they did for sports in school.
To track progress nine people said they would weigh or take photos of themselves to document body changes. Men would also look at their bodies in the mirror to gauge changes in their physiques.

**Diet**

I asked participants to comment on their diet and how that factored into their workout routines. Participants who generally wanted to be leaner or wanted to lose weight tended to track their calories; these participants fell into the subset group of men who had more concrete fitness goals, such as achieving a certain body weight or shedding body fat.

One person who is cutting calories to lose body fat said he sometimes might be hungry and wouldn’t eat to preserve his diet goal. Another person tracked his calories and ate healthfully by eating fruits, rice, as well as cutting soda and meat. He, too, desired a lower body fat percentage, and he even recalled his exact weight including decimal points.

Some participants followed diets that significantly impacted their day-to-day schedules. One such person is Stephen, who said he wants to get down to 160 pounds. Stephen said he had tried the high-protein, low-carb keto diet, and at one point he was eating 1,200 calories a day despite estimating his basal metabolic rate – the amount of calories one must consume daily to maintain the body at rest – to be 3,000 calories. He said he was doing this for three months while he weighed 380 pounds. He recounted:
The first time I did [a low-calorie diet], I just pushed through. It took a lot of willpower. There were plenty of times where I just like went to sleep if I couldn't handle it. And having that kind of few-hour gap where you're not dealing with anything, you're not having to use your willpower to deal with the hunger, helps, ’cuz it’s a bit revitalizing. Now I'm trying to take more of a gradual approach. So I didn't start out eating one meal a day; it was like a window of eight hours where I could eat whatever I wanted. And then it was a window of like six hours, and then three hours, and gradually into the one day – one meal a day thing. And I'm still working on that. The goal is to be able to fast for about 72 hours, eat and then repeat until I meet the weight that I'm at or that I want to be. I don't know. That's obviously not a long-term thing. And I'm, I'm planning to try to adjust what I eat and how many calories I eat as I keep going into that, so that when I'm ready to start eating more normally, it'll probably just be like one meal a day, about 2000 calories.

Stephen also described his experience of fasting when he abstained from eating for more than 28 hours, saying that he felt as if he “was gonna die at that point.” Recently, Stephen had upped his caloric intake and had been intermittent fasting, noting that he planned to reduce his intake as his body continues adjusting.

Some participants took supplements; those were people who generally had more concrete fitness goals. Mason, the 20-year-old bodybuilder turned powerlifter, imported an American-banned workout stimulant from Germany when he lifted weights in high school. Right as he was being let out of school, he took the pre-workout before going to the gym. The drug was so powerful that he didn’t get to sleep until 3 or 4 a.m.. He would
sleep through classes the next day. Although he now performs as a powerlifter, he is still concerned with losing bodyweight, but to a lesser degree than he did years ago. In an effort to increase his lifts in powerlifting, he did a “dirty bulk” where one eats a lot of unhealthy food to increase one’s body weight. He said he regretted doing it because he gained a lot of fat, an antithesis to the body ideal he sought to emulate from the social media influencers he watched in high school.

Other participants reported alternative outlooks on dieting. Douglas, who has exercised casually for 10 years, said he used a fitness app on his phone to eat more calories. He said it was hard at first but his metabolism adjusted to his new intake. He said he wanted to gain weight because he felt skinny, but he overall felt satisfied with his musculature and said his focus was maintaining his current physique.

The other powerlifter, Edward, had a unique perspective on food consumption. He said in his sport, it isn’t uncommon for an athlete to integrate a full pizza into their everyday diets. Edward brought up body mass in the context of the sport’s weight classes. He said gaining weight as a powerlifter is seen as a good thing, and that if someone told him they gained 30 pounds, he would congratulate them.

Hao, too, was less concerned about his diet while admitting he doesn’t eat the best. He and others said the on-campus offerings and selection restricted the healthy foods they could eat. A common answer was that as students, participants couldn’t eat as healthfully as they would like, or they had to restrict their eating habits because of limited food service hours or the amount of money in their dining accounts.
**Aesthetics**

As is common with many people who exercise, a majority of participants said they wanted to become fitter to change their body appearance or increase their attractiveness in a manner they deemed favorable. I will be using the word “aesthetics” to denote this quality. Only three of the 17 participants were unconcerned with appearance, with the rest commenting that they started exercising, at least partly, with the intention to transform themselves.

For example, wrestler Mitchell’s chief exercise goal was to grow muscle and lose fat. He said he was bulking during the winter and cutting for spring to prepare for summer when people are more prone to wear less clothes, like at the beach. Mitchell said he has cut pounds off in a matter of days for wrestling:

> Yeah, um, I have cut down to really low weights, and I've seen myself with like, a crazy six pack, and I don't have that now because I've been putting on muscle. I’m gonna cut [the bodyfat] off and then look good in the end. … I’ve cut 9 pounds in two days, 16 pounds in five days. It wasn’t fun, but I was able to do it.

He acknowledged that cutting to lose body fat percentages makes one physically feel worse and is unsustainable long term, but he overall felt the end result – a good-looking body – was worth it.

A few participants gave answers that indicated they weren’t sure if they valued aesthetics or they didn’t know why it was one of their goals. The trainer Will was unsure whether he exercised for general fitness or for appearance. After saying he exercises for
general health, he corrected himself, replying, “honestly, I don't think that's it. Like I work out to try to look better.” One participant who wanted to be both muscular and slimmer, the fencer Alexander, had a hard time pinpointing why he favored these attributes. He replied that he didn’t know why he wants them specifically over other body types; his final answer was, “It just looks better.”

A drive for slimness was a typical trait the men yearned for; in many instances, these people also stated their current and desired weight, or even discussed lowering their body fat percentage. Those discussing the latter wanted visible abs.

Some men who called themselves skinny or underweight, however, were concerned more with increasing the size of their frames; Ritten wanted to become as “strong and jacked as possible,” and Douglas said he has historically been in a bulking phase to make himself larger. The runner Caleb said he perceived himself to be thin and stopped running, as cardio is often viewed as a weight-loss activity.

**Performance and health**

Set goals were not uncommon, and a few people noted specific ways they wanted to improve or maintain body performance during lifts. The two standout examples are the powerlifters Edward and Mason. The former noted how being a strong person is important to him. He said that at some point in his life, he wants to break the bench press record for the US Powerlifting Association’s and USA Powerlifting’s 200-pound weight division. Similarly, Mason is working toward increasing his squat, bench press and deadlift numbers to achieve national records.
In addition, Edward explained how his fitness goals and prior comments on body weight tie into his overall philosophy on general health:

We [powerlifters] are far less concerned about what the scale says than many other people. It's led to some fairly interesting things where your, your BMI might suggest that you're not being very healthy, but the fact that you're still running a 7-minute mile and you just pulled 650 would suggest otherwise. … We often equate body weight with health, and powerlifters scoff at that. There's a big difference between how much the scale says and how healthy you are based on how far you can run, how much you can lift, if you can make it through the whole show without huffing and puffing. You can get up a flight of stairs. You could carry your kid around the amusement park for the day. Those are our signs of whether you're healthy or not.

Similarly, Sebastian said that the general public’s perception of health is surface level, and that people are often likelier to believe a skinny person is “healthier” than a larger one.

Hao, who was less concerned about how he looked, said he might prefer a fitter body because it would improve his running performance. Another person wanted to get more fit to achieve a 7-minute mile.

Others shared their loosely defined goals and the actions they took to cultivate general health and heighten quality of life. The recruit Omar, who said he was formerly overweight and exercises partially to avoid illness, emphasized that he educated himself on how to execute lifts safely and how much rest his body required to recover. He spaces
his exercises out to minimize risk of injury. Omar stressed setting realistic goals for himself, such as cutting soda and drinking more water, so that he can decide actionable steps to achieving them.

The runner Caleb said he wanted to integrate more cardio into his schedule for general health, an action a few other people similarly expressed. Caleb said he tried to eat healthfully and avoid junk food because he generally felt better during his everyday activities. Andre, the javelin thrower, commented on how exercise makes him feel less lethargic and more positive mentally and less “weighted down.” Interestingly, these two recruits had similar outlooks on their fitness goals: They each wanted to bulk up a little, but not a lot. The two were more satisfied in their physiques than others and more self-assured. Finally, Caleb and Andre commented on how societal standards have distorted their perceptions of reality.
Body Image

As this topic is at the center of this research study, men’s body image was discussed extensively by participants. The men expressed a range of emotions, introspection toward their self-image and candor about their rocky relationships with fitness and body image.

A few notable concepts emerged as I spoke with participants. The first concept is the perception of the personal ideal. Many subjects relayed their physiognomic preference, or in other words, the type of body they would personally want to attain. The latter concept will become even more important in the later chapters on social media, as well as in the discussion. I have also dedicated a section to the progression of participants’ body images, as many described how their relationships to their physiques, and their motives to change them, have evolved over time. This concept will also be a prevalent theme in later chapters on social media. In the next section, I’ll look at men’s rhetoric when describing body image. I’ll show that recruits relied heavily on numerical data, such as body weight and body fat percentage, while discussing their body ideals. Finally, I will cover clothing, which several people noted as playing an important role in how people convey themselves, their principles and values.

Mixed attitude

Throughout the discussions, it became apparent that men’s body image was not a black-and-white phenomenon; in numerous cases, participants stated they struggled with body image, and though they considered the perception of themselves positively overall,
they at moments have succumbed to bodily self-deprecation. These emotions don’t exist in vacuum; as I will discuss in later chapters and in the discussion, self-body image is inherently tied to social media exposure as explained by social comparison theory and cultivation analysis.

Most men stated they either had a negative or mixed relationship with their bodies, with most detailing specific aspects about themselves they disliked. Ken, who was concerned about being overweight, said he was paranoid about some of the features of his body like a double chin, and he said in the past he thought his gut was getting big whenever he looks in the mirror. Luis, the participant who cited anime as a source that impacts his ideals, stated he was more concerned with how his body looks rather than how it performs. Overall, he wasn’t satisfied with his current appearance.

Responses such as Luis’ were common, with 13 of the 17 participants stating that to some extent, they were unsatisfied with their present physiques or have experienced negative body image at some point. A few participants such as Caleb, Douglas, Sebastian and Gabe each noted that they were mostly happy about their physiques but that they have experienced passing moments of feeling unsatisfied or self-conscious about their bodies. Caleb, for instance, said he isn’t “depressed” about how he looks but that he isn’t “thrilled” about it either. The 19-year-old said he began exercising in college to gain muscle because he was self-conscious about being skinny. He said he personally would want a little bit more muscle, but that he would be happy if he could maintain what muscle he already has. Similar to Caleb, Douglas, too, has mostly had a positive attitude about his body, but he sometimes feels mild discontentment or self-doubt. He specifically noted how he wanted bigger calves and felt that his legs were “twig-like.” Douglas, like
Caleb, said he was concerned with maintaining his current lean physique, and his ideal physique is one that isn’t “grotesque” with muscle like the Incredible Hulk.

One participant, Andre, held a unique perspective on his body and how his attitudes have shifted since high school. He said he would personally want a bigger chest, lower body fat and visible abs, but that he doesn’t desire a “beefcake look.” Andre discussed how his athletic passions and media exposure have impacted his body image; although he said he wouldn’t mind more muscle in certain areas of his body, Andre was overall confident and content with his body. In addition, Andre stated he valued body performance over aesthetics, stating he desired certain characteristics because they would enhance his physical performance. Specifically, he noted that visible abs are an indicator of a strong core, which would improve his performance at the javelin throw.

Beyond his athletic pursuits, Andre spoke about how TV, movies and his perception of women used to affect his views. He said his body image was worse in high school because he thought girls liked muscles. Eventually, this image got better once he started dating, realizing his idea of what women want wasn’t consistent with his partner’s preferences. Much like body image, Andre said his views of body image and women link to messaging in movies. One example he brought up is how the “nerd” in movies is portrayed as unsuccessful at athletics. Andre said he realized this depiction was inaccurate to real life and that he believed other stereotypes that entertainment media feeds viewers, such as traditional notions of a “nerd” being unathletic, or that men who were followed athletic pursuits were more successful at attracting women and attaining success in life in general.
Finally, Andre discussed body dysmorphia and how he almost succumbed to an unhealthy body image. He spoke about how he doesn’t prioritize others’ opinions often, but that he evaluates what women want from a man differently than before. This shift in perception has helped not only his body image but also his independence, he said:

You just have to realize it's not about what – I feel like a main key factor is I guess thinking about what other people think. If you don't value other people's opinions as much or you don't put as much weight behind them, it's not gonna matter as much. Like I said, other people's opinions, I could give two fucks. I don't care what other people think. And I guess that helped me get past it [body dysmorphia] because my thing was, when I'd say I almost had it a little bit, was because that's what girls thought. And soon as I realized that’s not what they cared about, it switched for me.

**Negative attitude**

On another part of the spectrum, some participants expressed strong negative feelings. Chip, who said he has low self-esteem, said he was heavier-set as a teenager and is unsatisfied with where he is at. He wants to cut his body fat so that he has visible abs. Stephen, who described himself as formerly obese, has negative reservations about his body. He said it is probably unhealthier to be obese compared to pursuing high amounts of muscle content with low body fat. Throughout my discussion with him, Stephen spoke at length about his desire to achieve leanness. He even said he probably won’t meet his expectations.
The powerlifter Mason started exercising in high school because he wanted to achieve a physique comparable to David Laid, a social media influencer. Mason said he had low confidence in his teenage years. In part of the interview, he said he even felt worse about himself when he was exposed to people on social media whom he could project himself onto, but not people in Hollywood, because he wasn’t emotionally invested in those figures. He said that he was irritated seeing someone his age with a better body because it made him doubt himself. However, when he witnessed an older man with a body he wanted to attain, these feelings didn’t trigger because he could theoretically catch up to that person.

In a few cases, participants brought up how friends or family also had their own body goals. Chip, whose mother was a powerlifter, said that she was aiming to cut body fat; Chip, too, stated that one of his goals was to become leaner. Luis, the 21-year-old who was depressed when he began exercising, said his mother was dissatisfied with her body, particularly noting her body fat. Luis said she desired to remove it via liposuction and that she had wanted to start exercising, but she was afraid of being judged by others at a gym. Additionally, he jokingly noted that he is partially to blame for his mother’s discontent because her body fat is a result of her pregnancy with her son.

*Positive or neutral attitude*

It might be misleading to describe some of the men’s body images as “positive”; although some participants were satisfied most of the time with their bodies and efforts to change themselves, they still at some points had bouts of dissatisfaction.
For this section, however, I am concerned with two participants who were neither positive nor negative toward their bodies. Instead, it’s more accurate to say they were neutral or indifferent about their appearance altogether. These two men are Edward, one of the strongman competitors, and Hao, the high school student.

Starting with Edward, the powerlifter did express a discontent with body at one point, but his underlying reason for such differs greatly from other participants. In high school, Edward said he injured his quadricep muscle and became heavier. He felt bad having gained weight. However, Edward was not concerned about he looked but was concerned about his physical performance; due to his newly gained mass, he couldn’t perform the same athletic actions he could before, such as pole vaulting. But Edward’s mood turned around when he discovered his weight granted him newly gained strength. In Edward’s circumstances, his perception of himself and his body has always been dependent on how much control he has of his body and never been about aesthetics. Edward explained why he disregards appearance and cherishes his own bodily autonomy:

It is all about how you perform the lifts and how the rest of your life feels as opposed to how you look … I guess – to me, the aesthetics, of a lifter are far less important than the benchmarks or the, the effectiveness of the lifter. If you look like a potato, but you pull 1000 pounds, you're one of the best athletes in the world. So there's a lot to be said for that, because unless you are genetically a Greek god, you're not going to look like one. But anybody can make themselves strong through practice and dedication. … There's always a potential to improve, and you're competing against yourself. You're competing against what you could do yesterday. So as
you get stronger, you've done something, and you're always able to track that performance, and that feels good.

Edward is overall concerned with self-competition, physical agency and reaping the rewards of one’s hard work. In addition, he is far more concerned with feel and function over appearance, as the former seep into the rest of one’s daily life.

The second recruit who held a neutral position on his body, Hao, is distinct among the others because he is an international student. Hao elaborated on how his upbringing and cultural variances have made him indifferent to body image.

Hao stated the only reason why he might want a fitter body is so he might perform better at running. Aside from that, Hao showed little interest in appearance, and he even said he noticed people in the U.S. pay more attention to individual presentation than in China; he said Americans often compliment one other more, specifically regarding one’s face or hair, and that in turn might make people more conscious about self-expression. When I asked him about body idealization, Hao didn’t even bring up muscularity at first – he spoke about skin tone and how Americans prefer tanner complexions.

Hao’s culture and domestic life might have played a part in position on body image. He said body image was never a subject his family brought up, and that China places much more stress on youth to perform well in academics. Regarding fitness, Hao said that exercise and bodybuilding are more niche in China compared to the more publicly known statuses they have in Western cultures; the recreation doesn’t have general public appeal comparable to the U.S. In addition, sports in general are more popular in the U.S. than China, he said.
At the end of our conversation, Hao gave a final comment on why he disregards his level of fitness and how it’s bound to self-identity:

I think another reason I don't really care like how my body looks is I don't identify myself as … like, people if they're doing sports a lot, they will care, but I don't identify myself as that. … doing sports is not my real like main interest. … so I identify myself as like a programmer, so like, and the programmer don't really care about how the body looks. … most of my interest is in programming and doing those things, so I don't really care, yeah.

The concept of identity will arise again in later passages.

**Progression of body image**

A significant and recurring theme is that participants’ body images have deteriorated since they began exercising, whether it be from routinely comparing themselves to others or immersing themselves more in social media filled with idealistic imagery.

Ritten, the student who wants to get as big as possible, said his body image became progressively worse as he was exposed to more muscular people, both in the gym and on social media.

Before [lifting] I didn't, I didn't really care about you know, putting on muscle or whatever. But like ever since I did, I compare myself to others
and like, I know it's not a healthy behavior – you shouldn't compare yourself to others, only yourself. But like it's hard not to do that. And it also gives me like, it pushes me harder to go harder in the gym … I see these guys, and I'm like, you look at yourself and you're like, “Wow, shit,” you know? So it's definitely, it's [body image] definitely gotten way worse. Like, you know the saying, ‘The day you started lifting is the day you become forever small,’ or something like that.

Throughout the interview, Ritten alluded that his thirst to become stronger served to expel a sense of “weakness,” which is a theme that will become prevalent later.

In a similar line of thinking, Sebastian, the “anti-Instagram” recruit, said he holds higher expectations for himself now that he regularly exercises. He was first unsatisfied with his body because he saw pictures of himself with friends and disliked his appearance. Douglas, too, said he notices that he thinks more about his appearance since starting to lift. As a high school athlete, Douglas was discontent having lost the athletic body he once had.

On the opposite end, Mitchell said his body image has improved, but that social media is the one force that makes him feel worse. He cited how when he was a chubbier kid, body image didn’t matter to him. But that’s changed because chasing an ideal physique is one of his goals in life. Like Douglas, he has felt pressure to not only improve his physique but also not regress into his less-than-desirable, past form.

As a kid I really didn't have that [body image problems]. I didn't really, like feel bad about how the way that I looked. But then when I started
getting in shape, I was like, “Wow, that's really what I looked like back then?” I don't want to look like that again, even though it wasn't like horrendous. It's just when you see yourself better, you don't go back.

**Numbers**

One recurring subject is that some recruits espoused numerical data often, often in relation to their body image or goals. Generally, those who provided numbers were likelier to be unsatisfied with their bodies and wanted to lose weight.

Will the trainer said he feels insecure after weighing himself, even though he understands the number on the scale doesn’t matter. Despite this, he said it’s hard to push past knowing if he gained weight; this feeling could be informed by his past where he said he was ostracized for being a bigger person.

Another participant, Chip, estimated his own body weight, his height, body fat percentage, and even would guess the weights and body fats of people on social media, as well as his parents. Chip said he doesn’t know the heaviest weight he has been at because he refused to check his weight; he said he fixates heavily on numbers, and so he tries to avoid routinely weighing himself as a measure to not obsess over the numbers. Although Chip could be an outlier, he brings up a valid point: fixating on numbers can be an exercise in futility.

The powerlifter Edward held a perspective that challenged others’ attitudes toward numbers and weight, much like his other nontraditional insights. Edward spoke
about numbers, specifically about weight, in relation to weight class in sports. Unlike other recruits, Edward’s discussion about bodyweight didn’t tie back to appearance – he was concerned with competition and performance:

> There is no advantage to not be as heavy as you can in your weight class.
> So if the bucket is 200 to 220, being at 205 isn't worth a damn. Being at 219 and a half is good that – there's a linear rate of just picking up heavier things because you are heavier. … There is not a single power lifter in the world who would be like, “Nah, I’m happy at my current weight class. I don't want to jump 15 pounds to the next one.” So there's, there's an awful lot of gain to be had by simply getting bigger.

**Clothing**

In my discussions with the recruits, men conveyed that clothing served as a tool for self-expression. In addition, some participants were aware that clothing, along with how it either complements or conceals the body, conveys personal values like pride, humility or hard work.

Luis told me he used to wear layers of shirts because he was self-conscious of his “man-boobs.” In a similar answer, the trainer Will also said he used to wear a jacket and vest when he was a teenager to hide his “man-boobs.” Additionally, he would slouch to better hide them. Both of these participants said they had poor body image.

The javelin thrower Andre, who wanted a lean physique not dissimilar from Bruce Lee’s, said he would want a physique that he could conceal beneath clothes.
However, Andre didn’t convey disdain toward his body; instead, he didn’t care what others thought, saying he “could give two fucks” about others’ opinions. Later, Andre said he was a private person and didn’t feel a need to receive praise or attention from others. This theme will become more relevant in the chapters on social media.

Extending off Andre’s initial idea, 27-year-old Douglas had a preponderance of concern on appearance overall; he said in his younger years he was self-conscious about his acne and crooked teeth because society connotes them as imperfections. Indeed, Douglas noted that he wears slim-fitting shirts to emphasize his physique. He said he straddles a fine line between concealing his features and showing off too much; he doesn’t see a reason in wearing a baggy shirt but also isn’t eager to show off too much in a tank top. Douglas said he feels good wearing a slim shirt because he considers his muscles one of his better features.

Caleb, too, brought up how clothes are an extension of the body in that it conveys messages to others; in a way, using clothes to portray an ideal image of oneself is like a form of strategic communication, he said.

However good your body might look in the mirror … you’re not gonna be showing people your body. So like, so it might almost feel like … y’know, I put all this work into the gym, what's the point of going out in like a baggy shirt or whatever, and not like having anyone be able to see? You know, like, because I think some aspect of fitness is definitely a personal thing where you want to feel better and you want to look stronger. But then a lot of it is … wanting to project an image of yourself. Because working out is seen as such a valuable hobby and something that just
makes you a better person. And so you just want to, like, signal to people that you're working out, you know. Like you want to signal to people that you have a muscular body, or you have like a flat stomach or whatever. Like you want to be portraying these things about yourself and clothes that accentuate your body.

The final recruit I spoke with, Gabe, who valued being himself over what his body looks like, spoke at length about personal appearance and how one can convey values through appearance. Interestingly, Gabe said he stopped wearing tank tops to the gym because it made him feel ‘vain,’ which wasn’t consistent with his sense of self. And when he stopped wearing tank tops, Gabe noticed that he had a healthier mindset, and he felt more of a similarity, rather than difference, to other male gymgoers:

It's like, I feel like I'm wearing cut-offs [tank tops] to also like show off like my tattoo, as well and kind of like you know, let myself be seen. And I'm like, that's not my main goal here at the gym. … I just didn't see cut-offs and tank tops like aligning with my goals in life, and I feel like it's, I feel like a little humility in the gym has made me better outside the gym as well … I've seen it reflect in other areas of my life, and I like that more than I like, you know, maybe getting one or two looks in the gym, when in reality I'm clearly not the biggest guy in the gym. Because when I was wearing cut-offs, like I would often also fall into comparison with the other guy next to me of like, ‘That guy's bigger than me, that guy, you know, like he has more definition than me,’ because then I'm looking at my own definition. Whereas if I'm wearing a long-sleeve shirt … then it's
very clearly just myself. … I've just found that to be much more, in the long run, I found it to have a much better effect on my mental health.

Much of the themes and ideas presented in this chapter will be further fleshed out and explained in the next one, where I will investigate the recurring motivations and inspirations to achieve fitness goals.
Motivations and drives

As discussed in the chapter on backgrounds, several recruits shared their entry points into weightlifting and what spurred them to change their bodies. Some of these themes were rooted in other participants’ stories, too. When reviewing all the participants’ reasons for exercising, it becomes clear that there are many similarities in the rhetoric among the men’s motivations and desires.

Although I’ve uncovered many reasons for why participants exercise, several themes related well to one another. Because reasons were so interrelated, I’ve identified and coined four broad forces or phenomenon that stimulate participants to act: physiological outcomes, self, social strata, and internalization. As will be apparent, these sections sometimes feed into one another.

This chapter will focus on diving into the various concepts participants shared with me that comprise these four main areas of exercise inspiration.

Physiological outcomes

Men expressed interest in transforming their bodies, which might show in objective, measurable outcomes. These changes range from a person’s muscle and fat content or overall health. In addition, I argue that the concept of how one feels (like if a person is more energetic or has elevated mood) belongs in this category because physiological chemical releases affect these experiences.
A pattern that emerged across interviews is that men expressed gratification toward bodily senses. A common phrase participants said was that exercising made them ‘feel good’; Omar, as well, said he overall felt better since he started exercising; Ritten said lifting weights thrilled him, saying he felt good because of the dopamine release that occurs during exercise; Caleb works out because it helps him release anxiety and stress, which is a reason that applied to other recruits, too. Andre, the javelin thrower who discussed media impacting his perception of reality, said he works out because it makes him feel less lethargic and ‘different mentally.’

Worth noting is Caleb, Omar, Andre, Gabe and Edward were more focused on attaining or maintaining performance or general health instead of drastically changing their bodies. These participants stood out to me among the roster as ones who were more satisfied in themselves and their bodies compared to other men. This point will come into focus later in the discussion section.

**Self**

The next layer of motivation pushing men to exercise is the drive to define the self. This section of motivation delves deeper into participants’ wants and needs than physiological outcomes. Men were able to open up about some underlying needs that spur them to pursue certain fitness goals, whether it be a basic level fitness, washboard abs or to achieve national lifting records.

Throughout the chapter on fitness goals, two prominent desires were to cultivate performance or aesthetics, which form a dichotomy I will discuss further in the
discussion section. These goals were common because they’re emblematic of a more primal urge: control.

Conversations with participants uncovered a few separate types of control, and some valued certain categories of control over others. The first one I will discuss is the will to command the body itself. In many cases, the word ‘capability’ arose in conversations as an interchangeable synonym for control.

For instance, capability was one of the driving topics of my interview with the powerlifter Edward. In the previous chapter on body image, I discussed how Edward was unsatisfied with his body due to a leg injury. His negative feelings about his own body stemmed from him losing the ability to perform certain actions. He said he was smaller as a kid and wanted to be bigger and stronger because he perceived those around him who were more physically fit, such as his coach, to handle stressors in their life with a firmer hand. Edward also didn’t like being out of breath or unable lifting heavy loads. To Edward, strength, capability and independence culminate into a want for control:

A healthy body to me is one that works … being physically capable of participating in your life and your job and whatever's going on around you in a way that you don't have pain. You don't have problems later, and you don't put yourself at great risk. So the the ability to go jogging somewhere if you had to, or to bring your deer out of wherever you shot it and not have to rely on the cart, that you can just pick it up, put it on your shoulders and walk it out your two miles. Just generally physically capable to confront the things you may have to in your life.
Andre the javelin thrower, too, used the word ‘capable’ to define his longing for bodily control. Although he does want his body to look better to a degree, Andre said cultivating strength generally makes a person more capable to perform specific actions.

One other word used to describe bodily control was ‘self-reliance.’ Stephen, who said he was formerly obese and wanted to emulate the physiques of manga characters, spoke about how solo climbers scale walls in life-or-death situations with only their personal abilities for support. Again, Stephen used the word “capable” to describe the person he wants to become. He said when he fosters a body that can execute more rigorous athletic actions, more opportunities for achievement open up. In turn, Stephen said having the opportunity to pursue more physical activity will yield ‘a sense of satisfaction and contentment with myself and my capabilities, primarily – generally just feeling better about who I am and what I can accomplish.’

Stephen’s perspective on control translates into a deeper desire to accept himself; he wants to use his bodily autonomy to reshape how he perceives his own identity. As many recruits stated, they want to feel better about themselves, but factors in their lives distract them from realizing or believing in themselves. People such as Stephen hold physical achievement in high esteem, and so they pursue fitness as a vehicle to control their self-esteem. (One fact worth noting is Stephen said accomplishments were important to him, but he didn’t know why.)

As I stated in a previous chapter, some participants exercised to improve their self-esteem; Chip, whose mom was a powerlifter, is a prominent example. He spoke about how his sense of feeling weak and not lifting heavy enough weight serves as a motivator for him to exercise. The same can be said for Ritten, who said his motivation comes from
‘looking in the mirror and seeing my lift numbers.’ These two men not only want to build physical control but use also use this sense of physical control to assuage doubt in themselves and be more assured people. Chip discussed how when he lost a degree of autonomy in his body, it also feeds into him experiencing some of this self-doubt:

If I cut my workout short, I feel bad about it. Like, even if it's for like a good reason. Like I got into a car accident in 2019, and I have just, haven't got my left knee back to where it needs to be 100 percent. It’s just some days, it just doesn't feel like doing legs. I've had to cut workouts short, but I still like I can't – it's really hard for me to justify cutting a workout short. Even if it's, you know, something like that, where it's like if I make myself, then I'm probably just going to do more damage than anything I would gain from it. Yeah, so but it's still like I have to like really sit there and get like reinforcement from someone; like, ‘this isn't stupid, right? I'm not just being a bitch?’

Others talked about how reshaping their personal image mattered to them. Sebastian said he wanted to become fit because it would prove to himself he can achieve anything he sets his mind to; he knew he had “the abilities and the tools to get in shape, and I wasn't, so it was more like almost a personal letdown, I guess.” In turn, Sebastian said becoming fit would give him the confidence to better his relationships, and being better at self-care would provide him the personal affirmations to be successful at his career. “I not only feel better about the way that I look, but I feel better about the fact that I was able to make it happen,” he said.
This type of control (self-reinforcement) was also shared by the powerlifter Mason, who pursued heavy lifting because he is naturally ‘gifted,’ and he feels good about receiving positive reinforcement.

Sebastian’s and Mason’s motivations begin crossing from personal control into the third type of control I will discuss, which is social control. In plain terms, recruits said one aspect of control they desire, which is perhaps the most unstable, is to control how others view them. Caleb spoke at length about this category of control. People approach social control almost in a similar way to how strategic communicators approach their work.

And then I think another part of it [wanting a fit body] has to do with like, kind of controlling your self-image and trying to make sure your self-image and the image other people have of you sort of match. … If people just don't notice you, or you don't know what they think of you … no matter how much you try to get around it, the way other people think about you is pretty much important to everybody. And if you have a self-image of yourself that you're putting work into by working out, you want to like — you want other people to notice that self-image and sort of have that same image of you as someone who works out and puts work into themselves and cares about their body and stuff. … Yeah, because humans want control, right? I mean, that's — it's so basic. Because no one likes to be stressed. No one likes to feel like they're being pushed around or controlled. Everyone wants to feel like they have control over themselves and their destiny. I mean, that's why thinking about the future is so anxious for so many people
because they don't know what's gonna happen. … And so, it just ties into that; everybody wants control over themselves. I think it's just a basic desire.

Others also expressed an urge to control their public image. Again, Ritten also wanted to control how others thought of him, and much of my conversation with him indicated that he wanted to have a strong body not only to convince himself he wasn’t weak, but outside viewers, too; he said he both wants to ‘look and feel strong.’ Stephen, aside from being dissatisfied with his body, said he believed a primary motivation for working out was due to how others perceived him, which he wanted to change.

Moving beyond craving control, a few other concepts pertaining to the self arose that move participants to exercise. Some prominent ones include how participants derived a sense of satisfaction from lifting, and this satisfaction came in some different forms; some garnered pride in themselves or their actions for exercising or attaining a better body, which are both viewed culturally valuable. In addition, men felt good about sticking to a routine, staying dedicated and disciplined to a pursuit and finding purpose in exercise.

Some people talked about lifting weights as a satisfying pastime in of itself. To some, dedication as a principle for self-accountability was important. This is the case for the powerlifter Edward, who gained gratification for his powerlifting efforts; as he put it, dedication is valuable to him because humans can maintain dedication through conscious choices:

[Being strong] is the true culmination of your efforts manifested in a new feat of performance – that when you know you picked up the heaviest thing you could,
and that was 500 pounds, and you worked your ass off for months. And it's that’s waking up early, it's the choosing the rice as opposed to the potato chips. All of the things that you feel like you've sacrificed or feel like you've worked for when you go pick up 510 instead of 500, that is that result all manifested in something, and it's, that's what feels good; knowing that you made yourself better at doing something that has beneficial ramifications in your life based on your efforts, feels good.

Others said that dedication and discipline are principles that provide gratification because they manifest in tangible ways; Gabe, for instance, said he feels satisfied seeing results and having goals to reach for. When the body feels sore from physical activity, that muscle ache serves as a sign that a person “earned” their workout, and it also signals to people that their workout will result in a positive outcome – larger, stronger muscles.

It's possible discipline is a sought-after behavior because it ties back into control; as a few people noted, they’re not just dedicated because it’s inherently gratifying but because society deems it valuable. Omar, for example, said holding oneself accountable for one’s actions and self-care is a “respectable” trait. He seems to think that an outside viewer must be present to acknowledge that respectability. Mitchell, who lifts weights for aesthetics and says dedication is a respectable characteristic, said this source of demonstration – using the body to communicate values to others. He derives pleasure by not just working hard but allowing his body to communicate he is a hard worker:

I'm going for the aesthetic reasons, so I'm really trying to you know, build up a lot of muscle with fat in winter; insulation, you could say. I like to call that hoodie season, hoodie on. And then during the summer, you know, you typically have
your shirt off, you're going to the beach, so that's when you want to show off all the hard work you’ve gotten. Like you could do it the other way around, but I just don't really see the benefit of that, being shredded in winter when you're always like, four layers on just so, so – it's about like showing off your work.

Apart from dedication, exercising is also a healthy ‘source of pride,’ as Omar puts it. For him, making the choice to change his body and better handle his health granted him satisfaction in himself. Gabe also spoke about pride and vanity, saying he didn’t want to pursue fitness and show his body off because he wants to stay humble, a more modest form of pride. Several participants also spoke about now not taking supplements, or being a ‘natural’ lifter, served as a source of pride; further discussion of drug use will be discussed in a later chapter.

Finally, the last concept I’d like to bring up is the sense of purpose men seemed to imply in their discussions. Although this topic was explicitly mentioned by most people, Sebastian brought the subject up as one he was grappling with. He said he was having a hard time finding motivation to exercise because he had no set goal at the time; he had already met his prior ones and was figuring out what he wants to accomplish next. Without a purpose or self-guidance, Sebastian was struggling to find motivation to exercise, which implies purpose – or simply having concrete goals – plays a strong part in men’s drive to exercise.
Social stratification

As discussed in previous sections, aesthetics was a common fitness goal. Speaking more broadly, though, participants sought fitter bodies for reasons they believed would benefit their socialization.

Recruits said they wanted to cultivate more muscular or slimmer bodies to attract partners or satisfy existing ones; the powerlifter Mason said one reason he wanted to appear better was because he was interested in women. Douglas stated he didn’t want to be ‘bulgy’ for his girlfriend; as I stated in the previous chapter on body image, the javelin thrower Andre was motivated to exercise in high school because media messages conditioned him to believe fit men were more successful at attracting women.

Gabe, who tries to work out for ‘the right reasons,’ said looking good for a partner communicates to them that you’re putting in effort to be attractive for them. In some sense, you’re giving ‘your body to someone else’ in a relationship, he said.

Another factor that drove participants was external validation, or in other words, the drive to seek approval or acceptance from others through their bodies. To some participants, external validation even meant getting attention or eyes on them; Mitchell, for instance, said he has done pushups before going to a party to puff up his chest a bit. Douglas said his girlfriend sometimes provides affirmations to him about his body, which he said help dissuade his self-doubt or feeling that he isn’t muscular enough.

Some men pondered external validation even if they said it didn’t personally motivate them. Omar, who exercises for general health, said he doesn’t seek approval from others, but he did mention that when someone compliments or notices a positive change in
others, it just feels good to know that others notice. Caleb, who started lifting because he thought he was skinny, is also not motivated by external validation, but his thoughts aligned with Omar’s. He said when others notice him, it makes him feel good about himself, and though he knows that sounds selfish, Caleb also believes ‘being selfish is human.’ Caleb expounded on this later in the interview by saying external validation isn’t about just being noticed by others; humans want to be admired, loved and accepted. When people have a good body and others acknowledge it, that attention is a form of validation, which is one of people’s basic needs.

Gabe said at one point he had exercised for the wrong reasons because he wasn’t doing it for himself and wanted to be seen by others. Although he now exercises more inline with his personal values, he also engages in online chatrooms where he shows his body to others. He said he pursued this type of communication because it was an instant, low-effort way to receive love and affirmations from women:

I'm going there [chat rooms] because I want people to desire me. Like I want people to acknowledge me, and I want people to specifically to like, to like maybe lust after me, things like that. … I don't just inherently do bad things because they're bad. I do bad things because they imitate a good thing. So the desire to be lusted after, the base good desire of that is the desire to be seen and wanted. And that's good. You know, like, like that's what, that's what moves people towards friendships, towards relationships, towards loving their family – is the desire to be seen, known and loved. And that's the base desire of wanting to be lusted. It's just that being lusted after is the instant gratification of that, and kind of a very cheap, get-rich-quick version of that.
Moving away from external validation, recruits delved into social comparison, one of the guiding theories of this research study, and how engaging in self-comparison pushed them to exercise.

Luis spoke about how he sees people on campus who wear clothing that accentuates their physiques. This results in Luis engaging in negative self-talk and minimizing himself in comparison to others, which fed into himself feeling depressed. Similarly, Ritten, who self-identifies as a ‘small guy,’ said he views a lot of men in the gym who push more weight than him, and he feels less adequate than them as a result. His sense of weakness functions as a motivator for him.

The trainer Will said being around others drives him to exercise harder; he said when he is in a crowded gym, he is likelier to compete with others or want to lift a heavier weight than the guy doing the same exercise next to him. It’s worth noting that a reason he works faster in a crowded environment is because he feels pressure to get his work done faster.

The powerlifter Edward wasn’t concerned with social comparison, however; he said the only comparisons he made concerning himself was to the person he was in the past. Edward was more interested in powerlifting because it connected him to others and brought him into a community with others; this can also be connected to the previous section on the self, as finding a community can also be perceived as having found purpose.

Gabe offered an insight similar to Edward’s. As previously stated, Gabe found that when he wore clothes that aligned with his values, he felt more connected to others in the
gym instead of comparing himself to them. But in many men’s minds, the gym is an environment that breeds social anxiety; men can fall into social comparison and end up feeling less than others, or they are afraid of being judged, said Gabe:

[I] was talking with a friend on campus, a woman, and she was talking about the kind of the toxic community that women can have of like, you know, always look better, be better, you know. Like, mainly that comes from fashion. And, and she was talking about that, about the difficulties of that, and she, you know, asked like, ‘What's the male equivalent of that?’ And I took a second to think about it. I said probably the fitness lifestyle because it's, while it's good, there's also, there also can be like the undertone of the message of like guys who are like prideful or vain like, you know, guys – I know guys who don't go to the gym because like, they don't look as good as other guys and they feel judged, and they feel intimidated. … it can be kind of an insult to I guess, like their own masculinity, or like, feeling judged or feeling like … ‘you're not as big as the other guy? You can't provide as much as he can.’ … ‘You don't lift as much? You can't protect as much. Like he looks better than you? He's gonna get a better life because of, because of that,’ or something like that. … And yeah, and she had never heard that before. And she was shocked … [she said] ‘You don't just like, do it for the health of it?’ And I'm like, no, it's, it can be a comparison thing that you can – there's a reason guys don't [go to the gym]. It's because like it requires like mental fortitude and just like, not caring what other people think.

Gabe’s point about being a “provider,” as well as his comment on insulting one’s masculinity, will discussed in the next and final section on internalization.
**Internalization**

Readers might have noticed that participants reference social- and media-prescribed values and ideals as motivators for working out. In this section, I will cover how society and messaging in media connects to the past three sections; I’ll review more closely how outside influences have impacted men’s preferences in body types, how they want to use their bodies to position themselves favorably in society and how messages have affected their self-image.

Beginning with body preferences, several recruits made it clear that media exposure was almost certainly a factor. In his teenage years, Douglas felt self-conscious about his acne and crooked teeth because these were unattractive qualities “internalized by society.” He said everyone on TV had straight teeth and “the only people that I guess I would see with crooked teeth in media … I don’t think they look attractive.” In my conversation with another recruit, Stephen, I asked why he preferred the lean body type. He replied that the martial arts manga he read probably affected his tastes, and the fictional characters who struggle “to achieve the things that you want” drive him even more:

It's just something I kind of gravitated towards. I mean, I would say like, there's definitely influences on that, like, I read a lot of manga, typical like martial arts manga, that kind of thing. And there's definitely that physique. It's very common, and I've read it since I was 12. So I probably grew up kind of idolizing that physique from the get-go, which definitely contributes I'm sure.
Mason, the powerlifter who used to exercise purely for aesthetics, said he used to analyze bodies on social media to figure out why they were attractive. His exercise routine revolved around trying to emulate these physiques. Some influences he specifically pointed out were David Laid (Figure 4) and Jeff Seid (Figure 5), both popular social media influencers who began exercising as teenagers. When I asked Mason why he thinks his perceived body ideal was attractive, he said it’s because what society accepts, and if he were to have a muscular and ripped physique then he could “be that guy.”

Figure 4: David Laid is shown flexing in an Instagram post from 2016. According to Laid, he was either 13 or 14 years old in the first picture, and he was age 17 in the second one.
Mason touches upon the next topic, which is that men chase physiques that society connotes as “good,” or they are trying to rid themselves of “bad” bodies. In each of these instances, the participants’ social interactions and messages in media functioned as driving factors.

For instance, some men had an aversion to being overweight, such as Ken and Stephen. One participant, Luis, who I discussed earlier as having worn an undershirt to hide his “man-boobs,” said some of the media he consumes portrays heavier people in a negative light.

In Japanese culture, there is a stereotype called a “hikikomori,” according to Luis. These individuals, who watch and consume a lot of media content and are characterized as anti-social, are viewed unfavorably, Luis said, and that media portrays the main characters or “good people” as slim and attractive:
I know they [the anime] make, portray [hikikomori] as being like, smelly, disgusting. That's how the anime portrays them as, and so I'm just kind of like, it kind of makes you feel like that as well. And that's, that's why I was just like, I need to start working out, too. Specifically after watching that one. I was just, I just don't feel good about myself. … I feel like society makes it so that you have to look slim or something. I just keep seeing people around on campus, they're slim. Anime, like people are like slim. And then like, when I watch like a commercial or TV show, everyone's like, have these nice-ass bodies, and I'm like, “Gee, I wish I could have that.” And so I was just like, that's part of the reason I was depressed. I was like, “Man, I can't do that.” And I’m like, personal talking to me, I was just like, “Yeah, I should, I should do it [exercise].”

Stephen commented on an aversion to obesity, as well. Speaking from personal experience, he said others tend to look down on overweight people because people with large bodies are often stereotyped as having poor work ethics, are lazy or not trying hard enough. He said he can tell when others think less of him “if you look like I do.” So, while Stephen’s ideal is chasing leanness, part of his motivation lies from escaping its antithesis. He wants a body that others won’t disparage him for having.

The trainer Will gave a similar story; he said a main reason he started working out was because he was overweight as a kid and was marginalized socially because of his body. He even said that when he was in middle school, he was rejected by a girl, whom he overheard commenting about his weight afterward. For Will, too, escaping alienation serves as one of his drives to attain an aesthetic physique.
Additionally, Will wants to be strong and lean because that’s what society views athletes to look like. “Looks sell, to a degree,” he said. He feels pressure to be in top shape so he can conform to a template that tells him what he should look like.

Will’s pressure to mold his body so he can conform to society and fit in with peers isn’t uncommon; as readers might recall, Hao didn’t care what his body looked like because he self-identified as a “programmer.” Sebastian, too, said one reason he began working out is because in high school and college he was surrounded by many people in shape. In this way, participants’ perceptions of their self-identity and how they wanted to position themselves in society served as drives to exercise.

Another person who fits this narrative is Andre, the track-and-fielder. When I spoke with Andre about his body preferences and motivations, he said he would want to be lean and have six-pack abs. Andre said he wants these qualities because those are characteristics a successful javelin thrower has; clean abs indicates a strong core for twisting and throwing, he said. He specifically brought up German javelin thrower Thomas Röhler and how he admires his physique. In addition, Andre said athletes often have “specialized” bodies that match their sport.

Finally, I want to discuss a specific identity that men sought to achieve through their bodies: masculinity. When I use the word “masculinity,” I am describing, in general terms, a normative, cisgender, heterosexual perception of the masculine ideal. The topic of masculinity in itself is a deep and rich area of research that this paper will not touch on.
In the previous section, I highlighted Gabe, who spoke about masculinity and how insulting a man’s body is almost like an “insult” to their identity as a masculine figure. To Gabe, muscul arity equates to masculinity.

I have a lot of conversations with my male friends about what does it mean to be a man, and it always boils down to two aspects of masculinity: the desire to protect and the desire to provide … the desire to be strong comes out of both of those, you know; you can't provide for friends or family or something like that if you don't have the means to do so. Even if it's just like desk work, you know, like that requires mental fortitude that can be reinforced in the gym. Stuff like that doesn't require it, but it helps. You know, protection is very clear of like, if you want to protect someone, you have to be strong. Again, even if it is mental fortitude of you know, protecting someone – like say if a significant other has depression, you know, you don't, you know, you don't fix everything in their life. You just be there for them. That requires mental fortitude, which can again be built by a good work ethic, like the gym.

As Gabe points out, conforming to the masculine ideal requires one to both protect and provide. He views a fit body as one capable of fulfilling these tasks. The powerlifter Edward also used the same “protector instinct” phrase when speaking about why it feels good to be a physically strong person; he can protect his family and be a resourceful person, in this way.

Masculinity could possibly even explain why Stephen and Luis are attracted to manga and anime. In Stephen’s case, he said the manga characters he has an attachment
to are in good physical or fighting condition. More importantly, Stephen said he admires them even more because they protect others, which is a characteristic he wants to achieve through a fitter body.

Luis spoke about his attraction to animated media, too. To him, it serves as a reprieve from the stresses of daily life:

I feel like anime for me is an escape from reality. But at the same time, I can be like, ‘Oh, I can see myself as like the character who always works hard.’ For example, like one of the most recent ones is like “My Hero Academia,” which is like the main character in like the first season like works hard throughout the whole year because he stuck to a regimen, he like, in order for him to prepare for like the like being a hero. And so it's just like, ‘I can do that.’ I could, so it's just like a more motivational push I would say.

Luis touches upon an important point – how media functions almost as a kind of empowerment fantasy; Luis said one aspect of anime that entices him is how he can project himself onto characters whose values he admires. In this instance, Luis spoke about determination and routine, which is one of the recurring themes of this chapter. Additionally, he said much of the protagonists in the shows he watches have a “never give up” kind of attitude, and he wants to hold onto the same mentality. Here, exposure to anime demonstrates two functions media can have: providing an escape from reality, as well as reinforcing viewers’ everyday ideologies. Luis’ anecdote supports the finding that participants derive motivation by internalizing messages from media.
Tying this section all together is Caleb, who pondered the concept of masculinity and why it’s ingrained in society as a conventional, ideal male trait. He, like Gabe, connects masculinity to muscularity, noting that society tends to position people with muscular bodies in a more positive light than those without. This idea is commonly reinforced in social media, entertainment media and even art, such as centuries-old statues of Greek gods.

Having a fit body is sort of ingrained in humans as a good thing. Because I mean, it has tons of evolutionary advantages, because you can, you know, run faster and you're stronger. Like, I think that there is a sort of innate element to that that you can't really ignore. And it's something that society has pretty much prized forever — is masculinity and muscularity. … It's like you, innately, you think one way because you've been sort of, quote unquote, “trained to think that way.” But you're realizing that those kinds of modes of thinking are outdated, and they're, you know, rooted in sort of problematic ideologies. So it's like yeah, like so I think that in a way, I am sort of innately equating masculinity and muscularity as being good things. But like, consciously, I would say they aren't necessarily good things, because I know that, like, a man is not a man because he has muscles, and a woman isn't a woman if she's, you know, like, conventionally attractive. Like, there's not like “good or bad” with these things because there's a lot of things that make a person worthwhile.

As I discussed above, a plethora of outside influences have left their marks on men’s ideologies and motivations to achieve certain goals. In the next chapter, I will hone
into participants’ interactions with social media, one of the essential components to this research study.
Social Media

An integral mission of this research study is to examine the relationship between participants’ attitudes and beliefs and their social media use. The following two chapters account for answers in the second half of my interviews.

This chapter will focus more intently on men’s relationship to popular media platforms and entertainment media, including the images they see, the duration of time spent consuming such media, and ways they interact on such platforms. I’ll also explore some of the attitudes or reservations participants held about the discussed media; this will be further discussed in the chapter, as well.

The chapter is split into four sections: time, content, engagement and reactions, and exposure to idealized imagery. The first half is meant to illustrate the range of attention and variety of imagery that men experience using media. The portion on engagement will hone in more onto how recruits decide to conduct themselves, such as how they feel after consuming the media or if they interact more with strangers or close friends on social media; the latter point will become more important in the discussion.

Finally, I have dedicated a section specifically to idealized imagery because these types of images, and the rising attention men are giving to them, will be a main talking point in my discussion, too.
Time

To clarify before moving any further, in this section I am only discussing time spent on social media; I am not counting any entertainment media such as movies or television, though I will discuss those in this chapter. In addition, social media is something people can check throughout their daily lives; entertainment media is usually enjoyed in one’s leisure time and requires more attention from viewers. In addition, many phones catalog the amount of time users spend time on applications, and on at least one occasion a recruit checked their phone so they could find out with accuracy how often they check social media.

The amount of time spent on social media varied wildly from person to person; some stated they used it very little to not at all, and a few stated they checked multiple apps several times a day, spending hours viewing images and videos on each. Some men couldn’t determine how often they use social media.

On average, the recruit roster spent around one to two hours on social media collectively; this metric is based both on in-person responses and data from the screener surveys. But some men were outliers. One young man, the bodybuilder turned powerlifter Mason who got into fitness because of social media influencers, said he spends five to six hours a day on his accounts, which is above average compared to the rest of the roster. Luis, who talked about how anime shifted his perceptions of the body, said he uses social media a lot; he estimated using Instagram and Reddit two to three hours a day and TikTok for six. In the past, he said he used social media so much that it drained the battery in his phone from a full charge. It isn’t clear what Luis’ total daily time is because
he said he multitasks on two different media platforms using a split-screen function on his computer. But overall, the 21-year-old was among the participants attached to media longer than others.

A couple people mentioned being addicted to social media; 23-year-old Gabe said exactly that, and he sometimes will uninstall Instagram on his phone because he doesn’t feel in touch with himself. Mitchell said he used social media more often than he liked. He accesses it at least once a day and tries to limit his usage, but he said he finds himself going on them often despite the personal limits he would like to impose.

Some men used social media little to none; Omar, who lifts for general health and not aesthetics, has no media accounts because he finds the interactions on them “mundane” and doesn’t see its appeal. He finds personal interactions with others more enjoyable. He considered streaming video games on the platform Twitch, but he also found that to be mundane.

**Content**

Across a range of media platforms, including social and entertainment media, men brought up various kinds of content related or unrelated to fitness.

The most common social media platforms used were Instagram, TikTok, Reddit and YouTube. In addition to those, some participants shared some of the kinds of entertainment media they view. I will review the types of content participants regularly see on these applications and websites.
Of the 17 men, 15 indicated in their screener surveys that they accessed Instagram regularly; the platform, which is owned by Facebook’s parent company, Meta, was one of the most discussed media apps across interviews. Although participants talked about their media consumption beyond fitness, men tended to synthesize active lifting content with Instagram.

In general, recruits described seeing gymgoers lifting on Instagram compared to people showing off their bodies, though this was reported as well. Two men, Mitchell and Mason, said most of what they see on Instagram is strongman/powerlifting and impressive lifts; as Mitchell said, the images fall more closely into “people showing off … comedy, technique, posing.” Gabe, who claimed he was addicted to Instagram and would regularly delete it, identified three categories of fitness content: memes, strongmen/bodybuilding, and people posing. He described each group, respectively, as “the fun of the community, the main guys of the community, and the vanity of the community.” Despite his firm understanding of how fitness is conveyed on Instagram, Gabe only sees fitness on his feed sometimes, suggesting it isn’t what he primarily views.

As multiple men attested, Instagram seemed to be a mixed bag of offerings, where viewers could either look for fitness tutorials or just look at good-looking bodies. Douglas periodically saw fitness images under the app’s search function while looking for exercise variants; he says because he saves some exercises into his video collection, Instagram began drip-feeding more idealized content to his feed. Other participants noted this, too, which I’ll delve more into later in the chapter.

Next, YouTube came in as the runner-up platform, with 12 people saying they log onto the video-sharing website. In general, recruits stated they used YouTube to view
educational and instructional content rather than outright looking for idealized bodies. Chip, for instance, said he cared less about the type of people he sees on YouTube because his intentions are to find exercise information rather than entertainment. Mitchell said something similar in that he goes to watch YouTube fitness personalities for instructional content. Ritten and Mason, too, have watched a lot of fitness videos that explain the science behind exercise; for the latter recruit, he spoke about learning about how steroids work, a topic I’ll discuss in the next chapter.

A few other people used YouTube to watch video essays unrelated to fitness, such as Sebastian; when he started getting back into fitness, he said he began watching more cooking videos on the website. Omar, who doesn’t use social media aside from YouTube, watches video essays and doesn’t look for exercise content on the video website. However, he has seen fitness ads occasionally pertaining to exercise form or damage prevention. He has also seen product ads, like ones for protein powder or energy drinks. The only time Omar viewed people in these ads is when a person was presenting the product, and they usually wore a shirt with a company logo. In an instance of a lean-body pill promotion, the video showed before-and-after photos a person to display the effects of the product. In all of these circumstances, Omar recalled not having paid much attention or thought to the promotions.

Luis talked about food-related content on YouTube, as well, but for an entirely different purpose; at the suggestion of a friend, Luis searched for a few notable competitive eaters on the video platform. After witnessing people online eating thousands of calories of junk food, far more than the average person can consume, Luis told his friend he felt disgusted; his friend said that was point. The purpose of watching the
videos is meant to blunt one’s appetite for eating fast food, Luis’ friend told him. Considering this anecdote, I should note that Luis expressed high body dissatisfaction, with him even wearing an undershirt to hide his ‘man-boobs’ at one point.

Moving on to TikTok, nine of the 17 recruits indicated they used it. The application mainly focuses on short videos typically with overlaying music. And as the men indicated, the platform has no shortage of fitness content.

Near unanimously, the men said they used the app to view idealized content, more so than any other platform. Many people said they looked at memes, which are often humorous types of content, in the realm of fitness. In addition, some viewers tended to look at content on TikTok that aligned with their fitness goals or resonated with their position in fitness; Mitchell, who chases aesthetics, says he goes on TikTok two to three times a day for aesthetics; the calisthenics-exerciser Andre watches a person who records feats in calisthenics; Ritten, who wants to get as strong as possible, stated he watches teenagers do “crazy lifts,” which inspires him for the next workout session.

The anti-Instagram user Sebastian described his experience on TikTok as “endless, mindless scrolling.” He said he sees the most fitness content on here, but it doesn’t appear in his feed as often anymore because he doesn’t go out of his way seek out new information. He was more interested in educational rather than spectacle fitness, too, which deviates from other participants’ viewing habits.

A few men mentioned a negative trend on TikTok where people secretly tape others in the gym and post it on the platform in an effort to belittle or shame others, such
as beginners, who might not be well versed in handling gym equipment. More on this point and recruits’ reactions to this content will be reviewed in the next section.

Beyond Instagram, YouTube and TikTok, participants also accessed a few other social media sites. Some used Twitter, for example, though nobody reported using it for fitness-related purposes. Some men used Reddit, which is a forum website, and recruits reported looking at gym memes and other topics like politics and music. Snapchat, a platform where viewers can send images and videos to each other, was also discussed, but participants mainly used the software for communication purposes. Facebook was one of the least discussed platforms across all interviews.

Finally, some men talked about their exposure to other forms of media like movies, comics and animation. Ken discussed watching a lot of Marvel superhero films, and both Luis and Stephen are fans of anime and manga, forms of illustrated comic and TV entertainment from Japan. I’ll discuss these mediums and the specific images the young men expose themselves to further in the chapter.

Engagement and reactions

Similar to how Sebastian described himself as “anti-Instagram” or Gabe as addicted to Instagram, nearly everyone I spoke with contextualized their social media use; they spoke about how they behaved on social media, and several recalled experiencing strong emotional reactions to content that made them feel better or worse about themselves. In addition, I will also cover recruits’ reactions to messages in comment sections – if they view these messages – as well as reservations toward a few
recurring types of video formats; namely, I will review “fitness journey” videos and other media that elicits negative responses from viewers.

A few key themes and patterns emerged in my interviews; one is that men used social media as a vehicle to foster connectedness or community with others who hold similar values. Another is that participants described consuming images from two types of content creators: strangers (influencers, celebrities) and personal connections (friends, family). This distinction and its potential impact on social media consumers will be a relevant talking point in the discussion chapter.

A significant pattern that emerged is that participants used social media to pursue a sense of connectedness with others – online and offline. This pattern ties to the second pattern I just brought up about the two kinds of social media users, strangers and personal connections.

Looking at all participants’ stories side by side, a significant takeaway is that participants who reported higher levels of body satisfaction were more interested in using social media as a channel to enhance social connection. In most if not all instances, these recruits didn’t follow strangers – in other words influencers – at all; they primarily viewed posts from friends or family. On the opposite side, those who indicated they suffered a higher feeling of body dissatisfaction, or even self-esteem issues, were likelier to follow or view fitness content regularly from people they didn’t know, such as fitness influencers or actors.

The first group of people who were generally more satisfied in their bodies or self-assured usually indicated in their responses that they used social media as an
extension of their offline personal lives; they used it to stay in touch with old friends. They either posted or viewed photos that included friends on trips they did together. They were more interested in genuine social connection rather than passively experiencing others’ lives. For Caleb, the track runner who said he felt skinny and was slightly discontent with his body, the platform Snapchat made him feel jealous of others in high school, and he had shallow conversations with others on it. So he stopped using it. Although he uses Instagram, he only follows people he knows, and he doesn’t follow fitness accounts.

Many other people were like Caleb in that they only, or primarily, followed the accounts of personal connections; the recruits Omar (the self-oriented man who exercises for general health), Hao, Andre (the javelin thrower), Edward (the powerlifter and strongman), Douglas (who discussed his anxiety surrounding acne and crooked teeth), Sebastian (the anti-Instagrammer), and Gabe (who detests vanity) all fall into this category.

Edward stands as a prominent example of how one uses online interaction to facilitate human connectedness. Edward chiefly uses social media to communicate with and expand the powerlifting community. Unlike other research recruits, who said their social media experience has ranged from positive to mixed to negative, Edward’s has been overwhelmingly positive. The 26-year-old said he uses Instagram as a platform to help others improve lifts, catalog training progress with new and veteran community members, and foster a constructive, encouraging environment to discuss the sport. He also said online activity is a way to be connected with others when he is alone physically:
We've got our gym Instagram things, and that's where stuff gets posted to. And that's where your community of people provides that support for you. … it builds upon what is otherwise a potentially discouraging or isolated sport – that in a powerlifting gym, you might be the only guy in the gym. I was, I was alone deadlifting this morning, but one doesn't really feel alone because of the communities that we've fostered online for such a thing. That even if that training was done with nobody physically looking at it, if I post that [lift] or if I talk to somebody about that training block or something, it's like they're next to me.

Edward says these spaces are also great ways to discuss training regimens with others and talk through plans to reach certain goals, like how to diet and train for a new lifting personal record. Additionally, Edward said social media is a great way to recognize others’ achievements and efforts; people can post short videos of their lifts onto group chats or community forums for others to recognize and offer feedback on form. In his view, it’s important to recognize other’s efforts because even if a lift wasn’t impressive to everyone who sees it, it was important to the lifter themselves, and so their efforts should be applauded. “It’s not about, truly, at finding a number impressive. It is more about recognizing somebody else’s dedication and feat and progress.”

Andre is another person who specifically uses social media to chat with friends or see what people from his high school are doing. He described himself as a private person, and he doesn’t post on his accounts because he doesn’t feel a need for others to know what he does. Andre talked about some people from high school who share visuals of themselves at the gym and that he makes a distinction between people taking pictures for
personal attention or gain rather than sharing their fitness journeys; he said he found the former type of people less appealing. Additionally, Andre only talked about one stranger on social media, who was a calisthenics athlete. From what Andre described, this user was inspiring because the posts showed Andre what people can achieve with calisthenics and when they test their capabilities.

Lastly, the recruit Omar talked about more unconventional social media platforms. When talking about the platforms he uses, Omar said he enjoys the “get-to-know-you” messaging boards on his university course pages. He said he enjoyed learning about others and that he could strike up conversations with others, which might lead to offline engagement with classmates. When he plays video games with others, he said he most enjoys playing friends rather than strangers.

Omar has abstained from apps like Instagram and TikTok, and he overall said he uses social media very little. Like Andre, he doesn’t have a desire for people to know everything he does and receive validation from others in the form of comments or “likes.”

I didn't really see the appeal of [social media] personally. Like anytime I went on there, I would just see, you know, random posts from people you've never heard of. And kind of like, whenever I would see that, I would think I could literally just call a friend who I am interested in and somewhat devoted in their life. Have a personal connection was just always more appealing. There was almost never a reason to choose social media over the people I personally know.
Moving away from the first group of media users, the recruits who fell into the second category talked extensively about fitness influencers. In addition, this group, in general, said they fell into comparison with others, especially those they identified with or could project themselves onto. Finally, this group consisted of a mix of people who posted online or engaged in passive viewership, each with mixed reactions.

A prominent distinction between this group of recruits and the first was that individuals here said they were likelier to compare themselves to strangers rather than friends. For instance, Chip made it clear that when he is on social media and views fitness content, he tends to compare himself with strangers rather than friends. He described feeling “happy for them but disappointed in myself” almost every time he views fitness content of strangers.

When it's someone I know doing something, like hitting a new PR or whatever, I'm just happy for them. When it's like some random person doing something — like I watched a video of like, what is it, the NFL Combine or whatever? – where, like they, they bench two plates for as many reps as they can just, you know, just for scouting and recruiting purposes. Some do, did 27 reps, and I'm like, “damn, I can – that is my one rep max.” It's like I'm a, excuse my French, but I am a bitch. So it's like, I guess like negative self-talk sometime, or, yeah, sometimes. … [When I see someone do something I haven’t achieved] I feel bad about myself, but I also use that as – feeling bad about myself is like what motivates me to do better so, uh, it – it makes me feel bad, but makes me want to be better, if that makes sense.
Chip said it’s easier to compare himself to people he doesn’t know, though he isn’t sure why that’s the case. He said a possible reason is that his friendships can’t revolve around comparison because then its entire foundation would collapse; he would start to harbor negative feelings toward close peers, and so he unconsciously doesn’t compare himself to them to retain friendships.

Luis has also talked about social media as a space that has affected his mental health. In recent years, he cut off Instagram because it was a toxic environment for him. In 2018 when he was in high school, he said he compulsively posted pictures of his life for as much as 12 hours a day, long enough that he drained his phone battery just from using the application. He acknowledged that he did this because receiving others’ attention felt good. Since he stopped posting, Luis has enjoyed life in the moment more:

I like value more of my friendships now. And I also feel like, like I said earlier, like I feel like I'm enjoying life in terms of like – it's cool what technology can give us, but at the same time you can only experience life once. It's just like that's, I feel like I enjoy more my time with my family instead of like taking a picture of my little brother and being like, showing it to everybody. Because that's what I used to do a lot; I would like also take pictures of like, “Oh, hey, I'm playing with my little brother.” It's just like now I'm like, I'm playing with my little brother, and only I should care about that.

Luis also engages in online activity where he can interact with others and contribute to a group dialogue. On some of the forums he’s on, such as Reddit, he will go onto group boards for a few hours a day and answer questions people have about shows
or entertainment he’s invested in, such as anime. “I feel like I’m actually doing something [other] than just like trying to look better,” he said.

To return to self-comparison, a few other people who reported being dissatisfied with their bodies said they were likelier to compare themselves to people they identified with; in other words, these were influencers they could project themselves onto, or they’re people who exemplify the participant’s personal body ideal. The trainer Will said he follows a lot of underground influencers who aren’t widely known in the fitness community, but they have characteristics similar to him: Asian men with long hair. Will said he follows these people because, similar to Andre and the calisthenic influencer, the buff Asian men serve as proof to Will that his goals are achievable. This same point – reassuring oneself of what’s achievable – was also discussed by the 18-year-old Ken.

It makes you think that it's possible, but at the same time — shoot, I guess it makes me feel less, you know? It's like, I'm not close to that sort of weight, you know, so what am I doing that's different? Why am I not progressing as fast as some of these guys?

Ken points to another reaction participants experienced pertaining to comparison: self-doubt. A few men like Ken said they felt worse about themselves or thought they were failing at fitness. This occurred when they compared themselves to others. The powerlifter Mason gives an example of this. Mason first got into weightlifting because while in high school, he was exposed to teenage fitness influencers. He wanted to emulate their image and work hard to see progress like them. But when he wasn’t seeing the same progress his idols were, Mason started to question himself:
I've definitely felt bad about looking at some people. I've always felt positive about looking at people older than me. So like, if there was a guy when I was like – let's say I was like 18, and there was like a 25-year-old that looked really lean and really athletic. I was like, “I could do that by the time I'm 25.” But then I would see someone my age that would look way better than me. And that's what got to me, because I'm like competitive as a person. So like, I'd see someone that at my age, at my, you know, fitness experience, and if he looks better than me or he lifts more than me nowadays, that gets to me more. … I was like, “Well, I'm not, I'm not eating healthy enough, I'm not doing, I'm not lifting hard enough.” I was like – it would annoy me, I guess you could say.

Again, Mason displays how participants clutched to social media figures who exemplified traits personal to the viewer (ethnicity, age) or exhibited qualities that the viewer perceived ideal – in this case, body type.

Of course, there were some recruits whose social media experiences deviated from this dual-group dichotomy. Stephen, who has tried several diets to lose weight, said images on online forums and sites, like the extreme fitness board on the website 4chan, motivate him to continue working out. He acknowledged that some of the images he viewed could result in negative emotions for others, but they inspired him. Both Mitchell and Ritten gave similar responses to social media usage; these points will be relevant in the next section.

Moving away from the two groups I described, men described other types of imagery and messages both positive and negative. Starting with the negative, many men
said the comment section was generally a toxic environment; Chip says he tries to avoid them because commenters are hypercritical, and Luis said people get made fun of for their appearance, especially people who are overweight or underweight. Ritten, who described himself as a social media “lurker,” said comments consist of people trying to put others down. Mason said he wouldn’t want to be a social media influencer because the comment section is overly critical, and he would feel too much pressure “to show perfection 24/7.”

One participant worth noting is Alexander, who said he wanted to get leaner but overall felt “neutral emotions” toward his body; he said the comment section tends to be positive, and the comments might not even be related to the videos themselves. However, when I asked Alexander about social media content he views, he brought up non-fitness personalities like Jack Black and Elon Musk who put out more humor-based and meme content. In addition, Alexander doesn’t view videos of fitness influencers working out. Instead, they speak into the camera. This is an important distinction to make, as Alexander may not be exposing himself to the same kinds of fitness content other participants described.

For positive reactions to content, Alexander brought up a social media trend where users attempt to dispel body shaming and be inclusive to new lifters. Some participants said this resonated with them because they said friends, family or other online users have avoided the gym due to a fear of being judged or recorded. Luis, who said his roommate was hesitant of going to the gym with him for this reason, described his view on these video responses:
I've seen this one guy, he's like a positive gym person where he just like goes on other people's TikTok’s that like, criticize people who are barely starting. And he's like, “That's not cool, bro. Like, you should go apologize to that person because the gym is like, some people don't want to go to the gym because of people like you like disrespecting them, making them feel like they're lesser. And they're trying to make that change and you're not letting them.” And I'm like, this guy's good. And that's why I like going to the like the [university gym] now, because I, I was also one of those people that was like afraid of everyone looking at me like, “Hey what’s this fat-ass doing here?”

One other type of positive fitness content men reacted to were transformational videos – people documenting their fitness journeys over time or using their social accounts as a daily journal of sorts. To participants, these posts allowed people to hold themselves accountable to their fitness routines and remain disciplined. For the trainer Will, transformation videos are great because he relates to them. He even uploaded a transformation video of his own, and the traction it received motivated him to continue posting for a while, but he eventually stopped when it became too much work. He said the experience was positive overall because he felt he had a platform to be heard.

In the next section, I will discuss idealized imagery in closer detail, as well share participants’ feelings toward it. As it will become apparent, exposure to this type of content will be a pertinent discussion point later.
Exposure to idealized imagery

This section will observe the men’s proximity and routine exposure to idealistic imagery in media content. This section will serve as the melting pot that combines information earlier in the chapter to illustrate a richer portrait of participants’ attitudes toward fitness and body image and how their proximity to idealized imagery possibly factors into their positions.

In this section, I will explore participants’ feelings toward the idealized content they regularly review, as well establish how often they are exposed to these visuals. I’ll also clarify recruits’ personal body ideals and how they connect these images. I will also be discussing fitness and entertainment figures throughout. Finally, I’ll expound on a dichotomy in fitness imagery that emerged across my conversations.

Many figures in media and entertainment were referenced by participants across all interviews, with some being mentioned many times. A few common examples were fitness YouTubers Jeff Nippard (Figure 6) and Jeff “Athlean-X” Cavaliere (Figure 7), social media influencers Bradley Martyn (Figure 8) and powerlifters Eddie Hall and Hafthor “Thor” Júlíus Björnsson. Participants said they routinely followed these content creators and high-profile actors; Dwayne Johnson, Chris Pratt, Henry Cavill, Chris Evans, Chris Hemsworth, John Cena and Tom Holland were regular names brought up, a roster of actors that speaks to the pervasiveness of superhero movies in Western culture.

Furthermore, men who had a higher drive to achieve aesthetic bodies were likelier to recite more actors or idols than those who were more content with their bodies. For instance, Mason provided me with names of more than 10 social media influencers or
entertainers, not including well-known Hollywood actors. Mitchell mentioned a total of nine people, mostly bodybuilders and powerlifters with impressive physiques. The trainer Will told me about five influencers.

Consistently, I found that participants’ personal body ideals matched up with the online and entertainment figures they referenced. So if a person desired a slimmer and leaner body, then they talked about slim or lean public figures. If a recruit’s goal was to attain high muscularity and low body fat, then it wasn’t unusual for them to talk about high-profile bodybuilders or social media personalities who exemplified this ideal. These references occurred late in interviews when I asked men to name media figures who they thought used performance-enhancing drugs or not.

Many of the individuals who were dissatisfied with their bodies or had a high drive to achieve aestheticism were more prone to discuss large, muscular men. Some of these online athletic figures are even open about their steroid use, which some participants acknowledged. For Ritten, the participant who wants to get as big as possible, his social media ideals were very muscular, lean men. In addition, he said many people wear “stringer” tank tops that make them appear “practically shirtless.” Mitchell, who has a high drive to attain appealing aesthetics, also held a position similar to Ritten’s. Mitchell said the popular bodies online are people who are shredded, vascular and have good muscle, which are attributes not far off from what he wants to attain. He said he sees a lot of people on TikTok who pose and actively lift. Furthermore, he said his feed is filled with many of these types of figures.
Figure 6: Jeff Nippard posts educational fitness and physical science videos on YouTube. He has 3.2 million subscribers as of June 2022.

Figure 7: Jeff Cavaliere stands shirtless. Cavaliere, a former strength coach for the New York Mets, has 12.8 million subscribers on YouTube (as of June 2022) where he posts fitness tutorial and videos. He also has 2.2 million followers on Instagram.
Figure 8: Online fitness influencer Bradley Martyn stands in a May 2022 photo posted on his Instagram account. Martyn has 4.1 million followers as of June 2022. Martyn states he is a natural lifter, according to a caption from a photo he posted in June 2022 where he wrote, “LIFETIME NATURAL.”

Returning to the last section about participant attitude and reaction, I should point out that Ritten and Mitchell also have another common similarity: Along with their high drive for aesthetics and exposure to idealized imagery, they both accept the images they view and feel it isn’t harmful to them. Ritten acknowledged that many of the images he looks at are men who use performance-enhancing drugs. He still admires their bodies all the same. The 20-year-old doesn’t “look up to them, I just want to look like them.” Mitchell was also accepting of what content his socials hand him. “I just kind of take it in and just go with whatever it throws at me,” he said.

As I stated before, Stephen was another person who was accepting of images he viewed. However, Stephen aspired for slimness and musculaity, but he didn’t want to be “grotesquely” muscular. The images he viewed line up with his body ideal.
Stephen reads manga and views fitness influencers online. Stephen discussed how the martial arts manga he read growing up affected his body preferences. The characters and series he brought up feature physiques similar to ones he wants to cultivate. He specifically talked about the series *One-Punch Man* and the characters Garou (Figure 9) and protagonist Saitama (Figure 10), as well as the popular manga *One Piece* and the character Zoro (Figure 11). Stephen brought up some other examples, like the characters from “Dragon Ball” and “Berserk,” but he said he didn’t desire the hyper-muscular physiques from these series. And for real-life people, the 24-year-old mentioned Aziz “Zyzz” Shavershian (Figure 12), a former young bodybuilder who gained popularity online in the late 2000s and who died from a heart attack in 2011 at age 22. Stephen said he learned of Zyzz when he was 14 years old, and though he knows Zyzz took steroids to achieve his physique, he admired the figure for what he stood for: taking care of oneself physically, pursuing goals and not caring what others think of oneself.
Figures 9-11: The characters Garou, left, and series protagonist Saitama, center, appear in illustrations for *One-Punch Man*, a popular manga serialized in the Japanese-published *Weekly Shōnen Jump* magazine. The character Zoro, right, appears in an illustration for the manga and anime franchise *One Piece*, which is also published weekly in *Jump*.

Figure 12: Aziz “Zyzz” Shavershian poses shirtless. Zyzz was a former internet personality who gained popularity on websites such as YouTube.
Luis is another person who brought up anime and how idealized bodies are typically portrayed as slim. Luis, too, said this type of animation impacted his personal body preferences (slim, low body fat), and that he wouldn’t want to be overly muscular because it would be too much for him. Additionally, Luis talked about a type of media content no other person discussed: pornography. Similar to Luis’ compulsion to post on Instagram, he said he used to have a porn addiction and would view it multiple times a day. Like his social media behavior, the 21-year-old forced himself to cut this media out of his routine because the scenarios and content were “poisoning” his brain. He said that people in pornographic films, male and female, have perfect bodies and “no flaws,” which made him feel like a lesser person in comparison. One individual he brought up is Johnny Sins, an adult actor and social media personality who has a lean and moderately muscular frame. Speaking about how media “poisons” minds, Luis discussed how Hollywood portrays the body:

> It's like, you see no issues with their bodies, and you kind of want to be like them. Just like everything about them is perfect. I think that's why Hollywood is like a problem, because that's like, that's their image of perfection. And if you aren't perfect, you pretty much suck.

Finally, I want to bring up Andre, who was more satisfied with his body but would want a leaner body to perform better at sports. While discussing media figures, Andre brought up a few actors, namely Bruce Lee, Brad Pitt (Figure 13), Robert Pattinson and Charlie Cox (Figure 14) as the types of body of he would want. Andre said these actors were examples of bodies he preferred, fitting his personal ideal.
Not every person reported regularly viewing idealistic imagery. Omar, who said he isn’t concerned with aesthetics, said he has never noticed someone so muscular or lean online that it grabbed his attention. This can perhaps be explained by his lower-than-average social media use. The anti-Instagrammer Sebastian couldn’t name any big fitness
personalities. He said he tries to look past surface-level, idealized exercise content and more into “substantive” material. He believes he’s done a good job of ‘consuming more things that are beneficial’ and that highlight the struggles of fitness. Including Omar and Sebastian, Caleb, Alexander, Andre, Douglas and Gabe – seven of the 17 participants – each said they don’t go out of their ways to follow fitness personalities on their social media accounts. As readers might recall from the previous section on engagement, these same participants were among the participants most satisfied with their body images. These men tended to only look at fitness accounts so they could learn exercises or educate themselves on an exercise topic.

One young man I didn’t include with these is Hao because he has seldom viewed idealized imagery, or even remembers it. As I previously covered, Hao said Chinese culture puts a lot less emphasis on the body, and his media habits are consistent with that. Social media was not as ingrained in everyday life in China as it is in the U.S., he said. When I spoke to Hao about fitness images he has viewed, he had a hard time recalling any instances at all, and he couldn’t name any Western media figures with nice bodies, too. He was so far removed from Western media culture that I presented him a picture of Arnold Schwarzenegger (Figure 15). I asked him to react to Arnold’s body; Hao said it was a “little too much for me.” When I asked him why, he replied: “I don't know. I just think it’s not normal. Like he's too unique.”
Lastly, I want to discuss the powerlifter and strongman Edward. As I discussed earlier, Edward used social media primarily to foster connection and community with other strongmen athletes. When talking about media figures, Edward brought up Eddie Hall (Figure 16), Thor Björnsson and strongman Rob Kearney (Figure 17). But in contrast to other participants, Edward didn’t focus on these individuals’ bodies; he talked about their strength and performance. When viewing social media content, Edward said it’s more impressive to see better lifts than good-looking bodies. This takeaway will come into play in the discussion chapter.
Figure 16: In the left photo, Eddie Hall appears at the 2017 World’s Strongest Man competition, where he placed first. Hall weighed 432 pounds at the competition and cut down to 355 pounds, depicted in the right photo, after three years, according to a Facebook post from Muscle & Fitness Magazine.

Figure 17: Professional strongman Rob Kearney performs a deadlift.

In the next and final findings chapter, I will examine more of participants’ stances on and perceptions of social media, as well as their knowledge of performance-enhancing drugs and who uses them.
Media Literacy

A pertinent component to consider about fitness content in entertainment and social media is how participants perceive certain messages and themes. In the previous chapter, I covered some of men’s attitudes toward imagery and idealized content.

For this last chapter, I will discuss more in depth participants’ beliefs concerning influencers’ and celebrities’ fitness lifestyles, as well as the messages participants perceive about fitness media. Additionally, I will share where men cultivated their knowledge of certain topics.

Finally, I will give an overview of participants’ attitudes about performance-enhancing drugs. I asked interviewees their thoughts on these drugs because I believe their answers will provide more context to men’s mentality about fitness, their core ethics and principles, and what they’re willing to sacrifice to achieve their body ideals. The purpose of this section is to better illustrate the mindsets and attitudes participants hold, which will add toward answering with more clarity this study’s research questions.

Lifestyle perceptions

In this portion of the chapter, I will explore with more focus what participants had to say about social media influencers’ and entertainers’ day-to-day lives. Specifically, I will discuss what these public figures do to attain their bodies, such as regimens and diets they follow. In addition, I will share whether participants believe these lifestyles are accessible to most other individuals.
Outlooks on media figures ranged from positive to negative to mixed. Some opinions were near unanimous among the 17 men. Meanwhile, some recruits were very confident in their beliefs, while some were still on the fence about how they viewed certain aspects of entertainers’ lives.

Obviously, one of the two main components of a fitness lifestyle is actually putting in the time to exercise. As participants have voiced previously, fitness figures dedicate much of their lives to training. All participants, in some regard, held this opinion, with many of them answering that they exercise either every day or much more than the average person does. Adding to this perception, several recruits remarked that fitness figures are dedicated and disciplined people, which is how they are able to maintain such lifestyles. However, some individuals held an opinion that partially discredits some fitness lifestyles.

Mitchell, Stephen and Edward each commented on bodybuilding as a profession and how it isn’t stable long term. Mitchell said that many bodybuilders’ training regimens are curated short term; no person is ever going to be training as hard as they do for years on end. This is a reason why Edward doesn’t follow bodybuilding. He spoke about how he can’t maintain the bodybuilding lifestyle because it’s unsustainable:

I did a bodybuilding split [training program] and almost competed in it as a younger man. At 19 I took a year to go work and did a co-op and was able to lift at high intensity twice a day and jump my calories up to the 6000 that a bodybuilder uses and go about it. And that is a very intense lifestyle that … probably wouldn't be sustainable to have a professional career and a family and maintain a house and social interactions. The, the
bodybuilders that I know and I'm friends with dedicate their entire life to that style, whereas I might dedicate two hours a day to my lifestyle.

Stephen, too, recognized that a lot of the bodies he sees are the result of short-term diets; he even said just eating an apple a day isn’t necessarily “unhealthy” because a person would only be doing that in the short term.

While on the topic of dieting, an intriguing finding is that men’s conceptions of media figures’ diets sometimes aligned with their personal ideals. As I just described, Stephen was more accepting of undereating because he aspired to slimness and moderate muscularity. In addition, Stephen said he believed many online figures focused on undereating. Mitchell, too, who talked about being able to lose pounds of body weight in a matter of days, also brought up the fact that fitness personalities are going to restrict certain foods to lower their body-fat percentage as much as possible. The fencer Alexander, as well, noted that people eat less and carefully moderate diets as to build muscle but not gain much fat; he said he wanted to be leaner because he didn’t like the “flabby” look. These opinions stuck out because, in general, other participants didn’t emphasize undereating while describing their perceptions of lifestyles; the other recruits either stated fitness personalities have more resources to eat healthier food (with some saying healthier food is more expensive while unhealthy food is cheaper) or they actually eat more than the average person. Viewing responses in this way could suggest that participants’ beliefs about social media figures relate to their personal ideals and media figures’ level of wealth.

Another portion of lifestyles recruits discussed was personal trainers or dieticians. Participants typically spoke about this aspect when discussing celebrities, because these
people are typically much wealthier, have the time to dedicate to lifting and need to follow stringent schedules to be in shape in time for a film’s shooting.

Some men’s opinions deviated from one another, particularly concerning the use of supplements or drugs. Luis said he believed Hollywood gatekept fitness and dieting information from the general public so that only celebrities and high-status figures have the best knowledge to cultivating ideal bodies. He joked about it being one of his conspiracy theories. Mason, the powerlifter who learned about training routines from a social media coach, said there isn’t any special information actors or influencers know that anybody else couldn’t get. He brought up kinesiology, the study of human body movement, and how trainers and coaches have pretty much figured out optimal routines people can follow to achieve peak conditioning. Essentially, Mason said there are no secrets; people in Hollywood are just on drugs to achieve muscularity.

Others commented on performance-enhancing drugs, but some were not as sure what they thought about them in relation to actors. As I stated, Mason was most the most confident recruit talking about people he thought used PEDs. Caleb and Douglas each said public figures might be using drugs to achieve their looks, but both were unsure. For Douglas, he didn’t care enough about them look further into them, and Caleb said he tried to restrain judgment pertaining to how people achieve their bodies. Ritten, too, said he learned from fitness commentary channels on YouTube about who and who is not using drugs. Performance-enhancing drugs will remain a relevant talking point in the upcoming sections.

Finally, I want to share a few standout answers about how popular media figures achieve their looks. Starting with Caleb, he made a distinction between actions women
take compared to men: Women will focus on less strength training and integrate more cardio than weight training into their routines compared to men. Meanwhile, men might “ego-lift” – lifting a higher amount of weight one can handle while disregarding proper form – and do more strength training compared to cardio. Caleb said these routines fall in line with society’s conception of gender standards; slim women and muscular men are seen as ideal body types. He brought up unhealthy and trend diets as an example of what social media figures might promote, such as the “grapefruit diet,” which was an old fad that claimed eating a grapefruit a day promoted rapid weight loss.

Luis was the only participant to discuss body-altering surgery as a means to achieve aesthetics and beauty. As I previously mentioned, his mother has expressed a desire for liposuction surgery. Luis discussed how breast enhancements, Botox and facial reconstruction surgery are avenues wealthy figures have access to. One person he brought up was Portuguese footballer Cristiano Ronaldo (Figure 18) and that people have speculated the athlete underwent facial reconstruction surgeries. Sebastian also brought up plastic surgery briefly, as well. He pointed out the Kardashians as a hallmark example of unrealistic beauty standards and that they have probably undergone a lot of plastic surgery in addition to editing their images.

To cap off this section, I ended each interview asking participants to sum up their thoughts on lifestyle and if they thought those routines were accessible to the everyday person. Ten of the 17 participants said they were not accessible, four said they were, and two had mixed responses. One person, Hao, had no response because of his unfamiliarity with media fitness lifestyles.
More than half the roster believed the level of dedication, time and money required to follow actors’ and influencers’ everyday pursuits were out of reach to the general public. A common answer is that normal people, or students, have jobs and course work they need to fulfill. But on the other hand, actors and figures online are paid to look good, either for a movie or their fitness accounts rely on their self-image to draw in viewers. In addition, if someone has a family, then they have even less time to dedicate to exercise. Actors can even bypass some of the barriers to healthy eating by just listening to what their nutritionists tell them to eat, and they even have personal cooks who prepare food ahead of time. Viewing health and fitness this way, it becomes clear that wealth plays a major factor into who can afford to be fit and who can’t, Caleb said. Protein shakes, personal trainers and gym memberships are all expensive in their own rights. Furthermore, transportation to the gym or workout equipment is another factor to
consider, too, as not everyone might be close to a facility or have the means to get there often, said Caleb:

I think that fitness is very connected with wealth and very connected with affluence and also wealth. Because if you're struggling with money, you're probably working more. It's the same thing with like voting: the people who are more likely to vote, or the people who are wealthier, because they have more free time. The people who are fit are probably more likely to be wealthy, because they have the free time to go work out. I mean, maybe you have like people in like physical labor who are super, you know, super fit, because they're just doing that for their job. But like, generally, if you're comparing like a CEO and like just sort of like a lower-level office worker, the one who's more likely, I think, to be fit would be the CEO, ‘cause he has all the time. Like, he has the money and the time.

Motivation was another component men brought up; not everyone is going to have the willpower to achieve an aesthetic physique because the rest of their life probably doesn’t depend on it. But for actors and people on social media, they have to achieve a certain standard of fitness for their livelihoods.

An interesting response Omar gave, who said the lifestyle isn’t accessible, is that he made a distinction between “accessible” and “achievable.” He stated that technically, the lifestyle is “accessible” to everyone, but it’s not realistically “achievable,” though. This was an important point to bring up, because it shows how participants might answer differently based on how the question they’re answering is framed.
The five participants who said these lifestyles are achievable provided compelling reasons to back up their beliefs. The fencer Alexander and the javelin thrower Andre were two of the men who answered this way. Alexander said fitness is a “non-excludable good,” and so anyone can be taught how to get in shape. Andre said anyone who has an hour a day can attain a physique like Brad Pitt’s. Interestingly, these men gave reasons that aligned with their personal body ideals, and they were also two men who had a lower-than-average exposure to idealized content compared to other men.

The trainer Will said anyone can go to the gym for an hour a day, too, also stating that high-intensity interval training, or HIIT, is another quick option people can opt into. And as I covered before, the powerlifter Mason said it’s accessible, as the field of kinesiology is information anybody can look further into.

Some men gave mixed responses; Douglas said the fitness lifestyle is a mixed bag because a lot of people have sedentary jobs and might not have the time to balance their work and family life with exercise. Mitchell said it is accessible, but throughout the interview he expressed reasons why it isn’t. A college student, for instance, won’t have access to the healthiest food options. Mitchell said he wasn’t even eating breakfast because his student dining account was low on funds, but he was fine with it because he has been “used to [not] eating [for] like, days.” However, Mitchell said most people have access to information and routines to start exercising. As I’ve covered in a previous chapter, Mitchell tended to provide responses that conflicted with one another, such as his attitude toward his body image and social media use.

For the next section, a closer look of the types of messages and themes participants identify in media will be shown.
**Messaging**

It was apparent across all interviews that many interviewees perceived pervasive themes and tropes that social media figures and entertainment media implement in their online content. For that reason, several men voiced skepticism toward such content, acknowledging that digital images aren’t always reflective of real life. In addition, some recruits said they were conscious of misinformation about fitness and other messages that the general public may not be able to readily identify.

As I have covered in previous chapters, men discussed how media has shaped their world beliefs; Andre said movies informed him about what a “nerd” is and what women desire in men. At the end of the interview, Andre gave a final comment on messaging in media, stating he believed messages that children pick up from it can “inflict you the most.” Luis talked about how anime portrays protagonists and how antisocial individuals are “smelly, disgusting.” Furthermore, Luis said that porn skewed his impression of sex, and so his expectation of it changed when he actually had sex for the first time.

Luis is one of many participants who voiced skepticism toward media and how truthful its portrayal of life, including standards of beauty, actually is. Later in my discussion with Luis, he talked more directly about Hollywood and how the socially elite reinforce society’s unattainable beauty standards:

I just feel like [Hollywood is] the problem. They are the problem. They make all these people look so good, and then like, it's like you want to be like them. And it just stays in people's heads. And I can say for one that it
affected my head watching Chris Evans be like six-pack, humongous 6-foot-2 dude. I’m like, ‘Jesus.’ … Like it makes me feel kind of jealous, man. I feel like they do that on purpose. To show like the elite and to psychologically put down the people and just wanting to be like them.

Indeed, unrealistic expectations were brought up by participants who had mixed or negative reservations toward social media. This was prominently discussed by Sebastian, the anti-Instagrammer. He said he believes social media creates unrealistic expectations, and one reason for that is because users choose to present the best parts of their lives and not the bad or mundane ones. Speaking about Instagram, Sebastian said he thinks the platform “exists to just kind of boost yourself up and kind of give the highlights.” This creates an environment where content creators are disingenuous about their own lives. As a result, viewers will begin to compare themselves to others on a surface level.

Social media personalities want to portray themselves in the best light, Sebastian continued. He said they post about themselves right after the gym when they have a “pump” – when blood rushes to a worked-out muscle and makes it appear bigger and feel denser – and are looking their best, but not on a cheat day. One other aspect of creating an ideal self-image is editing, which Sebastian talked about in his final thoughts:

If you are taking a picture of yourself and you're an influencer on like a fitness page or something, and you're editing your pictures, you're lying to your audience. And I feel like that that's detrimental, because you're creating unrealistic standards. And I feel like there's, there's been more and more of that, like, embellishing of your pictures, like whitening your teeth.
Trying to you know, use Photoshop to make your waist look skinnier. And I feel like that, that can do – that's probably the thing that does the most damage, because it's just not real. But I also feel like, as that has started to become a popular practice, there's, there's been like a lot of backlash to that and a lot of awareness that ‘Hey, these certain people, they're not being realistic with you. This isn't really what they actually look like.’ And it goes back to my point about people will only really take pictures of themselves like right after the gym when they got their pump on. Like that's not what they walk around as, but, but that's what you see from them every day when they post, so that's what you think that they look like. So I think there's a bit of misinformation and that these audience members are being lied to. And that's probably the biggest problem that I have.

Sebastian’s sentiment was also held by Mitchell, who wants to achieve aesthetics through bodybuilding. Mitchell said that people on social media only want to show themselves when they’re in prime condition, and if that’s all viewers see over a long period of time, then they will start to assume those images are indicative of real life. Thus, viewers will eventually push themselves harder and harder to achieve these idealized standards, something Mitchell said applies to him.

When discussing fitness content creation, Mitchell said “pictures are 10% fitness, 90% lighting.” He comprehends that creators have access to filters and image altering software that can enhance their images. Indeed, others spoke about this as well; Stephen, the individual who wants to attain slimness and significantly cut his calories to lose weight, said he understands that online figures will pose for photos in environments that
complement their physiques. He said there comes a point where growing a lot of muscle can be unrealistic, and it sets unrealistic expectations for viewers. Such imagery can lead viewers to form habits like bulimia or overwork themselves, which will eventually lead to them burning out, he said. However, Stephen appeared to hold conflicting attitudes towards unrealistic expectations; although he said the media he views creates unrealistic standards, he said “it’s still something that I’d like to aim for, even if it’s unrealistic.”

Stephen’s belief that unrealistic expectations impact one’s habits holds true with Ritten, the participant who wanted to get as strong and muscular as possible. Ritten, who said he overworked himself when he first started out lifting, discussed how information he read online impacted his dieting choices.

Like my diet, I thought it was healthy … I didn't really have anyone to guide me right. So I just went on YouTube and Google and like searched ‘Okay, what do I do? What do I do?’ Like people are like, ‘Oh, you gotta, you gotta cut out all the junk food. No sugar, no fat,’ and like I thought I thought I was having a healthy diet, but I was not. Like I cut out a lot of, a lot of fat especially. And you know, that's important for like hormone regulation, right and your testosterone and all that. And so I cut out the fat. … I thought I was told that [fat] was bad. So you could cut that out, um, your hormones crash, and you feel like garbage all the time. And I'll say, ‘Why do I feel this way?’ But I didn't, I didn't realize it until like, almost a year into lifting.

Another significant topic Ritten talked about are “fake nattys” – lifters who use performance-enhancing drugs but claim publicly they achieve their physiques naturally.
He said he recognizes that many people on social media are using drugs and not disclosing it, but he is indifferent to this; he said it isn’t the “most moral thing to do,” but viewers have the responsibility to make their own judgments and control their actions. To Ritten, if an influencer has a body that fits into his ideal, then they’re inspirational to him regardless of what drugs they’re taking or what they tell viewers.

Before progressing further, I must note that though Ritten, Stephen and Mitchell pointed out how social media can pass on unrealistic messages to viewers, none of these individuals seemed to express negative outlooks on social media. In fact, the three men indicated that social media was a significant motivator for them to change their bodies, even if they held conflicting views about them. As readers might recall from the last chapter, I stated these men welcomed idealized imagery into their lives. This point will be discussed in my discussion chapter.

The trainer Will commented on fake nattys as well and how they reinforce unrealistic expectations. Even at his personal gym, Will is sometimes unsure about who around him uses steroids and who doesn’t. He said he goes back and forth on whether he thinks some people are using drugs or if he’s “making excuses” for himself concerning his own physique and muscularity. I will discuss performance-enhancing drugs and the image it presents of people later in this chapter.

Finally, some men discussed their beliefs on why media creators choose to present certain scenes over others and what these creators have to gain from all of it.

Some participants held a similar point about media not telling the “full picture” of a story. Omar said movie viewers only see the result of hard work – the body – and not
the choices an actor makes months or years ahead of time to progress to that end product. The powerlifter Edward discussed this and used a competitive powerlifting show as an example. He said the televised coverage of these kinds of shows only provide the most impressive portions of them. In addition, when talking about online celebrities, he said viewers have no idea what those figures do when they’re not on camera:

The majority of the influencers are putting in so much effort behind the scenes to get where they're at. And it doesn't tell the whole picture … everything you do goes into that; your entire life is dedicated to being as strong or as, as aesthetically appealing as possible to do so. And I don't have that much time or dedication. So there's, there's always that, that – even if it looks like, “Ah, that's a diet I could follow,” you're eating 2800 calories, it's at this split, this ratio, you're lifting these things at this frequency – there's always more behind the scenes and in general health and, and, wellness to go along with that, there isn't mentioned.

Speaking about entertainment media, Omar, who said he has a neutral stance about media messaging, recognized a few reasons as to why media chooses to portray bodies some ways and what information it emphasizes. Omar brought up anime and its specific brand of flashy action and drama. He said animators draw characters with idealized bodies because those physiques, as unrealistic as they are, match the tone and can even “add to the absurdity” of shows. For viewers, Omar said it’s important to realize that they don’t see the full picture; characters aren’t shown over an extended period of time training to achieve their physiques; we never see the actors behind the characters,
and more often than not, they’re “everyday Joes” who look nothing like the characters they lend their voices to.

Omar continued on his point about media not wanting to presenting a concrete picture. For instance, he said he is skeptical toward product videos because he knows marketers want to display their item in the best light and obscure the bad aspects of it. And, if these marketers so desired, they could fabricate information about the product. Ultimately, media is a tool for business, Omar said, and content creators have the means to form their own brands and images about themselves or products they want to sell.

The last two recruits I’d like to bring up are Caleb and Mason, who both discussed media as a tool for financial gain and building status. As I have mentioned in previous chapters, Caleb described this kind of social control as strategic communication. He provided a few examples: He talked about visiting a zoo with his friends and documenting the pleasurable parts of the trip but not its undesirable ones, such as the long car ride his group incurred during the experience. In this, Caleb and his friends consciously chose to frame their trip in a way with only upsides and no downsides, which he said isn’t accurate to how events actually play out in day-to-day life.

Caleb’s other example pertained to a friend he knows who posts fitness imagery on social media. He spoke about how this friend chooses to portray herself: She shows herself with heavy weights and displaying physical prowess. He believes she does this so she can mold her online identity so that others view her as strong and dominant. This individual works for a fitness company, Caleb said, and he believes that by presenting herself with admirable qualities, viewers will connect those qualities to the gym and supplements she sponsors. “You’re gonna see that content and think to themselves that if
they, you know, buy the supplements and go to the gym that she's sponsoring, then
they're gonna look like that, too,” Caleb determined.

Mason, too, brought up a similar insight about how public figures want to portray
themselves with respectable traits to build their statuses and reap the benefits – and in
some actors’ cases, hide the fact they take PEDs:

There’s a guy called V-Shreds who's like, built his whole program around
like “I have the thing the Hollywood celebrities are doing you don't know.
And if you buy my program, I'll give you their program.” And it's like,
there's nothing, you're – it's just a sales point. And then I feel like for, for
like Hollywood people, like The Rock, like “I work out twice before you
wake up, I work out on a severe, like a super hard program,” and stuff like
that. And it's like, sure you do, but like, it doesn't matter, you know? And
then it doesn't matter what time of day you work out. That's not changing
anything on the program. It's like, it can't be that much different than
what's, you know, researched and found out to be the best. And so I just
think they're, they’re – it's almost impossible for there to be a way for
what they’re, what they're saying to be true. I feel like it's kind of a cop-
out to answering, like “how are you so much better and how are you
progressing so much faster than like the average person?” I feel like it’s a
cop-out.

As Mason brings up, public figures might not always be fully transparent about
their exercise lifestyles. One important aspect to that is the use of performance-enhancing
drugs, which he briefly alluded to in this quote. I will discuss this in the next section.
**Performance-enhancing drugs**

In my interviews, I made sure to dedicate a portion to drug use. I felt this was important for participants to consider, because as I have briefly covered, actors and influencers are not always transparent about whether they take drugs or not. This can lead to unrealistic expectations about what kinds of bodies are achievable, sustainable and overall healthy. Gauging participants’ reactions to PEDs will help better illustrate their internal mindsets and what messages in media have impacted their beliefs.

In this section, I will make clear which participants were for and against PEDs. In addition, I will outline an important dichotomy that emerged in interviews: participants who talked about PEDs for competitive use, and those who talked about them for attaining better physiques. This distinction will be an integral part of my discussion chapter.

Oftentimes, when recruits began discussing PEDs, they framed their answer either in a sports environment, where drugs are tested, or via a recreational use. To this point, a significant finding is that men who focused on drugs to build physiques were more concerned about their body image, had higher drives to achieve aesthetic physiques and were exposed to more idealistic content. On the opposite end, men who tended to talk about PEDs in the context of competition – or performance – were overall less concerned and/or more or less content about their body images than other participants. Men who had better body images overall wouldn’t want to use steroids because they had a lower drive to achieve an aesthetic physique, or they were more concerned about their general health. Caleb, for instance, felt that taking steroids was unnecessary for him because the body he
wanted could be achieved without them. He approved of others taking steroids if they understand what it does to their bodies, but he didn’t approve of them if it augmented unhealthy behavior:

If they're using it as a coping mechanism, that isn't healthy. Because, you know, like, I think it's healthy to have concerns about your body, because literally everyone cares about their body in some way. I mean, it's just natural, because you live with it. You see it all the time. You see, care in it some way. But like, yeah, if it's getting to the point where you have to resort to unhealthy habits, I think that, like, some of those other habits are probably more destructive than using steroids. Like, I would probably think someone who was, you know, working out several times a day without stopping or like completely, like, putting themselves on some insane diet — I think those kinds of things are probably more harmful. Like, I’d probably be less concerned for someone who's using steroids. I think it depends.

Two men I want to bring up are Omar and Edward, who discussed PEDs only in the context of competition or body performance. Interestingly, Omar was against PEDs, citing that they are illegal and unethical, and that they give users an unfair advantage compared to opponents. However, Edward was pro-PED, and he had even used a PED classified as a Selective Androgen Receptor Modulator (SARM) called ostarine in the past before it was prohibited from competitive sports. Edward didn’t use it to attain a better physique, though, but rather he focused on how it helped him improve lifts and made him feel better physiologically:
It feels good because you're getting all of the benefit of lifting heavy both physically and psychologically. And you are not subjected to the long recovery period in time between lifts that you otherwise would. I ran a six-month continual, like, lifter’s high because I was able to do that twice a day while, while taking this stuff. And dammit, did that stuff feel good.

Edward said ostarine did no more damage to the kidney than a can of beer, so he felt comfortable using it when he was younger and not drinking as much. He also educated himself on what the drug does to the body and how to take it safely.

Across interviews, it became clear that opinions on PEDs themselves weren’t an indicator of men’s body image. However, how PEDs were utilized was an indicator of men’s internal values and what kinds of media have impacted their perception of drugs.

If someone answered they were against PEDs, a common answer was that PEDs let someone “cheat” or they devalued a person’s efforts. Andre, who talked about them in the context of competition, was against steroids because it served as a shortcut to achieving an athletic goal. In that sense, “you’re not believing in yourself” or personal talents, and using drugs as a crutch is almost “a weakness of self.” He even talked about how steroids can affect mood, one’s social behavior and increase depression. Andre brought up someone he knew from high school who got bigger quickly, and how this individual became more erratic; this indicates that Andre’s opinions on steroids derive from personal experience. As I previously covered, Andre didn’t want to be “grotesquely” muscular, and he wanted a better body so he could perform and feel better.
Stigma surrounding drug use was heavily discussed among participants. To start off, some men voiced a level of confusion surrounding performance-enhancing drugs, and oftentimes men considered them to be “bad.” Some men even took pride in being natural lifters. Gabe said not taking supplements was a healthy source of pride for him, and Ken gave a similar answer, but pertaining to steroids. Interestingly, Ken said he had started taking creatine because Instagram personalities claimed it was the number one thing “killing his gains” – missing out on growing muscle through strength exercising – and someone he knew who transformed their body used it. He said he didn’t know how creatine affected the body.

Mitchell, like others, thought PEDs were the “easy way out,” and being “natty” gave a person more credit than one who used drugs. He talked about how steroids affect heart health and how he would be willing to stigmatize drugs further if it meant it kept people from using them. Additionally, he said steroids are short term solutions because a person will need to continually inject themselves if they want to retain muscle. To circle back to the point on pride and satisfaction with one’s efforts, Mitchell brought up a person from his fraternity who he and other peers believe uses steroids:

There's actually someone in my pledge class right now who, he's really big. I'm like, we were trying to like get him to admit that he takes gear or something, but he hasn't given like a definitive answer. Because I think the way that people look at it is if they're on steroids, they want people to assume that they're natural. Like they don't want to give the credit to steroids; they want to say, ‘it is me who is big, just me who did this.’
As Mitchell alludes, taking steroids, in some way, diminishes a person’s efforts because of how steroids are perceived by society, so a person has something to lose if others know they take them. But if someone doesn’t know a steroid-user takes drugs, then the user has all the more to gain. Ken even made a comment connected to steroids and status; he doesn’t want to assume someone on social media uses steroids because that would “discredit” them. He said he isn’t confident about who uses steroids and who doesn’t. Chip also understood steroids similarly. He was unconfident about who online takes PEDs and doesn’t want to “accuse” anyone.

Going back to Omar, who talked about PEDs as a way to cheat, he spoke more in depth about why he thinks they are immoral to use in any situation and what people have to gain:

I mean, other people might see it and be like, ‘Oh, they look super fit. I wonder how they got there.’ … There's always a shortcut, or almost always a shortcut to get the results you want, and it's up to the individual to say whether they'll take it or not. And I think it's another showmanship of character. … if they take those drugs and then deny using them, it’s another showmanship of character; you're lying in order to save face because you'd rather not let people know that you took the shortcut, which you wouldn't tell people that exclusively to make yourself look better. In the situation where you do it to look better for yourself or as an actor, you're still cheating to yourself, you're taking a unallowed shortcut to achieve it.
Omar’s point ties back to Gabe and how exercising is a pursuit like any other: One must expend energy to earn a reward. In Omar’s scenario, PEDs equate to cheating because an actor or influencer can use them to expend less energy to earn a more substantial reward – admiration and status. And for the average lifter, Omar believes benching more weight for the sake of benching more weight is an unnecessary goal; the cost to attain such as reward – breaking the law and damaging the body – is too steep a price.

Although Douglas hadn’t given much thought to PEDs – which is in line with his body image and goal to maintain his current appearance – he discussed how media frames steroids in a negative light. In movies and TV shows, people who take steroids hide the fact away from others, and using them is associated with negative side effects, he said. It’s this reason why Douglas believes the general public frowns upon PEDs.

Hao said he didn’t like drug use because he thinks they negatively affect the body from a performative standpoint, but he isn’t sure if this is true because he hasn’t researched the topic. He even brought up how using Tylenol was undesirable in his household; again, Hao’s personal experience informed his opinion on drugs. Hao said he believes most people in real life don’t use PEDs to achieve their appearances, which is consistent with his indifference to body image and nonexistent exposure to idealized media.

Another person’s attitude toward drugs, Chip, was also affected by his family background. Chip said when he was in elementary school, he and his mother watched a documentary where someone used steroids. When that person stopped taking them, the
muscle hung from the body functionless, he said. This influenced Chip to the point where he doesn’t think taking steroids are worth the risk.

Sometimes, recruits said PEDs were fine to take if a person had a medical condition or was advised by a medical professional. But more often than not, the general consensus was a negative opinion of steroids in certain contexts. Some people thought they were fine to use for personal use, but if they were an aforementioned “fake natty,” then they’re lying to others about themselves. This can lead a false image of them, and they can profit off this lie. Mason the powerlifter discussed both of these aspects and how his perception has changed over time. He has a problem with fake nattys who sell workouts claiming they will get natural lifters the same results as the fake natty. In addition, Mason said that when he started learning that many actors and influencers use PEDs to achieve their looks, his attitude toward his own body image improved. He believes a large gap exists between nonlifters and those who are invested in the fitness community:

But like, if you really know what you're doing when it comes to working out, you can … look right through that [PED user’s] face. But they're also not trying to hide it from me; they're trying to hide it from the general public that doesn't work out, I guess you could say. Because that's the people that like, also have the terrible image of steroids. If everyone was like me, that's like, I know what steroids do. I know that they're not like the worst thing ever. … Then they might come out and be like, ‘Yeah, I'm on XYZ steroid.’ But, you know, with the public's current image of steroids and being like a banned substance and stuff like that – not that I'm
saying they should be unbanned – but I think it's just like, the public image of steroids isn't good. So why would someone in Hollywood come out and say ‘I'm on steroids,’ rather than taking a cop-out excuse that someone like me can look straight through? ... but someone that like, you know, a different person's like, ‘Oh, that's pretty reasonable.’

Interestingly, Mason said he thinks it’s stupid to take steroids as a teenager because those lifters shouldn’t need to take steroids to progress because they wouldn’t have plateaued in progress. As I previously covered, Mason began exercising because of the idealized physiques of teenage fitness influencers. This might indicate he holds conflicting feelings about PEDs to rationalize his body ideal, which is consistent with a physique a steroid user has attained.

Another recruit, Ritten, said he acknowledges many online figures use steroids but admires their bodies all the same. Ritten said he was fine if others used PEDs because it only hurts their bodies and nobody else’s, which is an answer some other participants provided, too. He said he wouldn’t use them personally because he cares about his heart health, but he thinks steroids should be legal for anyone to use, including teenagers. Ritten also said being a fake natty isn’t exactly moral, but he felt like it wasn’t a problem overall. Like some other participants, Ritten was impartial to steroids and the moral dilemmas they present possibly because he had a high drive to achieve muscularity and strength and had a high exposure to idealized imagery.

Stephen, who wants to be slim but also muscular, said he was fine with steroids if users know the risk. Like Ritten, he wouldn’t want to use them because his family has a history of health complications. He said a female friend had considered using steroids,
and Stephen didn’t approve of PED use for health-related reasons. This same friend, according to Stephen, had in some way pressured him to lose weight and served to reinforce Stephen’s negative feelings of obesity. Stephen, like Ritten, seemed to be indifferent toward steroids overall because, possibly, they aligned partially with his personal ideal.

Finally, I asked participants if they thought they could identify who uses steroids in media and who doesn’t. Some were more confident than others, and many shared the same explanations on how to tell if someone takes steroids.

A common sign of a steroid user is if they make rapid progress in a short period of time, most if not all participants said. Many also said if someone is too muscular, then that could indicate they’re using drugs to gain muscle.

Some participants thought many men in media use drugs to attain their physiques while others didn’t. Caleb said many men on social media probably use steroids to achieve their physiques. However, he was not confident whether he could identify a steroid user from a natural person, which many others expressed. Alexander the fencer said many bodybuilders use PEDs, and one sign someone uses drugs is if they have back acne. And Sebastian the anti-Instagrammer said more people are using PEDs than he probably thinks. Interestingly, Gabe felt that method actors achieved their looks naturally – harkening back to his themes on pride and personal values – but that many people on social media probably use drugs.

Mason and Edward, the powerlifters, were confident in who took steroids or not. Edward said he can tell based on how a person’s shoulders and backs are defined. For
Mason, he cited information he has heard from fitness commentators and his own knowledge in the kinesiology field as areas that informed his beliefs. Additionally, Mason brought up a point no other person discussed. He said if an actor or celebrity wants to obscure the fact they take PEDs, then they take it in smaller doses. This way, they can attain a good-looking physique that exists in the space of being attainable naturally. This blurs the line between what is attainable naturally and what can only be accomplished with steroids. Mason hasn’t considered steroids because he is still making progress on his lifts without them.

One other aspect of the body that blurs the line between what’s achievable naturally or not is the role genetics have in defining our bodies. The topic of genetics was pervasive across many interviews, and many men said it complicated what an individual is capable of achieving for their bodies. For example, Stephen said some bodies accentuate muscles more prominently. In this case of his own body, he said his wide shoulders “makes me look a little less heavy than I actually am.” Genetics was one reason participants reserved judgment about identifying enhanced physiques.

In the next and final part, I will sum up my findings and draw it back to the literature and past research I discussed in the intro section.
Discussion and Conclusion

As I have covered in the findings section, various significant themes emerged across interviews that connect to my primary research questions, which were:

Q1: What is the experience of men aged 18 to mid-20s who are exposed to media images depicting the ideal male body, and how do their beliefs affect their self-identities?
   a. How often do men in their late teens to mid-20s consume media featuring idealized content?
   b. Does this population perceive idealized messages favorably or unfavorably?

Q2: How do recruits distinguish naturally achievable bodies from enhanced ones?
   - Do they believe the ideal body is sustainable within an everyday lifestyle, and if so, why do they believe this?

I will answer each of these questions in this section through the lenses of social comparison theory and cultivation analysis. Also, the data made clear I should have asked an additional question: how does exposure to idealistic imagery in media impact young men’s everyday experiences? Additionally, using the themes and patterns I have uncovered through this research study, I will pose additional questions researchers should consider in future qualitative research endeavors.
Social Comparison Theory

The topic of self-comparison was pervasive across many interviews, and men indicated that self-comparison was a significant motivator in them exercising. As I have uncovered through my discussions with the 17 participants, experiences varied greatly among the young men. In general, men who tended to be more content in their bodies and self-identities compared themselves to others less frequently, while men who viewed idealized images of strangers had worse body images. This distinction is supported by past researchers such as Fardouly et al. (2018) and Tiggemann and Anderburg (2020).

To continue with answering my first research question, some men were against social media imagery, and some men welcomed it. The men who welcomed idealized imagery were more prone to self-comparison and said they used their discontent in their body image to motivate themselves to exercise. The men who disliked idealized images were less likely to be exposed to it, and they were overall more satisfied in their body images than participants who viewed idealized images more frequently.

Additionally, self-comparison served as a motivator for men to work out in various areas; participants yearned to exercise to define themselves, and oftentimes, those participants indicated they sought control of their bodies, their self-identity and controlling what others thought of them, as well as chasing a heteronormative version of masculinity. So while men used self-comparison to motivate themselves to reach their fitness goals, the discussions suggest though men want more aesthetically pleasing bodies, their ultimate desire is the ability to control; their bodies serve as an agent to achieve internal and social acceptance. In addition, the men who had more positive body
images and/or didn’t desire aesthetic physiques valued personal social connections over social media, and when they did use social media, they were more connected to people they knew.

Finally, one significant finding is that men tended to compare themselves to people they related to; Will the trainer said he viewed other Asian men with long hair online because he could relate to them better. Mason the powerlifter said he felt anxious about his own body when he viewed teenagers his age who had aesthetic physiques, but he didn’t care about Hollywood actors or fitness influencers older than he was. Additionally, Chip said he didn’t compare himself to his friend but that he compared himself to people online, and this often resulted in him feeling dissatisfied with himself. Finally, Gabe said he started wearing less-revealing clothing in the gym because he found it to be better for his mental health. He noted that when he wore a tank-top, he focused on the differences between his and another man’s body, which resulted in negative comparison. However, when he saw another man in the gym who had on a long-sleeve shirt, Gabe focused less on the body and more on the similarities between them two, which resulted more in a sense of connectedness.

For the observation above, one explanation I present is that men viewed images of these figures because they found commonality with themselves and the media idol. Furthermore, I believe it’s possible that participants viewed these public figures in particular because they represented a desirable quality the participants yearned for himself. Although I didn’t conduct an in-depth review of any fitness influencers brought up, some participants did make reference that they were attracted to some types of media because the messages presented in them resonated with the participant. One example is
Stephen, who said he admired people on social media who accomplished death-defying athletic feats, and he said he wanted to achieve this himself. Stephen also connected to the characterization of anime characters for their capableness and essentially functioning as protectors to others, which Stephen wanted for himself. Although Stephen is but one example, others indicated a similar sense of attachment or projection onto external figures, such as the powerlifter Mason, who only compared himself with teenage Instagram influencers but not Hollywood actors or older influencers.

Cultivation Analysis

Men indicated that messages in media impacted their world views. Additionally, as I covered in the chapter on motivations and drives, messages internalized from society and media functioned as motivations for men to achieve different bodies; this aligns with the research done by Warren & Rios (2013) and Grammas & Schwartz (2009), who found that men from other cultures felt pressured to change their bodies after viewing idealized imagery from Western media.

As my study indicates, some men felt pressured to change their bodies to conform to a societal standard of beauty. For example, the trainer Will said he felt anxious to look like how a trainer is traditionally expected to look. But on the opposite end, Hao said he didn’t care about how his body looked because as a programmer, he wasn’t pressured to look a certain way. As other participants indicated, too, their desire to look a certain way lined up with preconceptions of how desirable individuals appear in media and society.
Furthermore, as Hao stated, his Chinese culture focuses less on the body, and so he would only want to achieve a better body because it would allow him to run faster. These findings line up with past research that found that men in Western media tended to have worse body images than those of other cultures possibly because Western media portrays a higher amount of idealistic imagery (Melki et al., 2015; Yang et al., 2005).

As past researchers have surmised, men’s motivation to achieve masculinity is driven by a desire to perform masculinity because Western cultures have mostly done away with the male “breadwinner” role (Leit et al., 2001; Campbell et al., 2005). Therefore, men in Western territories feel pressured to display masculinity through their bodies. Conversations I had with the 17 study participants strongly support the hypothesis that muscularity, muscle definition, and arguably leanness, is emblematic of a traditional Western conception of masculinity.

On the topic of natural and enhanced bodies, which were a significant talking point in the interviews, most participants had a hard time distinguishing enhanced bodies from natural ones. A few participants were exceptions, and these men said they learned about who was natural or not from online commentators or based on knowledge they gained from their respective communities. Additionally, some who said they couldn’t distinguish an enhanced body from one that isn’t either had no interest in researching the topic and had better body images.

Another finding is that men’s opinions of PEDs didn’t affect their body images, but their opinions did indicate what values mattered to them. For example, Omar and Edward didn’t care about how their bodies looked, but Omar disapproved of PEDs while Edward approved – and at one time used – them.
A significant finding is that men who freely exposed themselves to images of fitness influencers who take steroids and admired these bodies were likelier to have worse body self-images. As I covered, Ritten, Mitchel and Stephen were a few of the men who had a high exposure to idealized imagery, and their body preferences aligned with the kinds of bodies they viewed, which included people taking PEDs to achieve their physiques. These men had a positive attitude toward the images they saw; they said they used the images as motivations to achieve their bodies, and they also used their poor self-perceptions as motivation, too. The participant Chip also was discontent with his body and said he had low self-esteem. Although he didn’t seem to indicate if he approved of the images he saw, he nonetheless viewed idealized images of strangers. The powerlifter Mason, who got into fitness because of social media, said his body image got better when he started to focus more on online posts emphasizing impressive lifts instead of impressive bodies. I should note that Mason said he still had a poor image of his body, and he was a participant who still viewed idealistic imagery. His goals, to improve his lifts while still achieving leanness and lower body fat, are consistent with the images he has viewed historically.

**Potential solutions to social media**

Based on my analysis, I have a few ideas that experts or educators may consider to combat men’s continual struggle with body image.

Firstly, as I have identified, men who focused more on using social media to engage with others had better perceptions of their bodies compared to men who viewed
strangers, such as fitness influencers or actors. To fight against negative self-perceptions, I believe it would be wise for parents to consider allowing their adolescent children to follow people they know on social media; as I indicated in my findings, some men I spoke with who had poor body self-images were exposed to idealistic imagery in their youth, and these experiences have impacted them in a negative way in their early adult years.

Secondly, I would argue that educators should draw attention to PED use much in the same way a physical education teacher discusses nicotine use or sexually transmitted diseases. I believe educators can do more to help prime young people’s expectations of what achievable bodies are; as participants indicated to me, it was hard for many of them to identify which people online and celebrities used steroids to achieve their looks. Additionally, I believe public health specialists can do more to communicate to the public a clearer picture of what achievable physiques look like, as well as making clear to audiences that even if a person appears that have great health on the outside (toned muscles, slimness) that they may not be healthy inside, or their diets may not be sufficient sources of nourishment.

Finally, as participants have told me, editing and even fabricating photos on social media is a continual problem that needs to be addressed. Many social media influencers can manipulate content to improve lighting that accentuates physiques, use filters that glamorize photos or even use editing software like Photoshop to cut out imperfections and accentuate their body’s strong points. As men have told me, these images lead to self-comparison and reinforce unrealistic standards. As I see it, and based on conversations with recruits, it doesn’t appear the general public is aware of the strategies
content creators use to idealize depictions of themselves. I believe the first part of this solution is to educate people on why these images are not accurate depictions of real life – fitness influencers are likelier to photograph themselves after a workout when they have a “pump” and under controlled lighting rather than, for example, after eating a big meal while sitting in their living room. On the subject of flagrant image tampering, I believe legislators should consider the impact edited images have on social media audiences. As I covered earlier, the U.K. Parliament has set to address the issue by making content creators post ad disclaimers indicating their photos depict distorted imagery. I believe Western territories should assess the potential danger edited photos have on the mental welfare of impressionable audiences and perhaps seek similar regulation for online platforms.

Aside from my primary research questions, I want to draw attention to a few patterns that emerged throughout the study. The first is whether workout frequency inherently connected to exposure to idealized imagery. The second is a dichotomy discussed in prior research: performance versus object imagery.

**Workout frequency and drive for muscul arity**

It occurred to me during this research that workout frequency might be connected to a participant’s drive to achieve an aesthetic body. Although this might be the case with some people, such as Ritten, who had a high drive for muscul arity and worked out a lot more compared to other men, this wasn’t consistent with all recruits.
The participant Sebastian said he worked out six days a week, which might suggest he had a high drive to achieve an aesthetic physique. However, Sebastian seemed to indicate he exercised more as a means to control his perception of himself and not others. Additionally, his low exposure to idealized content contrasted his exercise routine; Sebastian was more interested in viewing fitness content that was substantive, such as the science behind fitness, and not content that draws attention to the body. This perhaps indicates that Sebastian’s drive to exercise isn’t connected to his social media usage, which sets him apart from other participants. Additionally, Sebastian said he was against Instagram because the platform encourages people to compare themselves to others. This fact is consistent with the finding that those who welcomed idealistic imagery had a worse body image, and those who had a negative opinion of such imagery had better body images, in general.

**Object vs. performance images**

As I progressed through my discussions with participants, it became clear that fitness imagery fell into two categories: Men who were more satisfied with their bodies and self-image were generally likelier to discuss looking at fitness visuals depicting people performing tasks – I’ve dubbed this group “performance” images. Conversely, participants who reported higher body dissatisfaction were more prone to looking at images highlighting people’s bodies – these are “objectified” images. Interestingly, this finding is inconsistent with a prior study by Mulgrew and colleagues (2014), who found that participants who viewed images of men performing athletic activities – “body as
process” – reported poorer satisfaction in their own bodies compared to images that focused on the body itself – “body as object.” As the findings in my study suggest, the men I spoke with who freely exposed themselves to a high amount of idealistic imagery in social and entertainment media tended to have higher drives to achieve aesthetic physiques and had poor body images, while men who tended to exercise more for general health, self-satisfaction or to feel good tended to have better body images and viewed less idealistic imagery.

The powerlifter Mason and trainer Will were among the recruits exposed to high amounts of idealized imagery. They both said they tended more to gravitate to influencers or entertainers for their bodies rather than athletic feats. Mason even dubbed the popular bodies he saw as “Instagram physiques”; he characterized these young men as having wide shoulders, low bodyfat, cut abs, a small waist and overall appearing “slightly naturally possible.” In other words, though these bodies were impressive, Mason said they could be achieved through hard work without drugs.

Two more things Mason noted is that since he started powerlifting, he has gravitated more toward “performance” visuals instead of just for aesthetics. Interestingly, Mason said his body image has gotten better over time, but it still isn’t great. This might indicate Mason’s body image has improved due in part to him searching out solely “object” images on social media.

The other powerlifter, Edward, had a high drive to achieve his fitness goals. However, Edward had no desire to achieve an aesthetic body. He was concerned only with improving his lifts, and he used social media solely as a vehicle to view other lifts and connect with his community. Edward’s comments and attitude indicate he had a more
positive body image because he is more concerned with lifting in itself and not with how he looks. Hao, who was unfamiliar with idealistic images, also said he would only want a more muscular body for performative reasons. When I showed Hao a picture of a bodybuilder, he felt said the body looked unnatural and wouldn’t want it for himself.

**Limitations**

As with any study, there are a few limitations in my methods. Firstly, it’s possible those who reached out were likelier to have criticisms of social media/entertainment and its depictions of body image compared to those who had less to no criticisms. This could leave the perspective of the latter group absent, if this correlation holds true, resulting in a dialogue that doesn’t fully reflect the range of opinions among most people who exercise.

Additionally, social class or sexual orientation was not taken into account when interviewing participants. These characteristics are possible factors that shape how one views self-body image. This is significant because participants were recruited primarily from gyms, through a local university and on social media. It’s possible those from lower socioeconomic communities don’t have access to these spaces even if they regularly exercise. Therefore, my study may only account for the lives of men in certain areas of society.
Further consideration

As I have pointed out throughout my findings section, recurring themes emerged that I was not able to test fully and therefore comment on in my discussion. I will bring these points up here, as I believe they can serve as the basis for future research.

Firstly, it would be fruitful for future researchers to study the impact of family and how exposure to fitness images in early life impacts one’s drive to exercise or achieve an aesthetic physique. Some participants in my study seemed to indicate family expectations impacted their drive to exercise, such as Chip, who was exposed to fitness in his youth through his mother. Additionally, Hao indicated that his family life impacted his opinion of drug use, and he didn’t care about his body image because the topic was not discussed in his household. Future research can be done to better examine the connection between family life and a person’s body image.

Additionally, future research should also be done to better examine how culture impacts body image. Although I spoke with only one participant from another country, my discussion with him indicated that his culture put less emphasis on the body and showed less idealistic imagery in media. Therefore, he was less concerned about his body. Although I cited some studies that examined differences between Western culture and African and Eastern ones, more work can be done to examine how other cultures present the body in media.

One finding in my study is that men who tended to use social media more to follow personal friends and viewed fewer images of strangers had better body images overall compared to recruits who viewed more images of fitness influencers or actors they didn’t
know. Furthermore, viewers who used social media more to connect with others – engaging in group chats with people in their community or social circle – tended to have more positive body images. I believe future qualitative research should more closely examine how a viewer’s habits and behavior on social media affect their mental health and sense of connectedness to others.

As I covered in my fourth chapter of my findings, men’s motivations to exercise included physiological outcomes, a yearning to define their sense of self and identities, their desire to maneuver more seamlessly through society, and via messages internalized from media and society that drive them. A major message men internalized was that muscle equated to a heteronormative notion of masculinity. Additionally, some men indicated that they wanted a better body to grant them a greater chance of attaining a romantic partner. I believe more research can be done that examines how musculature connects to a traditional conception of masculinity. Separately, I think researchers should consider how men’s expectations of women’s desires, as well as what women find attractive, are portrayed in society and media.

Finally, I believe more in-depth content analyses on entertainment and fitness media should be conducted. For example, I believe researchers can look more into the types of messages that appear in social media and entertainment, such as Instagram captions, fitness motivation videos, transformation videos and entertainment media. One area I would point to is anime, which is notably absent from the research. As I have stated previously, multiple participants acknowledged that anime was one type of media that motivated them to exercise and that the medium is full of idealistic imagery. Additionally, some men seem to indicate messages they pick up from media like
Instagram and TikTok can result in harmful mentalities. One example I propose is that researchers review the accounts of top fitness influencers and identify certain messages or concepts these people are reaffirming to audiences. Or, researchers could look at body transformation or fitness inspiration videos and look at what messages can be gleaned from those; as participants indicated to me, this was one type of content men said motivated them.

In May 2022, *New York Time Magazine* writer Sam Anderson reflected on humans’ relationships with their bodies. He notes near the end of his essay how fitness as a modern-day ideological movement is rooted in humans’ anxieties surrounding mortality and our species’ hunger to control its own destiny:

> Much of diet culture is a sublimated response to this crisis [mortality] — an attempt to discipline the unruliness of the body, to transcend it, to prove that we are not, in the end, merely things. Diet culture is a fear of death disguised as transformation. But the transformation is a fantasy. If, through some heroic act of will, you do manage to heave yourself into a new place, it is still you who did the heaving. It is you who stands in the new place. You will still be you.

To the extent men in my study displayed physical and mental wellbeing, they expressed they were closer to accepting who they were and realizing their bodies are not a summation of their worth and their lives. The men who displayed more discontent in themselves and their positions in society felt more anxiety to control their body’s “unruliness,” Anderson’s words. Although, based on the recurring messages participants
indicated, every person I spoke with all wanted basic human desires: social acceptance, control and self-love. The body has merely been the vessel to pursue them.
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Appendix A: Recruitment Flyer

STUDY PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

An MU master’s student is seeking men to participate in a research study. Men's everyday experiences and body idealization in media will be investigated.

Complete an interview and get a chance to win one of two $100 Amazon gift cards!

YOU MAY QUALIFY IF YOU:
--Are male
--Are aged 18–26
--Exercise regularly
--Use social media
--Are knowledgeable of entertainment media

PARTICIPATION INVOLVES:
--A roughly one-hour interview where you will answer questions pertaining to your exercise habits, experiences on social media and the topic of body dissatisfaction and idealization

FOR INQUIRIES, REACH OUT TO:
Jared Gendron, MU master's student
Email: jpgk7z@umsystem.edu; Phone: 603-801-2464
Appendix B: Semi-structured interview script

1. Please tell me about your exercise lifestyle.
2. What are your fitness goals and why?
3. What actions do you take to achieve your goals?
   Probe: Can you tell me about how food factors into your fitness routines or goals?
4. What kinds of emotions have you experienced pertaining to your self-body image?
5. Please tell me about what social media platforms you use.
6. Tell me what kind of media content you look at.
   Probe: How often do you view this?
7. Can you tell me about the types of images you see?
8. What specific idols or people do you follow, if any?
   Probe: What does their content look like?
9. What types of bodies appear to receive the most attention on the platforms you use?
10. If you see any of them, what kinds of comments do you often see on popular content?
11. When you see popular content, tell me how you react.
12. What opinions, if any, do you have on performance enhancing drugs?
13. Can you name a few actors or influencers you believe to achieve their looks through natural\(^1\) means? Why do you believe this?
14. On the flipside, can you name a few who you believe use performance enhancing drugs? Please explain why.
   Probe: Would you be willing to show me a picture of some of the examples you described?
15. What do you believe these fitness influencers or actors, whether natural or enhanced\(^2\), do to achieve their appearances?
16. Do you think the fitness routines that entertainment figures and social media influencers follow are accessible to the everyday person? Please explain.

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\(^1\) I will define this as a body achievable without the use of performance-enhancing drugs.
\(^2\) I will define this as someone who achieves their physiques by using performance-enhancing drugs.