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## **Unpacking the Construction and Reinforcement of Hegemonic Masculinity in Fitness Influencer Culture on Twitter**

### Abstract

This paper examines the representation and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity through the content shared by male fitness influencers on Twitter. By analyzing the interactions between influencers and their followers, the study explores the power dynamics at play and the ways in which traditional notions of masculinity are reinforced through messages and imagery. The findings indicate that the majority of interactions involve parasocial relationships, where fans perceive the influencers as role models and sources of guidance. Comments and retweets are common forms of interaction, often expressing admiration or seeking advice. However, some viewers challenge the portrayal of masculinity and express alternative perspectives on fitness and health, resisting the power dynamics inherent in the content. Through intertextual analysis, the study demonstrates the connection between fitness influencers' messaging and the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity, emphasizing the importance of dedication, physical exertion, resilience, and determination in achieving an idealized masculine physique. The study has important implications for understanding the role of fitness influencers in shaping societal norms and expectations related to gender roles and body image. While limitations exist in the methodology and scope of the study, future research could expand upon these findings to explore the influence of fitness influencers on other social media platforms and gender dynamics within the fitness influencer landscape.

### Lit and Methodology

In recent years, the rise of fitness influencers on social media platforms, such as Twitter, has contributed to shaping and reinforcing societal norms and expectations related to body

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image, physical appearance, and gender roles. This paper aims to examine the impact of fitness influencers Bradley Martyn, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman on Twitter, who embody and promote ideals of hegemonic masculinity.

The research questions guiding this project are: How do parasocial relationships with fitness influencers on Twitter contribute to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity ideals? How do viewers negotiate and resist the power dynamics present in the content produced by these fitness influencers? Can complexity theory-informed interventions help mitigate the negative effects of social media on body image perceptions? How do social media personalities such as Bradley Martyn, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman embody and promote hegemonic masculinity ideals on Twitter, and how do their viewers respond to these representations?

The theoretical framework driving this research project includes Michel Foucault's Subordination Theory, which examines the relationship between power, knowledge, and social institutions. Foucault argues that power is not a top-down, hierarchical phenomenon but is exercised through a complex network of relations embedded in society. These power relations shape how individuals are constituted as subjects within various institutional settings. In this instance, I will examine the power relationship between Twitter influences and fans.

Foucault is particularly interested in the ways power operates to control and discipline individuals through the production of knowledge. For example, in the context of prisons, schools, and hospitals, certain forms of knowledge are used to categorize individuals, define acceptable behavior, and create norms. These systems of knowledge serve to subordinate individuals to the control of institutions and to internalize the rules of the dominant social order. By investigating these systems of power and subordination, Foucault's Subordination Theory aims to uncover the mechanisms through which societies maintain control and discipline over

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their members. This will be used to understand the power dynamics at play in the relationships between viewers and Bradley Martyn, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman, and how they contribute to the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity ideals (Foucault, 1982).

Complexity theory is a multidisciplinary approach to understanding the behavior of complex systems. These systems can include natural phenomena, social systems, or organizational structures, and are characterized by their dynamic, non-linear, and often unpredictable interactions among their components (Byrne and Callaghan, 2014). Byrne and Callaghan argue that complexity theory offers a valuable framework for analyzing social phenomena and understanding the interconnected nature of social systems. They emphasize the importance of considering the interactions among various social elements, rather than analyzing them in isolation. This approach recognizes that seemingly minor changes in one part of a system can lead to significant and unexpected outcomes in other parts of the system, highlighting the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of various elements within a social context.

Parasocial relationships are not a theoretical framework in itself, but it is a concept within the field of media and communication studies. The term refers to the one-sided, emotional connections that individuals form with media figures, such as celebrities, television characters, or influencers, despite having no direct personal interaction with them. This concept was first introduced by Horton and Wohl (1956) in their study of the relationships between television viewers and media personalities.

The methodology for this analysis includes content analysis, which is a versatile and comprehensive research method that allows for the systematic examination and interpretation of various forms of communication, including written, verbal, and visual messages (Berelson,

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1952). These methods will be used to examine the Twitter content produced by Bradley Martyn, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman, as well as viewers' responses to this content.

The content analysis of the fitness influencers' Twitter posts will reveal several recurring themes related to hegemonic masculinity. These themes include an emphasis on physical strength, toughness, dominance, and aggressive language. It is crucial to examine the role of visual imagery in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity ideals.

The fitness influencers under study, Bradley Martin, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman, utilize visual content to showcase their bodies, workout routines, and daily lives, which can significantly impact followers' perceptions of masculinity. Also to expand upon the analysis of viewers' responses to the content produced by fitness influencers on Twitter, it is important to explore other types of engagement, such as comments and retweets, and the ways in which viewers negotiate and resist the power dynamics presented in the content. By analyzing these responses with discourse and content analysis we can gain a better understanding of how viewers interpret and engage with the content produced by fitness influencers and how it impacts their perceptions of masculinity.

Second, is, Intertextual Analysis which is a concept that explores the relationships and connections between different texts, highlighting the ways in which meaning is constructed and interpreted through the interplay of various texts (Kristeva, 1969). Intertextuality emphasizes that texts are not isolated entities, but rather are interconnected with and influenced by other texts, whether explicitly or implicitly.

#### Recurring themes related to hegemonic masculinity.

Upon analyzing the Twitter posts of Bradley Martyn, David Goggins, and Ronnie Coleman, several recurring themes related to hegemonic masculinity were identified, Emphasis

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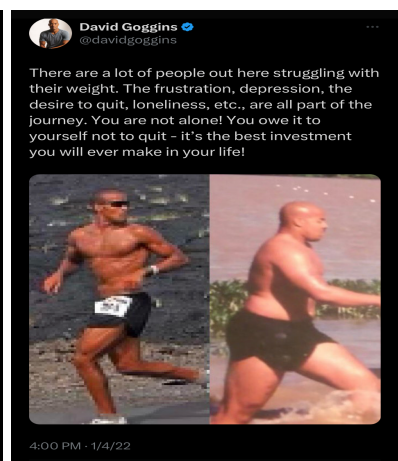
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on physical strength: The influencers frequently post images and videos showcasing their muscular physiques and impressive feats of strength, such as lifting heavy weights or completing challenging workouts. Toughness: The influencers often discuss overcoming physical and mental obstacles, emphasizing their mental fortitude and resilience. Dominance: The influencers project a sense of authority and control, both in the gym and in their personal lives, often positioning themselves as leaders or role models for their followers.

### The role of visual imagery in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Visual imagery plays a significant role in reinforcing hegemonic masculinity ideals in the fitness influencers' Twitter posts. The images and videos shared by these influencers highlight their muscular physiques, often in settings that emphasize their physical prowess, such as gyms or outdoor workout spaces. These images reinforce the notion that a "masculine" body should be muscular, powerful, and dominant. Additionally, the influencers frequently post images and videos of themselves engaging in traditionally "masculine" activities, such as lifting heavy weights and participating in competitive sports. These visual representations serve to strengthen the association between hegemonic masculinity ideals and the content shared by fitness influencers on Twitter.



In these three pictures Ronnie Coleman, Bradley Martyn, and David Goggins, all post a picture of their bodies to promote their masculinity. In the first picture, Ronnie Coleman posts an older photo of himself before his Dallas competition. Coleman's impressive physique exemplifies the societal expectation that men should be strong, muscular, and dominant. By frequently posting images of his highly developed muscles, he highlights the importance placed on physical prowess within the context of masculinity. Coleman's shirtless photos often portray the "ideal" male body, which is characterized by a sculpted, muscular frame. This representation perpetuates the notion that men should aspire to achieve this specific physique, which may be unrealistic or unattainable for many individuals.

The emphasis on Coleman's physical strength and bodybuilding achievements may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be strong protectors and providers. These photos can contribute to the belief that men should embody these specific attributes, while alternative expressions of masculinity are seen as less desirable or even stigmatized. Coleman's status as an eight-time Mr. Olympia winner showcases the competitive nature often associated with hegemonic masculinity. The celebration of his victories and his position within the bodybuilding community may encourage the belief that men should strive for dominance and superiority over others, particularly within the realm of physical strength. By sharing shirtless photos on Twitter, Coleman implicitly sends a message that physical appearance is an essential aspect of masculinity. This emphasis on appearance may lead some men to prioritize their physical looks over other important aspects of their lives, such as emotional well-being or personal growth. By regularly posting shirtless photos on Twitter, Ronnie Coleman, whether intentionally or not, contributes to the reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity, perpetuating

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cultural norms and expectations that can have far-reaching effects on men's self-image, mental health, and overall well-being.

Second, Bradley Martyn, As a popular fitness influencer and bodybuilder, Bradley Martyn's impressive physique exemplifies the societal expectation that men should be strong and muscular. By regularly posting shirtless images of his well-developed muscles, he highlights the importance placed on physical prowess in the context of masculinity. Martyn's photos often showcase the "ideal" male body characterized by a chiseled and muscular frame. This representation perpetuates the notion that men should aspire to achieve a specific physique, which may be unattainable or unrealistic for many individuals. The focus on Martyn's physical strength and fitness accomplishments may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles where men are expected to be strong protectors and providers. These photos can contribute to the belief that men should embody these specific attributes, while alternative expressions of masculinity are seen as less desirable or even stigmatized. As a well-known figure in the fitness industry, Martyn's success showcases the competitive nature often associated with hegemonic masculinity. By celebrating his achievements and his position within the fitness community, the photos may encourage the belief that men should strive for dominance and superiority in various aspects of life, particularly in physical strength. By sharing shirtless photos on social media, Bradley Martyn implicitly sends a message that physical appearance is an essential aspect of masculinity. This emphasis on appearance may lead some men to prioritize their physical looks over other important aspects of their lives, such as emotional well-being or personal growth.

Third, David Goggins, Goggins' impressive physique, resulting from his intense physical training and endurance achievements, exemplifies the societal expectation that men should be strong and muscular. By posting shirtless images of his well-developed muscles, he highlights

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the importance placed on physical prowess in the context of masculinity. Goggins' shirtless photos often showcase a fit and muscular frame, representing an "ideal" male body. This portrayal perpetuates the notion that men should aspire to achieve a specific physique, which may be unattainable or unrealistic for many individuals. The focus on Goggins' physical strength and endurance accomplishments in his shirtless photos may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender roles, where men are expected to be strong protectors and providers. These photos contribute to the belief that men should embody these specific attributes, while alternative expressions of masculinity are seen as less desirable or even stigmatized. Goggins' success in various athletic and military endeavors is evident in his shirtless photos, showcasing the competitive nature often associated with hegemonic masculinity. By celebrating his achievements and his position within the fitness community, the photos may encourage the belief that men should strive for dominance and superiority in various aspects of life, particularly in physical strength. By sharing shirtless photos on social media, David Goggins implicitly sends a message that physical appearance is an essential aspect of masculinity. This emphasis on appearance may lead some men to prioritize their physical looks over other important aspects of their lives, such as emotional well-being or personal growth.

#### Types of engagement, such as comments and retweets.

Upon examining the types of engagement from viewers, it was found that comments and retweets were common forms of interaction with the influencers' content. Comments often praised the influencers' physical abilities, sought advice on workouts and nutrition, or expressed admiration for their dedication to fitness. Retweets frequently involved sharing the influencers' content with followers, further disseminating the messages and imagery associated with hegemonic masculinity.



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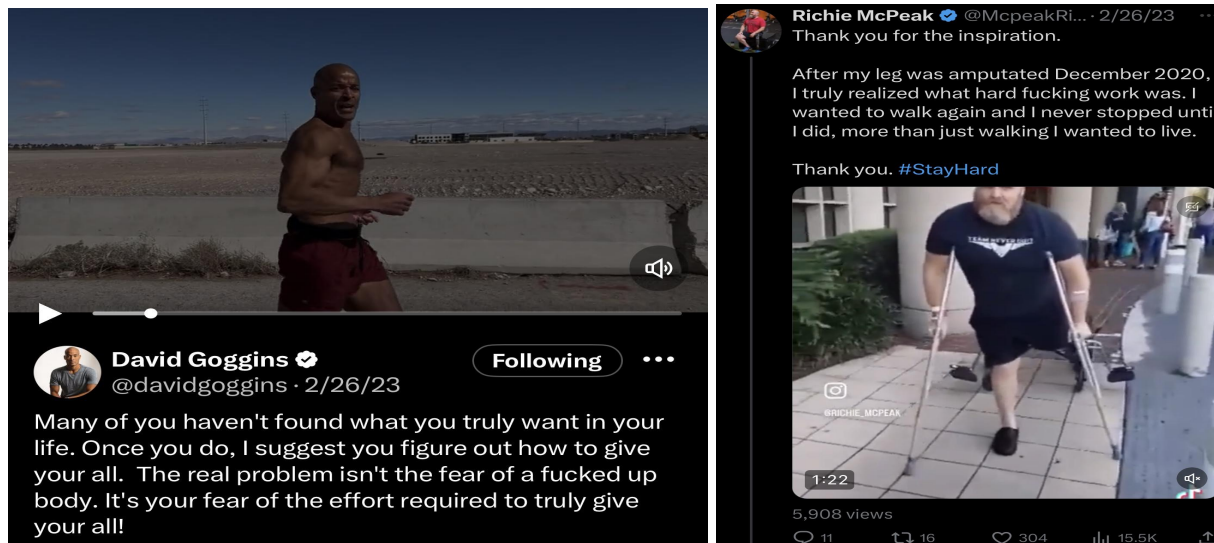
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In this tweet, we observe Gannon responding to Coleman's tweet, where he emphasizes that everyone wants to become a bodybuilder, but few are willing to put in the hard work required, such as lifting heavy weights. In his response, the fan expresses admiration for Coleman, referring to him as a hero. Gannon specifically mentions "hardcore training." This interaction serves as an ideal example of how Coleman reinforces hegemonic masculinity. He persuades his fans that to achieve a physique like his, they must train even more intensely than they currently do. By promoting this mindset, Coleman perpetuates the notion that an idealized masculine appearance is attainable only through the extreme dedication and physical exertion.

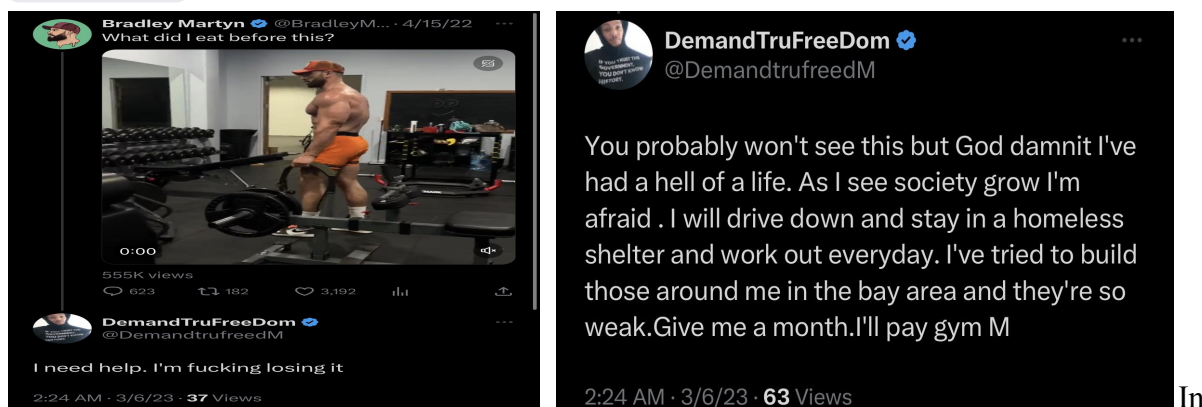
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In this tweet, we observe McPeaks responding to a post by David Goggins. The original tweet featured a video of Goggins running, in which he asserts that to achieve one's fitness goals, one should not be afraid of having a "fucked up body." A fan replies to this tweet with a video documenting his journey of getting his leg amputated. The fan explains how he worked diligently to regain the ability to walk and realized the true meaning of hard work. He thanks Goggins for the inspiration and concludes the tweet using Goggins' signature phrase, "Stay Hard."

This interaction reinforces hegemonic masculinity by promoting Goggins' ideology that regardless of the pain or difficulty involved in achieving a goal, one should never shy away from attempting it. While this mindset can be helpful in some instances, it is important to recognize that not everyone who undergoes a leg amputation will fully recover or be able to participate in physically demanding activities like running marathons, as Goggins does. By endorsing an unwavering commitment to overcoming adversity, Goggins inadvertently perpetuates the notion of an idealized masculinity characterized by resilience and determination, which may be unrealistic or unattainable for some individuals.

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In this tweet, we observe DemanTruFreeDom responding to a post by Bradley Martyn. In the original post, Martyn stands in front of a camera flexing his muscles, and playfully asks his fans, "What did I eat before this?" A fan replies by seeking help, opening up to Martyn about his fears regarding societal expectations, discussing his fitness plan, and inquiring if he could visit Martyn's gym.

This interaction reinforces hegemonic masculinity in several ways. Firstly, Martyn's display of his muscular physique contributes to the promotion of the idealized male body, which can create pressure on men to conform to such an appearance. Secondly, the fan's response reflects the influence of societal expectations on men, specifically the fear of not measuring up to the standards of hegemonic masculinity. This fear may lead individuals to seek guidance from public figures like Martyn, who embody these ideals. Lastly, the fan's desire to visit Martyn's gym demonstrates the admiration and aspiration that many men may have toward individuals who represent the epitome of hegemonic masculinity.

These three interactions between fans and fitness personalities (Coleman, Goggins, and Martyn) can be analyzed in terms of parasocial relationships. In the interaction with Coleman, the fan expresses admiration for Coleman, referring to him as a hero. This fan's emotional

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connection to Coleman is a typical example of a parasocial relationship, where the fan perceives Coleman as a role model and seeks his advice on training.

In the case of David Goggins, the fan shares a personal journey of getting his leg amputated and thanks Goggins for the inspiration. By concluding the tweet with Goggins' signature phrase, "Stay Hard," the fan demonstrates a strong emotional bond and a sense of familiarity with Goggins, which are characteristic of parasocial relationships. In the interaction with Bradley Martyn, the fan opens up about personal fears and aspirations, seeking Martyn's guidance and expressing a desire to visit his gym. This fan's behavior indicates a parasocial relationship, as they turn to Martyn for support and validation in their fitness journey. These interactions showcase how fans engage with fitness personalities in ways that suggest parasocial connections. Through these relationships, fans form emotional bonds with the fitness icons, perceiving them as role models and sources of guidance. By closely following their advice and seeking their approval, fans develop a sense of connection and familiarity with these public figures, which are key aspects of parasocial relationships.

#### Viewers negotiate and resist power dynamics in the content.

Some viewers negotiated and resisted the power dynamics present in the content by challenging the influencers' portrayal of masculinity or expressing alternative perspectives on fitness and health. For example, some comments questioned the necessity of extreme workouts or diets, suggesting that a more balanced approach to health and wellness could be beneficial. Others highlighted the importance of mental and emotional well-being in addition to physical fitness. By voicing these alternative perspectives, viewers resisted the hegemonic masculinity ideals perpetuated by the fitness influencers and engaged in a dialogue that challenged traditional notions of masculinity.



In this interaction, Bradley Martyn posts a shirtless photo of himself at the gym with the caption "Savage your mind." A fan, Fuller2305, responds by acknowledging Martyn's motivational efforts but criticizes him for allegedly using steroids. The fan also mentions that they follow someone who isn't as big as Martyn but lifts the same weight. This response can be seen as a form of resistance to the power dynamics inherent in the fitness influencer culture.

Fuller2305's reply challenges the fitness ideal by questioning the authenticity of Martyn's physique and highlighting the unrealistic expectations set by such influencers. This act of resistance confronts the notion that an idealized, muscular body is the only acceptable standard for masculinity. Furthermore, the response disrupts the typical parasocial relationship in which fans admire and seek guidance from fitness influencers. By voicing skepticism and critiquing Martyn's methods, the fan resists the power dynamic in which influencers hold authority and set standards for their followers.

Additionally, by mentioning another individual who does not possess the same physical appearance as Martyn but can lift the same weight, Fuller2305 advocates for alternative role

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models who may promote a more attainable or diverse representation of masculinity. This response also encourages other followers to question the messages conveyed by fitness influencers and to consider alternative perspectives on what constitutes a successful fitness journey.



In this interaction, Ronnie Coleman posts about the necessity of lifting heavy weights to become a bodybuilder but fails to mention the potential negative consequences of such training. Coleman himself suffered from a herniated disc, which led to him being unable to compete and experiencing difficulties walking. A fan in the comments addresses Coleman's omission by pointing out that he sacrificed his body to demonstrate the limits of human capabilities, and jokingly refers to him as a "legend."

This response illustrates the fan's resistance to the power dynamics inherent in the fitness influencer culture. By drawing attention to the negative consequences of Coleman's training methods, the fan challenges the narrative that lifting heavy weights is the only path to success in bodybuilding. This act of resistance exposes the potential dangers associated with pursuing an idealized masculine physique at all costs.

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Moreover, the fan's comment disrupts the typical parasocial relationship, in which fitness influencers are admired and followed without question. By acknowledging Coleman's physical sacrifices and using the term "legend" sarcastically, the fan resists the power dynamic that grants influencers authority and admiration from their followers. The fan's response also invites other followers to critically examine the messages conveyed by fitness influencers like Coleman and consider the potential risks associated with extreme training methods. This encourages a more balanced and informed approach to fitness, rather than blindly following the advice of influencers.



In this interaction, David Goggins posts a video sharing his reflections during a run as he passes by a graveyard. He wonders how many people buried there might have died unhappy with their bodies. Goggins asserts that enduring physical suffering is crucial to achieving one's goals. In response, Parker actively resists the power dynamics inherent in Goggins' message by asking, "Can we still enjoy life?"

This question not only challenges the idea that suffering is the sole path to success but also confronts the authoritative stance that Goggins presents. By posing this inquiry, Parker defies the notion that there is only one 'correct' approach to personal growth and well-being.

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Instead, Parker advocates for a more balanced, individualized perspective, where people can find their paths to happiness and fulfillment without conforming to an external narrative. In doing so, Parker encourages a more inclusive and diverse understanding of what it means to be successful and content, actively resisting the power dynamics embedded in Goggins' message.

Relationships and connections between different tweets related to fitness influencers and hegemonic masculinity.

The fitness influencers' Twitter posts were compared and contrasted with other tweets discussing the impact of fitness influencers on societal norms and expectations. These texts often critiqued the portrayal of masculinity in fitness influencer content, drawing connections between the influencers' messaging and the perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity ideals. Furthermore, these texts provided alternative perspectives on fitness and health, emphasizing the importance of a more inclusive and diverse understanding of wellness. By examining the connections between the fitness influencers' content and these other texts, it becomes evident that the messages and imagery shared by the influencers contribute to the reinforcement and perpetuation of hegemonic masculinity ideals within the broader cultural discourse on fitness and health.

In the first intertextual analysis, Coleman's tweet about the hard work required to become a bodybuilder is related to Gaggon's response, where the fan calls Coleman a hero and mentions "hardcore training." This exchange highlights the importance of dedication and physical exertion in achieving an idealized masculine physique. In turn, this connection between Coleman's tweet and Gaggon's response perpetuates the notion of hegemonic masculinity, as both texts emphasize the significance of extreme training in the pursuit of physical goals.

In the second intertextual analysis, Goggins' tweet about embracing a "fucked up body" to achieve one's goals is connected to the fan's reply, where he shares his story of getting his leg



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amputated and regaining the ability to walk. This interaction demonstrates the connection between Goggins' message of pushing through adversity and the fan's personal experience, which reinforces the idea of hegemonic masculinity as characterized by resilience and determination.

In the third intertextual analysis, Martyn's tweet showcasing his muscular physique is related to the fan's response, which discusses societal expectations and seeks guidance from Martyn. This interaction illustrates the connection between Martyn's display of an idealized male body and the fan's concerns about conforming to such an appearance. This link between the texts further perpetuates the notion of hegemonic masculinity, as both texts emphasize the importance of achieving a muscular physique to meet societal expectations.

### Summary

The findings of this study have significant implications for understanding the role of fitness influencers in perpetuating hegemonic masculinity ideals. By promoting messages and imagery that align with traditional notions of masculinity, these influencers contribute to the shaping of societal norms and expectations related to gender roles and body image. As a result, viewers may internalize these ideals and feel pressured to conform to these standards, potentially leading to negative effects on mental and physical well-being.

However, it is important to recognize that some viewers actively engage in dialogue that challenges traditional notions of masculinity, suggesting that there is room for critical engagement and resistance within these online spaces.

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the analysis is based on a small sample of fitness influencers, which may not be representative of the broader population of fitness influencers on Twitter. Additionally, the study focuses solely on male fitness influencers and their promotion of hegemonic masculinity ideals,

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which may not capture the full scope of gender dynamics at play within the fitness influencer landscape. Furthermore, the methodology employed, such as content analysis, may be subject to the researcher's interpretations and biases.

Future research could expand upon the findings of this study by exploring the influence of fitness influencers on other social media platforms, such as Instagram or YouTube, which may offer different insights into the promotion and reinforcement of hegemonic masculinity ideals.

Additionally, the researchers could examine the role of female fitness influencers in shaping societal norms and expectations related to gender roles and body image. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complex dynamics at play within the fitness influencer landscape. Furthermore, longitudinal studies could be conducted to assess the long-term impact of fitness influencers on individuals' perceptions of health, fitness, and gender identity.

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