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Picture Perfect Bodies:
Visualizing Hegemonic Masculinities
Produced for/by Male Fitness Spaces

This study examines hegemonic masculinity as both a motivator for and a product of body improvement within male body culture. Through photovoice methodology and multi-phase, in-depth qualitative interviews, 24 men who were actively pursuing muscularity and/or fitness captured what it meant to pursue the ideal male body. Using Foucault to situate the body as a theoretical construct, the results validate male body culture as a unique space for the production of masculine identities. These masculinities echo the traits of hegemonic masculinity, and are discussed in light of five distinct themes—(1) dominance and intimidation, (2) demanding respect, (3) weapons and violence, (4) social capital, and (5) sexual dominance. Results are discussed in light of Foucauldian readings of fitness, with regard to the potentials of photovoice for better understanding the complexities of identity formation and enactment within fitness spaces.

Keywords: hegemonic masculinity; muscularity; fitness; photovoice; body culture

The body has become a crucial element in individuals' overall identity project—a constant site for self-improvement (Bordo, 2003). This drive for bodily improvement implicates the body as a multidimensional project of the self and of systems of power—a space where power is targeted and produced. Throughout this co-production of body politics, fitness emerges as an especially salient ideology. Much research has focused on women's experiences with fitness (Aubrey 2006a, 2006b; Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Kilbourne, 1994, 2003). While a healthy volume of research has also focused on men's experiences (see Cafri, Strauss, & Thompson, 2002; Drummond, 2002; Labre, 2005), the volume of literature is significantly smaller. Still, since the 1980s, the muscular ideal— that is, the "rapid rise in interest in the muscularity dimension of body image" (Thompson & Cafri, 2007, p. 3)—became a topic of interest, and men are now bombarded with images

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of *muscular* masculinity to a degree far greater than ever before (Pope et al., 2000). Given this increased visibility, men's body image concerns have risen drastically (see Cafri, Strauss, & Thompson, 2002).

Any conversation surrounding the body and body image ideals must at least acknowledge the power of advertising and media. Although to a lesser degree than women, men's bodies are consistently highlighted in mainstream media and these media tell a very specific tale about male fitness. Men are told that their bodies are to be finessed for sexual conquest— *"Better abs, better sex!"* (*Muscular Development*, 2015)—aesthetic dominance—"How to split your shirt in 6 steps" (Flex, 2015)—social and economic capital—"Spike your metabolism, double your salary, boost your energy" (Men's Health, 2015)—and beyond. With the power of fitness, advertising sells an impressive benefits package. And because the stakes are so high, men are told they need to "build bigger guns" (*Muscular Evolution*, 2015), sculpt "weapons of mass definition" (*Fitness: His Edition*, 2015) and "Get combat ready" (*Muscle and Fitness¸* 2011). As such, the male body is a site well suited for examinations of hegemonic masculinity.

Lanzieri and Hildebrandt (2011) contend that, "masculinity is molded by sociocultural constellations that continually shape its constructions into areas of sexuality and gender" (p. 277; see also Butler, 1993). As Kimmel (1994) notes, the drive for masculinity has always been concerned with the overwhelming need to establish specific boundaries between masculinity and femininity. In opposition to femininity's gendered traits of compassion, gentility, dependence, and passivity, hegemonic masculinity seeks to capitalize on hyper-masculine bodily performances of aggression, independence, confidence, and emotion-free logic. Masculinity is not a fixed construct, rather it is a (corporeal) performance. Connell (1995) asserts:

> True masculinity is almost always thought to proceed from men's bodies—to be inherent in a male body or to express something about a male body. Either the body drives and directs action (e.g., men are naturally more aggressive than women; rape results from uncontrollable lust or an innate urge to violence), or the body sets limits to action (e.g., men naturally do not take care of infants; homosexuality is unnatural and therefore confined to a perverse minority). (p. 45)

When situated within the well-developed body of literature that confirms men are actively seeking a very specific type of body— that is a mesomorphic (see Sheldon, 1954), well-developed, athletic, muscular, toned body (Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownwell, 1996; Mishkind et al., 1985; Thompson & Cafri, 2007; Tucker, 1984)— men's performance(s) of masculinity vis-a-vis the body emerge as a theoretical context ripe for examination.

This body project invokes Foucauldian (1979) notions of the *disciplined body*—"a body which is controlled not by physical restrain, but by individual acts of self-regulation" (Pienaar & Bekker, 2007, p. 539). Thus, this entire work rests upon an understanding of the body as a site of power, contention, discipline, and identity construction. As the Western world has shifted from a modern industrial culture to a postmodern culture of consumption (see Baudrillard, 1981; Lyotard, 1984), corresponding cultural practices have shifted as well. And as practices shift, so do sites of social discourse. The body—a site of longstanding culture critique and social dialogue—is a primary site for observing this shift. Indeed, the body has become a site for consumption, where social etchings of power be can observe.

Foucault (1979) presumed that the body was a site for the "object and target of power" (p. 136) and that the body itself was "a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a

'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (Foucault, 1979, p. 215). Active bodies, in particular, are especially honored for their (re)productive capacity. As such, "docile" bodies (Foucault, 1979) are sites of great potential for the operations of power, for "when docile, the body becomes useful as it can be molded as a vehicle for the technologies of domination" (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 74).

While Foucault was not a gender scholar, per se, numerous scholars have used Foucault to interrogate sport culture (see Chapman, 1997; Markula, 2003; Shogan & Ford, 2000). Additionally, many scholars have interrogated these issues through a feminist lens (see Duncan, 1994; Duncan & Robinson, 2004; Markula, 2001, 2004). Ultimately, there is a warrant to study not only the power structures of body culture, but also the *gendered* power structures that operate within it. As Rowe (1998) contends:

> Sport is a crucial site for the reproduction of patriarchal structures and values, a male-dominated secular religion that has celebrated the physically aggressive and often violent deeds of men. Sport has been an integral element of self-sustaining forms of exclusivist male culture, lubricating a closed system of male bonding and female denigration. (p. 246)

In addition to the gendered power operations of body culture, male body culture—like any subculture of the socialized, medicalized context of fitness and body improvement—is a site of multiple identity intersections and tensions. Race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability all etch their meaning on corporeal performances and intersect to create a host of problems both *for* and *of* the body. I see these bodies—raced, class, gendered, and otherwise—situated in a biopolitical force field where dominant discourses "invest [them], mark [them], torture [them], force [them] to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signals" (Foucault, 1977, p. 25). No doubt, male body culture is not simply a site for the reproduction of masculinity—it is a site for the reproduction of a very specific, very White, very heterosexual, very able-bodied, and very privileged type of masculinity, that is hegemonic masculinity or "the most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849).

But this masculinity is not a static trait, fixed across time and context. The present study moves beyond an ideology of "being masculine," and moves toward a performative view of gender. Here, body culture emerges as a space whereby men, in particular, engage in specific performances that construct the social understanding of their masculinity, thus prompting the proposal that men are then "doing masculinity" as they are "doing fitness" (see Connell, 1983; Drummond, 1996). These performances are of special interest here, as performance is a co-construction, whereby two groups of people enter the scene—an actor and an observer (Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The body, in this multifaceted *doing* of both gender and fitness, emerges as the aesthetic stage upon which these performances are enacted.

METHODOLOGY

Photovoice

The body is a visual artifact. There are many things the body *does*—some physical, some social, some cultural, most observable. In an effort to explore the production of hegemonic masculinities within male body culture, the present study uses photovoice methodology to capture the visible production of those masculinities. Photovoice is a visual methodology for assessing the social world through the eyes of those experiencing it. While the proce-

dures of photovoice vary from study to study (see Hurworth, 2003; Sampson-Cordle, 2001; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1997), the core premise is the integration of participant-provided images into the research process.

Photovoice is typically used to provide a platform for those whose voices are often silenced to provide their stories. As such, numerous photovoice works have chronicled experiences of domestic violence (Frohmann, 2005), health and recovery (Radley & Taylor, 2003), disability (Thoutenhoofd, 1998), queer identity (Santurri, 2014), and more. Yet, the present project is one focused on members of one of the most *socially powerful groups*. Despite photovoice's well-documented history of highlighting the experience of the oppressed, this study uses the method to examine the experiences of those who do fit escape that oppression with the coveted invisibility that comes with fulfilling the dominant standard. Bending the method comes with its own risks, but ultimately flipping the method on its head demonstrates a level of "playfulness" in research (see Fahy, 1997; Manning, 2013). This playfulness should not connote frivolity, but rather the idea that by playing with the form and function of an artifact in creative yet theoretically-sound ways, researchers can navigate previously unexplored territory and establish new meaning and understanding of social problems. The use of images and interviews also presents a type of triangulation or "crystallization" (Ellingson, 2009) that works to build "a rich and openly partial account of a phenomenon that problematizes its own constructions, highlights researchers' vulnerabilities and positionality, makes claims about socially constructed meanings, and reveals the interdeterminacy of knowledge claims even as it makes them" (Ellingson, 2009, p. 4).

Theoretically, altering photovoice methodology can be validated with consideration to the valence of *markedness* (Trubetzkoy, 1975; see also Brekhus, 1996), which proposes that naming or labeling a phenomenon constructs it as something with exceptional significance. Consider "fat" men within male fitness spaces; those men are marked because of their label and the corresponding social understanding of the way that those with that label do/not fit within that space. Men who corporeally present as "fit" are permitted to occupy an unquestioned invisibility. Brekhus (1998) notes, "investigations of social life often begin with that which is already visible and named because of its 'exoticness' or its heavily articulated moral and political significance" (p. 36). While examinations of the exotic within male fitness spaces (i.e., fat men, trans* men, differently-abled men, and so on) are certainly worthwhile, focusing exclusively on those marginalized identities runs the risk of creating epistemological ghettos (Brekhus, 1996, 1998), where only those who are highly visible are subjected to close examination.

Participants

In an effort to explore those in positions of power who were active agents in male body culture, participants were recruited from large, introductory-level general education courses at a large state university in the Midwest. While samples of convenience utilizing undergraduates are common, this sample is especially relevant given that college-aged men are some of the most active participants in fitness spaces (Thompson & Cafri, 2007). Criteria for participation dictated that participants must self-identify as male and work out at least three times per week. While there is no commonly accepted correlation between "fitness" and volume of exercise, medical professionals, such as the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion (2008), recommend at least four hours of exercise per week for healthy adults. Additionally, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2015) recommend 60-90 minute workouts for optimal success. Three days per week was established as a minimum because it fits within the structures of recommended health procedures (i.e., following the

CDC's 60- to 90-minute workout recommendation, an individual who is a regular participant in physical fitness would have to theoretically workout *at least* three days per week). Additionally, using three times per week as a threshold without any other body-related criteria echoes the themes woven throughout the literature review that the male body is not simply hegemonic *when it is an ideal body*; rather, hegemony operates as a motivator for achieving the ideal male body. By establishing relatively broad standards for participation, this study was able to engage a variety of men with a variety of body types to better understand the multidimensional nature of male body culture.

Because of the demographic requirements for participation, the final sample was largely homogenous. A total of 27 men completed Phase 1 of the study and 24 of those men completed all phases (88.89% completion rate). All ($N = 27$) individuals identified as cisgender men. An overwhelming majority identified as heterosexual ($N = 26$; 96.3%), with one identifying as bisexual. Nearly every participant identified as Caucasian ($N = 26$; 96.3%), save one who identified as Mexican-American. Every participant indicated that they were "middle" or "upper middle class" (all demographic information was collected via open-ended questions, thus answers varied slightly). Participants ranged in age from 19 to 26 ($M = 20.31$). All participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms in this final manuscript to protect their identities. All procedures were approved by the governing Institutional Review Board. As part of the informed consent process, participants relinquished all image rights to the author for purposes of publication, presentation, and dissemination. All images copyrights are retained by the author.

Procedures

Data collection occurred in three phases. First, participants completed an introductory in-depth interview, during which they provided demographic information and information on their workout experiences ("So how long have you been working out?"). Additionally, all participants were asked questions regarding their motivation ("What keeps you working out?"), specific workout practices ("What body part do you focus on the most?"; "What does a typical workout look like for you?"), their body standards for self ("Describe your ideal body for me"; "What would you look like if you could?") and others ("Describe the ideal female body for me from top to bottom", or, "How do you feel when people who don't look like you enter the gym?"), as well as the source of those standards ("Where do you think your ideas about a masculine body come from?").

During the second phase of data collection, participants captured what it *looks like* to be a part of male body culture. Instructions to participants were strategically ambiguous. Quite simply, they were tasked with documenting what it meant to be a *man* pursuing *fitness*. The term *fitness* was most often used, but sometimes was exchanged for another term if one manifested more saliently in the initial interview. For instance, if participants referred to their fitness in terms of muscularity and aesthetics, they were asked to capture what it meant to be a *man* pursuing *muscularity*. These distinctions were carefully considered. In the case of *fitness* vs. *muscularity*, it seemed that these were compatible linguistic structures and would likely both yield results of significance to this study. However, because the purpose of this study was to examine motivations to pursue health through corporeal means, no participants were asked to explore what it meant to be a man pursuing "health." In such cases, the term *fitness* was used.

Although loaned digital cameras were available to all participants, all elected to use their own smartphone cameras. Because data return can be a significant obstacle in photovoice

studies (Wagner, Ellingson, & Kunkel, 2016), allowing participants to use their own technology emerged as a viable option to help ensure participants followed through all phases of the study. After ironing out the details of photo collection and the general theme of the project, participants signed a photo release form. They were also tasked with taking/submitting a minimum of 35 photos over a 7-day period, with 5 images taken per day (which served as a recommendation, not a mandatory standard). The number of photos submitted per participant ranged between 15 and 50 ($M = 35.83$).

Participants uploaded images to a secure shared online folder. Some participants uploaded images image-by-image, others day-by-day, yet others all at once. After all images were uploaded, they were then downloaded to a secure platform, reformatted into universal readable formats, and then sorted into private, individual digital galleries. Images in these galleries were randomized to help ensure no extra value was assumed on any particular image. After this process was complete, participants were invited to schedule a second interview.

In this second interview, participants were asked to select the most meaningful images from their collection, caption them, and provide a detailed description of the meaning behind those images. As a prompt, all participants were asked, "How did this work? What was it like taking these images?" While droll, this allowed a glimpse at participants' thought process, motivation level, and general approach to taking images. From there, participants were asked to scroll through all images, ensure they were theirs, and to think about the feelings they had as they took those images. They were asked to identify a "cover photo" among their collection—one that stood at as the most important among all. All participants were asked a consistent set of questions about each image: "What is going on in this image?", "What were you thinking as you took it?", and, "How do you believe it relates to this study?" Additionally, participants were asked questions that focused on themes from the first interview and questions related to the themes they highlighted in their own images. All participants were required to select and discuss at least five images from their collection. In some interviews, I asked participants to discuss specific images; however, most interviews involved a discussion of participant-selected images only.

All interviews were recorded using a digital, handheld audio recording device. These recordings were transcribed verbatim on paper. Audio recording of all interviews spanned a total of 29 hours, 47 minutes, and 11 seconds. Interviews were regarded separately (i.e., interview 1 and interview 2 were each treated and coded independently). Interviews spanned between 18:55–45:10 for cycle 1 ($M = 30:16$) and 23:20–46:23 ($M = 35:32$) for cycle 2. Transcriptions of these interviews spanned over 672 single-spaced pages of text. Before analyzing data, the author read through research interview transcripts no less than three times to gain a more complete understanding of the overarching themes and ideas. Then, a twofold coding process was utilized. First, through *open coding* (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the author attempted to identify, name, and organize emergent phenomena (i.e., any theme that emerges throughout participant data, despite its assumed ir/relevance). Using the constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and rigorous annotation, special attention was given to connections across participants and transcripts. This process of open coding led to a total of 4,241 coded segments.

After creating these open coding structures, all data were categorized and organized into larger thematic units. While the themes that emerged during the open coding process dictated the structure and scope of these broader themes, the *axial* coding process (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) helped merge induction and deduction to create overarching thematic units for analysis. Through this process of merging and restructuring, themes were collapsed into several distinct coding categories, including *body talk, other talk, eat-*

ing control, security and surveillance, dominance, gender, discipline, procedures, attraction and sexuality, social support, intrapersonal support, social identity, community involvement, and *workout specifics*. Throughout all phases of the coding process, two external reviewers governed the coding and analytical processes. Although these reviewers were not individually a part of the coding process, they helped create a rigorous system of accountability to preemptively curtail researcher bias.

In an effort to explore data at a depth greater than mere surface level, discussion of these coding themes will not simply be a descriptive analysis of their underlying categorizations. Instead, true to the multidimensional and interpretivist-oriented nature of this study, these themes interact with each other, creating a rich pathway, which will arrive at theoretically grounded, methodologically rich answers to the guiding research question:

> RQ1: How does hegemonic masculinity operate as a motivator and inhibitor of body modification and improvement within male body culture?

RESULTS

True to the theoretical underpinnings of this study, the processes of masculinity within body culture are performative and built upon the aesthetic foundations of fit male bodies. Through in-depth interviews and individual reflexive photography, men in this study further validate the hegemonic structures upon which male body culture rests. As men construct their (fit) bodies, they are also constructing and contributing to the social ideology of a very specific type of hegemonic masculinity. Below, five distinct themes are explored: (1) dominance and intimidation, (2) demanding respect, (3) weapons and violence, (4) social capital, and (5) sexual dominance—with special attention to the way these themes intersect to sculpt a masculinity that both embodies, and is embodied through, corporeal performance.

Themes

Setting the stage. Before delving into these themes, however, it is crucial to first establish the legitimacy of sport culture (and more specifically here, *fitness spaces*) for critical examination.

As I discussed male body culture with Andres, the idea of body improvement as a *masculine community* emerged. Andres is of Mexican heritage—one of the few people of color in the study. He noted: "I mean, in Mexico, everyone's fit but you won't see gyms anywhere. You won't see people lifting. You won't see people drinking protein shakes 24/7 ... [if I were still there] I would not be doing this." I pressed him further, asking why he chose to pursue fitness (and more specifically, "bulking up") if it was not well-regarded in his culture:

> It started out with fitting in and that's why I picked up weightlifting. I just saw these guys who are enormous. Then, I started working out and thought "Holy shit! I'm out-lifting this guy and I'm out-lifting that guy. I'm gonna' keep it up. I like out-lifting that guy.

Andres implicates male body culture as a space where competition with others leads to becoming a part of a greater community. Notice that fitness itself is not the community that Andres is seeking to be part of; rather, this community is a very specific subset of fitness.

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He went on to describe how his now very muscular Mexican body was not well-regarded in his home culture, noting that if he lived there permanently, he would not engage in the level of bodybuilding he does. Instead, Andres participates in these specific fitness rituals because they are a type of *dues* to be paid in order to be scripted into the culture of Western (North American) masculinity.

Nearly every participant validated the social advantages of membership within male body culture. When asked about his day-to-day fitness endeavors, Jack noted, "Sometimes I go to the gym and I don't even work out.... I love being at the gym ... there's a social aspect to it." Similarly, when reflecting on his extensive fitness regimen, Jordan noted, "I started because I thought the whole culture seemed cool.... I guess the reason I started was to look like them ... it gives me a characteristic.... It gives me quality; a distinction." Over and over, this "quality" or "distinction" emerged, revealing that male body culture is a unique cultural space with clear structures and metrics along which participants' involvement is gauged. And with each discussion on the hierarchical and social aspects of male body culture, fit male bodies emerged as an aesthetic metric and currency. On these grounds, exploration of male body culture is not only validated but necessarily warranted.

Dominance and intimidation. In his discussion of Western masculinity, Andres situated the body as an important tablet upon which identity is written. For him, the body was not simply a body—it was a space upon which the nexus of masculinity, fitness, and power intersected to create a socially dominant man. He submitted the Figure 1—which is representative of dozens of similar images submitted by an overwhelming majority of men in this study.

Figure 1. I came. I conquered.

Upon reflection, Andres noted, "I mean, I feel … powered ... It's just … you always get that picture painted in your head when you watch a movie and stuff like that. The more masculine guy always overcomes the smaller guy." He was not alone. Similarly, Brent noted:

> I think you're just intimidating to where people aren't gonna' try to screw around with you. I just think you're kind of more dominant in, like, different things. Like, for example, in the gym—if there's a guy on a machine and he's huge and there's another guy on a machine who's not as big, I'm probably more likely to go to the guy who's not as big and say, 'Hey, do you care if I work in with you?'… Versus, like, a massive guy. It's like, 'I don't wanna' mess with what you're doing; I'll wait until you're done.'... I'm definitely less likely to go up to a big dude.

For Brent, the intimidation factor that came along with body improvement was a type of currency in the gym. Specifically, it meant dominance over a certain subset of others in the gym. He also recognized that he was not the *most dominant,* and adjusted his communication with others accordingly. Brent was not alone in citing "intimidation" as a primary motivator for body improvement. While it was certainly a type of currency, it also seemed to be embedded as an unspoken (yet revered) symbolic representation of masculinity. For instance, Zeke noted that dominance "is actually what kind of umbrellas everything that embodies masculinity." He further clarified:

> It's nature, you know? The fiercest wolf is gonna' be the leader of the pack. The person that can dominate their will is going to be able to be respected … followed … is gonna' get the women. It kind of goes with … not necessarily dominance in, like, you always need to prove it, but just have, kind of, that … people have that respect for you … [it] kind of makes it more like a man.

Zeke's quote above evokes the frame of evolutionary roots. Men feel an innate need to be dominant; not necessarily in an expressive capacity, more so in a way that guarantees in their own minds that they are a "leader of the pack." Caleb agreed, noting

> I think aggression is just related to the toughness. I've always thought masculinity … aggression kind of teams up along with, uh, being physically fit sometimes. You have to have … even if it's not aggression towards someone, you have to have aggression when working out … to achieve what you want and, uh, I've always just thought about ... with the injuries and stuff…. Getting the shit kicked out of you is just something that is amazing to happen to you and to see someone … to see them keep going, like, uh, boxers—boxers are amazing!

For Caleb, the "get knocked down, get back up again" mentality and aggression naturally paired with masculinity. In his mind, coping with injury and "getting the shit kicked out of you" meant simply ignoring it and remaining in control of the situation at hand. "Aggressive" and "intimidating" masculinity emerged as the best kind of masculinity; it was masculinity in the purest form. Nick confirmed that being painted as aggressive was largely a positive thing as a man and submitted Figure 2 as proof.

Figure 2. Red knuckles.

> I don't think of myself as super aggressive, but I wouldn't mind being the kind of guy that people think, "I would not want to get into an aggressive altercation with [him] because he looks like he'd kick my ass!" … Just because of the super macho, stereotypical thing. So, yeah … I wouldn't mind them being intimidated by me. It's kind of mean to say, but I wouldn't mind that.

Similarly, Zeke noted:

> To be a fit man, you need to be able to initiate yourself and go … actually "be" fit. I think aggression has to do with that. It's getting that start … that motivation to go do it. Dominance, you know? If you're not aggressive, you'll never be dominant. You have to be willing to challenge the top dogs in the pack and be willing to fight for what's important to you.

The two quotes above represent masculinity as something that is always in "protection mode." Many other men indicated that there was something to protect; thus, their aggression helped them establish control, especially in more dangerous situations. As Jack noted:

> Being big has a lot of benefits that come with it. Like, I don't have to worry. Like, right now, there are not a lot of people who are going to try to mug me.… I mean, like, if someone's preying on someone they think is going to be weak, I'm probably not the first person they think about.

Elliot corroborated:

> If someone causes trouble with me, I like the idea that I can handle myself.… I feel like that's more what it is; being prepared in case someone uses violence against you. I feel like being masculine has something to do with being able to defend what you own and stuff like that.… Your house, your stuff. You don't want people stealing your stuff and plus—you don't want people to hurt your family, obviously.

But wait—does that really happen? After spending two interviews with participants, these accounts of constant potential violence, danger, and the need for self-reflection seemed to directly contradict the other narratives these men situated their fitness endeavors within. Thus, I probed participants, asking if they had ever encountered a need to use their bodies as a mechanism for self-protection. Elliot noted, "To be fair, [in my town], people pick fights for absolutely no reason…." But he (along with everyone else) agreed that these occurrences are not common.

Demanding respect. So really, then—what is the purpose of this intimidation factor? As a whole, the very term *intimidation* cues negative connotations. Still, body culture seems to be a context where this intimidation factor is a special delineating feature. Saul noted that it was ultimately about demanding respect from other men. His overall body goal was, "just having a presence, kind of." I asked him to clarify further:

> I don't know. Like, there are always those people … when you walk into a room—everyone gets quiet because you know you need to be. I think physical looks has a lot to do with that.... I think that's a goal for a lot of men. I guess you want to know that you have that … not necessarily "power" … but that you have that impression on people … to respect you.

Similarly, Saul noted:

> I think masculinity is … you have that aura about you that people respect you; you have that presence. I think when people initially see you, they're going to judge you based on your physique. So I think having a physique that goes along with your personality is how they tie together.

The idea of gaining the respect of others was regularly cited as a corollary to masculine body improvement. Many participants wanted to look "intimidating" to others. When the body was not sufficient, some participants used other means to bulk up the intimidation factor. As participants completed the second round of interviews, many of them showcased images that contained themes of violence and weapons: an external supplement used to enhance their already intimidating bodies. As Nick noted in a previous paragraph above (regarding his bloody knuckles), violence and masculinity go hand in hand. After he danced around the theme for a large part of our second interview, I finally asked him point blank if he was making an association between violence and masculinity. His response: "Oh yeah! Of course!" He further clarified: "That's just typical stereotypical images of male violence … the typical "man thing," where we're just kind of violent and aggressive…. It's just kind of like you're a warrior or you're fucking He-Man."

Weapons and violence. Of no surprise then, several men provided images of weapons. When asked about the relationship between weapons and fitness, these men noted that weapons simply made them "feel" more manly. Oliver provided Figure 3 to further explain.

Figure 3. Physical strength.

> It's a machete. Actually, I bought that a few years ago. It's, like, a home defense thing. I can't afford a gun or anything. It was just laying out. I just saw it and thought it was real primitive and powerful. It made me feel masculine.

Like many others, Oliver admitted that his intentions were not violent. He had no desire to actually *use* the machete; it was merely an external symbol for his internal interpretation of masculinity. Elliot affirmed this view; masculinity, itself, is not violent; rather, there are simply stereotypical connections between men and violence (and perhaps, more specifically, weapons). He provided Figures 4 and 5 to further discuss his point.

Figures 4 and 5. Better safe than sorry.

It's something satisfying about feeling the recoil when you're shooting and stuff like that. The second thing is, like … should I ever need to use one, I'd like to think I'll know how…. I think people label those things as masculine in society ... but it doesn't mean that this stuff has to be violent.

Chad provided an image of a weapon as well (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Protection beyond your fists.

> I've grown up in basically, like, Colorado … back woods. I've always had a knife. Every time…. I feel like camping is a big thing. It's a manly thing to do. You're dirty, sweaty, and everyone's spitting and stuff like that. I don't see many girls with knives, and if I do, it's, like, in their glove box. For me, the knife…. A knife for me doesn't show manliness but it's, like, a masculine tendency to have a knife.

I asked Chad to elaborate more. He captioned his image "Protection Beyond Your Fists." Yet, as I noted above, I could not imagine a time where a man like Chad would *need* to use a knife. He clarified by noting it is "a defense, really ... [against] other people trying to hurt you … criminals." Chuck shared a similar perspective (Figure 7).

> It's just … we were going out shooting that day…me and a couple buddies of mine were hanging out and we were, like, 'Let's go pop some rounds off.' So we went out to a buddy of mine's place and were shooting at targets and pain cans…. I just felt really masculine that day…. I guess I would consider being dominant would kind of lead you to need to have that strength, I guess … the physicality … being able to defend yourself. That was a big theme of mine … just being able to defend your own type of detail.

As with the others, I asked Chuck to clarify—just who was he defending himself against? "Anyone. No one in particular … just in the event that you needed to, you could."

Saul summarized: "men are tough. They have thick skin … and they can get through stuff…. I think that falls under the definition of masculinity." I pressed him to explain the

Figure 7. Man's second best friend.

association between his image of the guns, masculinity, and body improvement. After some thought, he noted: "It would be kind of a dominance thing. I think the bigger people get, the more ripped they look and the more dominant they feel. The more dominant they see them-selves, the more dominant they act."

   These themes of weaponry and violence prompt a definition of the fit male as a dominant one—one always in control. While not all images touching on themes of dominance em-bodied *violence,* there was an overwhelming consensus among all participants that domi-nance (which, in some cases involved violence) was a crucial element of male fitness. Additionally, the payoff they expected for perpetuating dominant masculinity varied greatly. While the examples above refer specifically to *body dominance,* Jared revealed that it goes far beyond issues of corporeality— it is also intricately social. He provided Figure 8.
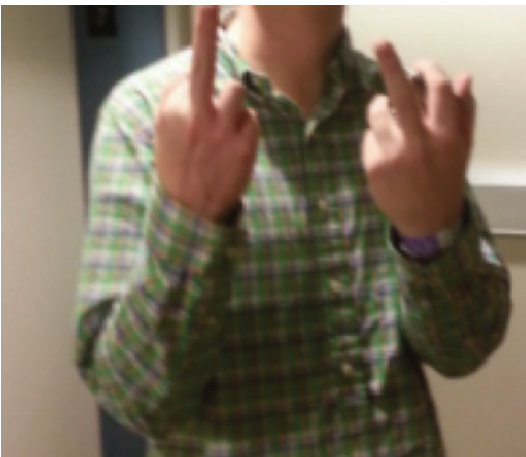

Figure 8. What do you think of this?!

When I asked him to clarify further about how this related to masculinity and the body, he noted:

> He doesn't care what you think. He's going to tell you how he feels.... Not many people are gonna' tell you off if you're strong and you do it. I mean, even if you're strong, you shouldn't do this in public; however, it's more … it's a primal instinct to be a little more upfront about it, being … asserting yourself in a situation.... If you don't have the muscles, it might be a little more difficult.

Jared, in tandem with others, situated the fit male body as the response to an either/or dichotomy. If the end-goal is social dominance, the body is identified as the means. In cases where it is not the most dominant (in the body hierarchy), men recognize a host of "or" options. As the images above note, those options may involve violence, weapons, and/or other socially provocative responses.

Social capital. Above, Jared situates masculinity as something centered on social dominance. This masculinity-dominance nexus situated participants' pursuit of fitness as a pursuit of masculinity, simultaneously. Specifically, participants were reaching for *hegemonic* masculinity—that is, the most revered and heralded social script of masculinity. Participants did, indeed, discuss their body, but also anchored this conversation within an overall masculine improvement project. Closely related were ideas of corporate success, financial gain, and sexual prowess—identifiable characteristics of hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993; Pyke, 1996). For instance, Brock provided Figure 9 of Goldman Sachs, using it to help further explain his idea of masculinity:

Figure 9. Goldman Sachs. (Black bars added.)

> Masculinity is more about … it isn't necessarily only physical fitness or only life.... When I think of masculinity, I think of being the best. Like I said, being your best

and being the best or however close you can get to being the best among others. When I have the guys with their shirts off with the undies or whatever, and he has the 8-pack and the perfect symmetrical chest, arms, and legs … that's the physical aspect. When I see guys on the New York Stock Exchange who are getting paid $10 million a year to manage $500 to $600 billion of assets, you know, I think that, in itself, is masculinity in that you've achieved … you've worked hard to achieve.

For Brock, masculinity was as much about corporate achievement as it was about aesthetic achievement. Chad agreed. He provided Figure 10 to frame his discussion of the relationship between the body and money:

Figure 10. Muscularity is confidence. Confidence is success. Success is money.

I basically just thought, like, with all the stereotypes and things like ... the male is supposed to be the head of the household and things like that … bring home the bacon.... When I took an economics class, there's something about you are like this … percentage ... based on factors like your height, which you can't control, the way you look, which for the most part, you can't control, and all this stuff ... all these factors over a broad category of things have proven over the years that you'll be more successful than someone who is more competent, just on the way you look are perceived. So just, like … with the ability to, like, be, like … as good looking as you can and try to, like, be successful and stuff like that, you'll have money. All those things—to me—revolve around each other.

For Chad, finessing his body meant contributing to his overall economic value. To him, masculinity, muscularity, and money were all related. Oliver also commented on this relationship (Figure 11):

I just saw this when I was downtown. Masculinity for me is more than physical fitness … but the attainment of a higher social status. That's an encapsulation of somebody who has most likely worked very hard to have enough money to be able to just throw $60,000 or $70,000 at a car.

But Oliver gave a caveat:

Figure 11. Rise to power.

> But I've also seen that money doesn't just get you hot girls. I've had…. I mean not cars this nice, but I've had nice cars and they never really got me laid … all they got me was comments—"Oh wow! You have a nice car!"—and that was it.

Thus, masculinity is not *just* about the body nor is it *just* about financial success; rather, it is a multidimensional social construct that encapsulates power in a variety of forms. The body was just one way participants saw an opportunity to guarantee—or at least help guide—their future success. Brent saw his body as one of the few things he *could* control:

> At this age level, [my body] is something I can control. I mean money…. I can work little jobs an 18-year old or 19-year old can get … it's not gonna' make me rich or anything…. I won't make enough money to attract a girl. I would say this is one of the few things at our age that you can control that will attract a girl.

For Brent, money was out of reach but his body was a project that he actively worked on to guarantee other areas of success, namely attracting a girl. Physical fitness became an outlet for control; a way to *contribute to* men's masculine project and also a way to *carry it out*. The fit body came with rewards—money and social capital, in this case. In the best case scenario, that body came with the ultimate reward—sex.

Sexual dominance. The expectation to be a dominant man manifested in a variety of ways, perhaps chief of which was sexual dominance. In every interview, men summarized their motivations for their fitness endeavors, and in nearly every interview, men noted (hetero)sexual motivation. Zeke summarized:

> Honestly, it's … probably the biggest reason is the ladies. They are the ones that push you to life more. If girls did not care about the body, you

would see very few guys working out. It wouldn't matter but they care about it, so you learn to care about it. If you wat to make up that difference to get closer to that 10 [i.e., the 10/10 woman], you've gotta' put in the work.

Participants after participant hinted at or directly addressed the association between attractiveness and body improvement. After a long discussion on bodies, fitness, and sex, I asked one participant—Oliver—if he had always been so focused on getting girls' attention with his body. His response? "Yeah, very debilitating so." The simple facts: many men work out to be physically and sexually appealing to potential partners. Chad proved this point pretty directly with Figure 12 and his explanation:

Figure 12. Strength in protection. Protection in strength.

I feel like this is pretty, like, down to the basics of being a guy, or especially at my age, being, like, an 18-year old male, single, full of testosterone, coming to college where there are literally thousands of girls. I think that's the big thing [i.e., the reason for working out]—for sex and stuff, like condoms. For me, personally, I really believe at the root of it, most people are getting in shape—besides getting healthy—to find, just ... a partner to be able to go around and have sex and things like that.... People are attracted to the strongest, the smartest, the biggest, whatever.... I say, like, the odds of you finding someone that will have sex with you are a lot better if you're chiseled or super strong or cut than if you're just, like, some chub.

To be fair— it is not all about sex for everyone. Some participants mentioned a relationship as a motivator. Even Oliver, as brazenly sexual as his motivations were, admitted, "[I'm] very caring. I want to bang a hot chick, but I also want to find one that I can just shower with affection." Derek sought a relationship, too. In the midst of his 100+ pounds weight loss journey, he cited it as a significant motivator for his continued success:

I've never gotten that close to someone before. And I think that's what I want. I want that relationship. I want that closeness that you can share with someone. I think that's a big motivator for me wanting to change.

But regardless of the strength of the connection—be it sexual or relational—*girls* were a significant motivating force for male body improvement and the topic arose in nearly all interviews.

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DISCUSSION

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With each image and re-iteration of masculinity, the above conversations seems to deter incrementally from *fitness*. Yet, as a reminder, each of these images and the related discussion were all in response to a simple question: "What does it mean to be a man pursuing physical fitness?" Below, I explore these six themes—(1) dominance and intimidation, (2) demanding respect, (3) weapons and violence, (4) social capital, and (5) sexual dominance—in greater depth, returning again to the theoretical foundations that undergird this exploration.

Throughout all three phases of this study, men's pursuit and performance of fitness was closely related to a host of other micro-performances of masculinity. Findings reveal that these performances exist both *within* and *because of* men's experiences of fitness. While the present study does not affirm a pathologizing or trait-based narrative of masculinity, results do help theorize masculinity (and more specifically, *fit masculinity*) as a pursuit. In regard to the guiding research question, as men were pursuing (or doing) fitness, they were simultaneously pursuing (and doing) masculinity. There was an overwhelming consensus that the ideal male body was not a body alone; rather, it was a type of currency with relational, sexual, social, economic, and professional capital. These themes are embedded within a largely White, cisgender, heterosexual, physically and mentally fit, classed and privileged reading of manhood—telltale features of hegemonic masculinity (Gesualdi, 2012).

As these men "did fitness," they did so in pursuit of a body that represents a much-coveted "moral and disciplined self" (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 39). And indeed, these men recognized that discipline "does not just act upon *but materializes through* the fleshly body. It creates…an 'aptitude,' a 'capacity'" (Godfrey, Lilley & Brewis, 2012, p. 543). Men in this study materialized body discipline through fitness performances, attempting to gain a social identity imbued with aspects of hegemonic masculinity and its corresponding micro-performances of aesthetic, sexual, economic, physical, and social dominance. As men's bodies were manipulated by the authority of body culture and its unspoken yet widely upheld standards (see Gesualdi, 2012), men's fit bodies became sites of power in the social constellation of *other* bodies (see Foucault, 1977).

By default, then, men engaged in practices of self- and other-surveillance. Although photovoice is, by nature, a surveillance pedagogy, the visual aspects of fitness were nothing new to these men and throughout each interview, every man in this study discussed male fitness as a practice defined by visual aesthetics. Men in this study spent a significant amount of time thinking about bodies—theirs and others'. One of the central ideas of the Panopticon (Bentham, 1995; Foucault, 1977) was that we gain understanding of our bodies as they fit within the overall structure of surrounding bodies. Within fitness spaces, this panoptic perspective plays a central role in (fitness) identity formation and development. Never fully knowing who was watching them or for what intent, men felt pressure to constantly embody, quite literally, the purest form of masculinity (i.e., hegemonic masculinity). As such, men's bodies become projects or machines. As Foucault (1979) notes:

> the individual body becomes an element that may be placed, moved, articulated on others. Its bravery or its strength are no longer the principle variables that define it; but the place it occupies, the interval it covers, the regularity, the good order according to which it operates its movements. (p. 164)

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In the present study, "fitness" no longer served as the principle variable that defined these men; rather, it was the *space* fit bodies occupied, the *interval* they covered, and the *good order* of their presentation. Indeed, this study validates the institutional exploration of power and hegemony at work within male fitness spaces. Of equal importance, however, are the micro-expressions that men who are byproducts of male fitness spaces engage in, specifically punitive acts of confession in an effort to redeem the body from its moral and corporeal sins. According to Foucault, "The obligation to confess ... is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us" (1978, p. 60).

In the present study, men's highly disciplined workout regimens emerged as a corporeal confession of their woes. In line with Foucault's (1978) assertion that "confession is a ritual of discourse in which the speaking subject is also the subject of the statement; it is also a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship" (p. 61), men in this study engaged in confessional acts via excessive body discipline and workouts as public acknowledgements of their transgressions against the hegemonic male body standard. The hours they spent in the gym were punitive for their past body grievances; their tales and desires of sexual, economic, and social conquest expunges the most *un-masculine* traits—passivity, failure, submission; and their flirtations with themes of violence dispel any notion that they *weak*. In short, these confessions were validation measures. As Murray (2009) notes, "the confessee is positioned as *already knowing* the 'truth', but wants to *confirm* the confessor is also aware of the truth of their own body" (p. 84). Furthermore, the very structure of confession leaves individuals with no choice—"juxtaposed with the conviction of personal autonomy and choice in one's relation to one's body, the act of 'confession' requires the other to normalize oneself, and to be 'healthy'" (Murray, 2009, p. 89). To be normal (that is *fit*), men here were forced to confess and/or redeem moral failure. The aesthetics of male fitness are this confession; revealing not only *health* but also a commitment to upholding the most protected, purest form of masculinity.

Methodological Considerations

Through the use of photovoice, men captured a meta-performance of masculinity and located a specific position of privilege upon which they could reflect. The visual medium of this study required participants to reflect and engage in mindful sense-making about their notions of fitness, further validating the use of photovoice in studies of those who occupy positions of power. For instance, in my conversations with Nick on his desire to be "sexually intimidating to women and physically intimidating to males", I asked if he made the connection between sex and violence. He responded:

> Wow! I never actually thought of it that way before. That's very thought provoking. I don't know.... I guess this is just another stereotype of males kind of put inside my head ever since I was a little kid—males just being the sexually aggressive ones and, I mean, everyone does that and knows that and things that that's the stereotypical male ... being the sexually aggressive ones and women being the passive ones. But yeah—there's definitely an overlap.

Nick was not alone. Many other participants reflected on their own power and privilege both inside and outside fitness spaces through photovoice. The confessional process, although embedded within the aesthetics of fitness culture and the performance of fitness, also manifested through men's mindful use of photovoice, situating the method as one with

great potential to provide deeper, more multidimensional perspectives into oft-forsaken contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study was not without weaknesses. First, this study involved interviews culled from a sample of convenience. Although that sample was logically justified, its homogeneity (also justified) shaped and guided all aspects of this study. Furthermore, although altering the method proved provocative, it also perpetuates some of the very power structures that it seeks to dismantle. Tasking a (primarily) White, straight, cisgender, middle-class, educated, fit cohort with documenting what fitness means, provides a platform for them to dictate/continue dictating what fitness is in the mainstream, as those voices are arguably foundational in shaping public perception in policy. If the method were flipped without a critical-orientation, it runs the risk of further perpetuating dominant ideologies and discourses. Still, when used within the framework of a critical-interpretivist orientation the method has great potential for being altered to study those in positions of power. Ultimately, more research "playing with" (Fahy, 1997; Manning, 2013) method needs to be conducted in order to have a greater understanding of the methodological, theoretical, and philosophical consequences and potentials of doing so.

The common expression is that a *picture is worth 1,000* words. In this study, those words tell a troubling tale about male fitness, implicating men's fitness experiences as a pursuit simultaneously of *muscularity* and *masculinity*—or *musculinity*. Highlighting those experiences—always with a regard to critical inquiry and emancipation—opens up new spaces and conversations about the nature of body culture and the (gendered) pursuit of health, wellness, and fitness.

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