MUSCULINITY: A CRITICAL VISUAL INVESTIGATION OF MALE BODY CULTURE

by

Phillip E. Wagner

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________________________________
Chairperson Adrianne Kunkel, Ph.D.

________________________________
Tracy Russo, Ph.D.

________________________________
Yan Bing Zhang, Ph.D.

________________________________
Jimmie Manning, Ph.D.

________________________________
Angela Gist, Ph.D.

________________________________
Charlene Muehlenhard, Ph.D.

Date Defended: June 9, 2015
MUSCULINITY: A CRITICAL VISUAL INVESTIGATION OF MALE BODY CULTURE

Chairperson Adrianne Kunkel, Ph.D.

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Abstract

While a sizable body of research has focused on gender and fitness, few have explored the intersections of gender and fitness identity. Although a significant volume of research has been dedicated to exploring women’s role within fitness spaces (Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b; Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Kilbourne, 1994, 2003), research on men’s experiences in fitness spaces is not nearly as plentiful. In this project, I explore male body culture through the eyes of those actively engaged within it in an attempt to better understand how masculinity and muscularity collaboratively construct male identity.

Using a multi-step protocol, I completed semistructured, in-depth interviews with 27 men regarding their experiences pursuing muscularity. Following the first interview, men were tasked with using photovoice—a participatory photography method—to capture their fitness experiences visually. After capturing these images, men then returned for a second interview to discuss these images and the ways in which they represent their orientation to a personal drive for fitness and/or muscularity. All interview data and corresponding images were analyzed via a critical/interpretivist-oriented process and through the use of open and axial coding (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results revealed that male body culture is a unique space where the production of hegemonic masculinities occurs through the practices of body discipline. Men regarded the body as a type of currency—an aesthetic marker for the consumption of others. Consequently, men understood their bodies were always on display and primed themselves for the positive consumption of others both through performances of fitness and masculinity. These performances were interwoven, as men regarded their body discipline as a mechanism of masculinity and their masculinity as a mechanism of body discipline. These results are
interpreted in light of relevant literature on hegemonic masculinity, body discipline, and methodological issues regarding the study of those in positions of power. Furthermore, in an effort to be self-reflexive, these results are interpreted in light of my own experiences within male body culture.
Dedication

To Jennifer, Kennedy, and Baby #2 (surprise!)

The joke is on you, Mom and Dad—bet you wished you read this “super big paper,” now!
Acknowledgements

Where do I even begin? This project would not have been possible without the support and inspiration of so many people that I couldn’t even possibly list here. I could write another entire dissertation on the support processes that surround the dissertation writing experience. So many of you have made this so easy for me.

Let’s start with those who didn’t make it so easy. My wonderful dissertation committee—Adrianne, Tracy, Yan Bing, Angela, Jimmie, and Charlene—words cannot even express how much I admire you. Each of you, in some way, has helped mold me into a scholar. Charlene, we’ve interacted only several times, but from the very first session of our Women and Violence class, I knew that I wanted to grow up to be as passionate about social justice and committed to thinking through all sides of a complex issue like you. Jimmie, even though you called me out at NCA for “ignoring” you (I was star struck!), I have admired you for years. I love how you stretch the discipline and how you make your own rules. I am so glad that you were able to be a part of this project. Yan Bing, you trained me as a quantitative scholar—sorry to betray you! But that training has helped mold me into a well-rounded researcher, committed to clearly articulating critical research to across audiences. Plus, your constant support and smile always affirmed that you believe the best in me and all of your students. Angela, you have been a critical part of this project from its conception through its delivery. As I enter into my career as a junior faculty member, I look to you as a perfect model of how to do it. Thank you for all of your methodological insight! Tracy—whew, here’s where the tears kick in—you have been an undying, never-ending, always and forever pillar of support for me. There are certain people that life throws your way that you’ll never forget—you are one of those. There are few people who have an almost tangible impact (ha—threw that in just for you!) on my life—you are one. When
I want to take a leap, you tell me to jump. If I’m jumping in a strange direction (ADHD = too many ideas….not all good), you say to jump anyway and see what’s learned along the way. You are a dear friend and I am thankful that you’ve been scripted into my life story. And finally, Adrianne—wow. Where do I even begin? I made the decision to come to KU just to work with you—a decision I’ve never regretted for even one second. You will never know how much you’ve poured into me these past few years. You have shown me what true support is. You’ve affirmed that being nice is always better than any other option. You have shown me how to be a true leader, despite whatever obstacles life throws your way. You’ve gone to bat for me, listened to 437,593,283 ideas I’ve had about my next research project, pushed me, challenged me, given me opportunities I don’t deserve, let me vent when life blew strange things my way, and celebrated with me when it rained down showers and showers of great things. You are a lifelong mentor, a true advisor, and one of the dearest friends life could ever afford. Thank you for everything. For coffee and guidance. For closed office doors and direction. For always and forever teaching me how to be an activist and a researcher. And for never ever doubting me. Thank you.

There are so many others that I have to thank as well. To the departments I’ve called home in some fashion around campus—Communication Studies, Women, Gender, & Sexuality Studies, Educational Testing and Evaluation—thank you. To Suzanne Grachek, who bears the title of “Office Manager” but should really have a plaque that says “Most wonderfully supportive, friendly, encouraging force you will ever encounter” on her door—thank you. Your friendship has meant the world to me. Thanks for all of the pep talks, casual conversations about anything and everything (from the Katy Trail and Sanibel to Disney and Monet), and constant affirmation that nice people always finish first. You are a dear, forever friend.
To my wonderful family—thanks. Mom and Dad—I know, I know—“What the heck is Communication Studies?” .... “Wait.... You study ‘Women’s Studies’?” You never did (do?) quite understand just what it is that I do, but you’ve been nothing but supportive every step along the way. I hope one day, if you ever decide to read this “super big paper,” you’ll see this and know that I am incredibly thankful for both of you and all you’ve done for me over the years. I love you.

To my children (whoa—that’s weird to put on paper!), I love you. So much. Kennedy, you were a thesis baby so you’ve already had your 15 minutes of fame in the acknowledgments there. Still, when you get older and read this I want you to know that way back when, in good old 2015, your daddy loved you to the moon and back. There isn’t a day that goes by where I don’t look in your eyes and think how proud I am already of you. When you know I’m tired, you’ll try to make me laugh. When I’m stressed and try to hide it, I know you know—but you’ll just say “How was your day, daddy? Which office did you go today? Did you see Adrianne?” Those conversations will always be my favorite. By the time you’ll read this, it will all be old news. You don’t know what a dissertation is, you can’t even fully say masculinity (although we’re working on all toddler-appropriate feminist lingo), and you only understand the concept of grad school to the extent that you get that we are both Jayhawks (Rock Chalk!) and go to school together. But you know what will never be old news? My love for you—thanks for being patient with daddy as I wrote this. I owe you big. At this age, you’ll accept ice cream and trips to the movie theater as bribes, so the next one’s on me. And to baby #2—at the time I defended this paper, you were only halfway ready to enter the world (and nobody knows about you yet!). It’s weird to write a note to a fetus, but I’ll simply say that despite not knowing you yet, I already love you. I can’t wait to see you in a few months. Please sleep more than your sister.
Finally and most importantly—Jennifer. Whew…we did it. Graduate school. Five degrees. Infants. Moving across the country. Tragedy. Homesickness. Sleepless nights (so, so, so, so many sleepless nights). We finally made it. I don’t know how in the world I landed such a great life partner but I’m so glad I get to do life with you. You are infinitely patient, insanely positive, frustratingly perfect, and a never-ending supply of affirmation, support, and encouragement. You push me to be the best I can be. You balance me out, let me vent, remind me to soak up every moment, and give me more grace than I ever deserve. You are so special to me. You are beautiful, kind, and a wonderful soul—far better than I ever deserve. I love you and am thankful that I get to spend the rest of my life with you. Thank you for your never-ending patience during this season of life. I look forward to what the next level brings us. Level to level, higher and higher, never looking back—we are going to do big things.
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Chapter 1: Introduction and Rationale

There is a huge epidemic in the Western World. Or at least, that is what you are likely being led to believe. Former Surgeon General of the United States, Richard Carmona, noted in 2006 that, “obesity is the terror within. Unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9/11 or any other terrorist attempt” (Jackson, 2006, n.p.). Indeed, numerous researchers have explored this “obesity epidemic” (see Campos, 2013; Rokholm, Baker, & Sorensen, 2010; Wright & Harwood, 2012), with little agreement on the danger obesity truly poses. Whether it is truly a terror greater than fanatical religious suicide bombers, or nothing more than a social panic (e.g., Dworkin & Wachs, 2009), it certainly is a hot topic.

But it is not just obesity, per se, that is a hot topic—it is also “health,” “wellness,” “fitness,” and a host of other positive reframings of fat fearing and fat shaming. You would be hard pressed to walk past a row of magazines in the supermarket that did not scream commands at you about what you should do with your body, whether through words or images. Of course, the magazines are not bold enough to print “no fatties allowed” on their covers, but you know good and well that there are body standards that you are supposed to have. The Swimsuit Issue. The Body Issue. The Fitness Issue. The Sex Issue. All of these “issues” are prominently positioned on the magazine rack to remind you of the ways your body either does (or does not) match up to the digitally-retouched and professionally-altered images you see in front of you. How you react is up to you. Perhaps you uphold the banner of second wave feminism—our bodies, our rights! Perhaps you further perpetuate toxic body standards by accepting or purchasing these messages. Perhaps you are like many of us and walk away thinking, “if only.” No matter how you react, research is pretty clear about one thing—you do react.
Study after study has confirmed that we have a natural propensity to examine, measure, and compare our body against other bodies, especially those we see in the media (see Grabe, Ward, & Hyde, 2008 and Holmstrom, 2004 for meta-analyses of these studies). And indeed, the media plays a significant role in contributing to the *cult of thinness* that pervades Western society (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Grogan, 2008).

Scholars have given special attention to the *gendered* implications of the social drive for thinness, noting the ways in which cultural expectations negatively shape weight and size standards for women (and their corresponding health behaviors; see Aubrey, 2006a, 2006b, 2007; Henderson-King, Henderson-King, & Hoffman, 2001; Kilbourne, 1994, 2003). Exposure to, and acceptance of, idealized female body standards in the media has been linked to a cultural obsession with thinness (Kilbourne, 1994), self-objectification (Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998), eating disorders and eating disturbances (Conner, Johnson, & Grogan, 2004), and a host of other issues (see Sloop, 2006 for a review). But if bodies/fitness/health are as gendered as research would have us to believe, what then about male bodies, male fitness, and male health?

Until the 1980s, virtually no scholarship on the male body existed in the social sciences. In the 1980s and 1990s, however, it became readily obvious that male bodies, much like female bodies, were worthy of showcasing for the sake of capitalistic enterprise. While female bodies had been used for decades as marketing props for advertising, the male body had rarely occupied this position. By the end of the 20th century, however, the male body had shifted to new and unique places of social prominence, significance, and objectification. Thus, researchers in the 1980s (e.g., Chapman, 1988; Mishkind, Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1985; Mort, 1988) began to recognize the new significance of the male body and began to explore its social
implications. This early work spawned numerous research studies on the male body and its relationship to fitness, with careful attention to the role of muscularity and the *muscular ideal*; that is, the “rapid rise in interest in the muscularity dimension of body image . . . a rather remarkable paradigm shift away from the dominant theme of fat, size, and weight dissatisfaction that dominated the [the social sciences]” (Thompson & Cafri, 2007, p. 3).

The hyper-sexualization of male bodies quickly became a topic of interest in research circles. (Semi-) nude women were common in the mainstream, but (semi-) nude men? This was new territory. Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000) note that men in some state of undress constituted only 3% of advertisements in the 1950s; however, that number rose to over 35% by the 1990s and is on a continued trajectory upward. Similarly, Stout and Frame (2004) found that semi-naked men in *Cosmopolitan* (or *Cosmo*) magazine constituted only 6% of all men featured in the magazine in the 1950s; however, by the 1990s, 32% of men featured in *Cosmo* were in some state of undress and even outnumbered the percentage of females featured in the magazine in some state of undress. These findings, about *Cosmopolitan* in particular, are supported by numerous other research findings (e.g., see Pope, Olivardia, Borowiecki, & Cohane, 2001; Soley & Kurzbard, 1986).

It is also important to note that the naked men appearing on *Cosmopolitan*’s pages did not demonstrate a diverse representation of bodies (Stout & Frame, 2004). Indeed, they all embodied *a very specific look*—one characterized by a muscular, toned physique (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Thus, as Pope et al. (2000) note, men are now bombarded almost constantly with images of *muscular* masculinity to a degree far greater than ever before. True to the nature of media theories, such as Cultivation Theory (Gerbner & Gross, 1976), the powerful nature of the media directs and shapes social ideas on a host of issues—the body is included in that list of issues.
Numerous researchers have shown that there is a highly specific male body ideal perpetuated in mainstream Western media. For example, Pope et al. (2000) have asserted that the muscular, V-shaped mesomorphic (i.e., fit, athletic, chiseled) body is commonly displayed (in a positive way) as the standard and sexualized body trope for men. Additionally, this body ideal is on display to a degree far greater than ever before (Baker, 1994; Mishkind et al., 1985). Given this increased, and somewhat normative, visibility, “men’s self-consciousness about their appearance is probably greater now than ever before. How could it be otherwise, given the massive exposure of men’s bodies in the media?” (Baker, 1994, p. 130).

Feminist filmmaker and scholar Jean Kilbourne has often noted that the media (i.e., advertisements) does not sell products, alone—it also sells ideas alongside those products. Sut Jhally (2003), a professor of Communication who studies cultural studies and advertising, concurs with Kilbourne, noting that “goods themselves are not the locus of perceived happiness. . . thus, advertising promotes images of what the audiences conceives of as ‘the good life’” (p. 251). If these perspectives are, indeed, correct, it is critical to take a step back and ask about the ideas being sold along side images of the ideal male body. Does Mark Wahlberg’s classic Calvin Klein underwear ad have any significant social meaning? What of the recent Dolce and Gabanna ads featuring extremely toned, muscular men pinning down women in pseudo-acts of rape and sexual violence in the name of selling luxury? It goes without saying that media are telling a troublesome tale of the utility of men’s bodies. And if men are indeed reaching toward these ideals, as research suggests they are (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009), what does it say about the masculinity, muscularity masculinity they are seeking to embody?

My dissertation research is not specifically concerned with the connection between media and male body image. It is, however, irresponsible, if not impossible, to talk about body image
and body standards (male, female, or otherwise) without implicating the media as a site from which these standards are established, groomed, and/or perpetuated. This project, however, will dig deeper. I seek to explore the functions of power that run rampant through male body culture—that is, the context of male physical fitness and body improvement. In the following paragraphs, I outline the blueprint for the subsequent chapters of my dissertation.

**Preview of Study**

The primary goal of this dissertation work, *Musculinity: A Critical Visual Investigation of Male Body Culture*, is to interrogate the operations of hegemonic masculinity at work in male body culture. I begin this proposal by first situating myself within male body culture—a crucial reflexive foundation for this entire project. In Chapter 2, I articulate my experiences within male body culture, defining it and the ways in which it has shaped my desire to interrogate its structure. Using reflective narratives of my own experiences with fatness, fitness, and body culture, I frame my dissertation work as a deeply personal endeavor and one that transcends a mere paper trail of scholarship on body issues. Using my personal experience, I situate my understanding of fitness and body culture, especially as they apply to operations of hegemonic masculinity.

In Chapter 3, I build on this understanding by providing a literature review that explores the “problems” of bodies. Drawing from Foucault’s writings and other critical theorists, I present the argument that there are unique implications for the production of hegemonic masculinities in body culture. I further explore the concept of hegemonic masculinity by exploring its definition, its relationship to the general overarching structure of masculinities, and its role in body culture. I then explore the specific inscriptions of hegemonic masculinity on the male body and the ways in which male body standards are perpetuated in Western society.
In Chapter 4, I discuss my methodology; an extension of photovoice, which involves in-depth, one-on-one interviews and participatory photography. I discuss this method in terms of its original intent and the ways in which my adaptation of it answers the call for critical research exploring unmarked identities. I also discuss the philosophical pillars upon which this dissertation research is built. I discuss the intricacies of a critical-leaning, interpretivist-oriented approach and its influence on my methodological and analytic procedures.

In Chapter 5, I discuss the results that manifested in my conversations with interview participants and provide visual artifacts (submitted by participants) to help illuminate men’s experiences within male body culture. I situate these experiences within seven main themes or structures: (1) the justification of male body culture, (2) body consumption, (3) body as currency, (4) hard work and discipline, (5) hegemonic masculinity, (6) social motivation, and (7) body snapshots. In this chapter, I also use these themes to help answer the research questions that guide this study.

In Chapter 6, I interrogate these results at a deeper level, looking first at the implications of methodology on the results through the lens of un/markedness. I then provide a discussion on the ways in which these results echo the same themes of relevant theories of positionality (Standpoint Theory), as well as theories of Interpersonal Communication (Social Penetration Theory and Communication Privacy Management Theory), and theories of identity (Social Identity Theory and Communication Theory of Identity). I conclude this chapter by returning again to the works of Foucault and other critical theorists to interrogate the structure of male body culture and set the foundation for future body scholarship.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I return to the themes established in Chapter 2 and provide a vulnerable, frank look at my own photovoice journey in terms of my own body project. While
the story I provide is not the story, it is my story. It is my hope that this personal account will prompt more introspective examinations about both the motivations to engage in and the consequences of engaging in male body culture.
Chapter 2: Research Context—A Personal Account of F(i/a)tness

I had walked into a gym numerous times before. I knew the smell well; a mix of crotchety perspiration mixed with the humid air of athletic bodies in chorus performing and enacting what we are all told to do with our bodies—things like, “just do it” and “be the best you can be.” I scanned my ID badge, smiled at the attendants, and walked the long line to the place any fat kid knew as the ultimate site of nerves and body anxiety: the locker room. It smelled, too—both literally and figuratively. I had grown to legitimately hate that place—the smells, the sounds, the sights. The sweat on other men’s bodies was an overwhelming reminder of my lack of it. The soap they used to clean their sculpted bodies did not stretch as far on mine. Their grunts, jocularity, and camaraderie reminded me that this space had membership requirements—and I don’t mean the financial kind. I am referring to body membership. You were either a part of the club, or you weren’t. At 363 pounds, it is safe to say that I did not have a membership card.

I’ll never forget the looks I got as I marched my 6’ 4”, 363-pound body up the Stairmaster, perched it on the weight bench, and forced it through mile after mile on the treadmill. What’s he doing here? Why does he jiggle when he runs? Go him—he needs this! When I first started my fitness journey, I did not know if these conversations were real or just imagined, but in my head they were real. It got to me and, eventually, I let myself feel like an imposter. What was I doing here? Why even try anymore? I tried the gym thing for a week here and a week there and I was always met with the familiar routine. Every day there were smiling attendants. Every day there were sideways glances as I walked past rows of exercise equipment. Every day there was a personal battle in the locker room; a place where men’s bodies are not supposed to be talked about—much less looked at—but my 363-pound body knew otherwise. Those looks—the ones I loudly claimed I never minded—cut through me. And as many jokes at
my expense reminded me, there was a *lot of me* to cut through.

The word *cut* is quite an appropriate descriptor. Like any fat kid, I felt *cut off, excluded from* and otherwise *made spectacle as the result of* a body culture to which I did not belong. Although my escalating weight had not provided me with any (visible) negative health effects, its effect on my social identity is something I could write volumes about. My body was fat. That’s okay to say. What was not okay, however, were the comments that diminished my social worth because of the way I presented my body. “Fat” was fine to throw at me, but “lazy” was not. “Big” did not even faze me, but when you said “sloppy,” I’ll confess—it hurt. My body was just that—a body; an outward composition of flesh and blood. But so much of my identity was built on my fatness. My experiences in the gym reminded me all too well of the characteristics that were assigned to me because of my body shape and size.

I am not fat anymore—or at least not *as* fat. I am not the type of fat that you stop and look at on the street. In fact, I am no longer even the type of fat that will make you step back and ask, “*Should he really be eating that ice cream?*” But my fatness still dictates everything I do. When I am hungry, I still fight the urge to retreat to a private place to eat because I remember all too well how it felt to be the feeding spectacle in the room. When I work out, I admit—I wear specific clothing that hides the buoyant gift of extra skin that came along with my 140-pound weight loss so I do not draw the same judgment I did when this skin was a little less elastic. Everything I do, everything I eat, everything I say—*who I am*—is based on my fat self.

I believe the reason for my rumination revolves around our Western culture’s aggressive fascination with the body. We love to talk about it. We love to consume it. We love to police it. We *love* to do just about everything to bodies—*except* love them. My dissertation is not a work on fatness, nor is it a telling autoethnographic tale of the fatness-to-fitness trope or my personal
weight loss and fitness journey. Instead, it focuses on the culture in which my experiences—and the experiences of countless others—exist. I term this culture: body culture.

While the term, “body culture,” is often thrown around in casual conversations, there is no universally accepted definition for this phenomenon. Throughout my dissertation, I define body culture as the overarching and mainstreamed discourses and spaces of body improvement and physical fitness, which involve expectations of what the (ideal) body looks like and what it does. This definition fits within the research framework of other scholarship focused on fitness, sport, and body identity (see Andrews, Sudwell, & Sparkes, 2005; Gillett & White, 1992; McKenzie, 2014). I situate body culture as a specific context wherein bodies are made subject to expectations of disciplinary practices for their corporeal “improvement,” be they purely aesthetic or under the guise of “health.” I also identify body culture as a specific space where bodies are simultaneously the object and target of power (Foucault, 1979). I am interested in interrogating the idea of body power, especially as it relates to hegemonic masculinity.

While numerous work exists on women and their place in body culture (see Bordo, 2003 for a comprehensive overview), my experiences in body culture have been distinctly gendered, sexualized, classed, raced, and cultured, leading me to further investigate the way hegemonic masculinity both produces and is (re-)produced by practices within male body culture, that is the social discourse and spaces of male body improvement and physical fitness.

At 363 pounds, you can probably understand quite well why my body was a spectacle in this body culture. The reactions I got while working out at my highest body weight were quite different than the ones I receive now that I am at my lowest. In both situations, my body was a site of consumption for others—especially other men. Even if I was fortunate enough to evade the rude comments made in jest (“Hey buddy, you better make sure there isn’t a weight limit on
the treadmill?"), the patronizing gestures of support ("Good job, man! I know I don’t know you, but it’s great to see someone like you in here working so hard"), or even the terrible nonverbal judgments that are too complex, too hurtful, and too personal to describe on paper, the consumption of my fat body was visibly evident. Men looked at it, eyed it up and down, thought about it, and sometimes even critiqued it aloud.

My fat body was often fetishized; a supplemental body project for those who had already attained the ideal body to "improve." The gestures of support I received only confirm to me in hindsight that my body was a show that everyone was tuning into. "I’m here three times a week if you need advice." "I hear they’re doing a special in January where one-on-one training is only $35 extra—thought you might wanna’ know." "Hey, just wanted to say, ‘keep up the good work!’" As my scale took a decline, the consumption of my body took a rapid upswing. "Hey buddy—you’re looking good!" "Man, you’re really slimming down; lookin’ sharp!" "Dang, son! *seductive whistling*"

This type of consumption of my body was so new to me. To be frank, I welcomed it with open arms. Yet as I step back and critically analyze the body culture in which my body transformation took place, I recognize that my body was a space with great potential for the target and production of power. It was an object of power in that it was a publicly and socially acceptable space for the criticism, judgment, and (patronizing) consumption of others. Men, especially, felt that their “fit” bodies—which, in their minds, were the assumed standard that I was trying to reach—awarded them a special type of social privilege, which allowed them this consumption power. Yet, as I transformed from 363 to 220 pounds, the power slowly became mine. As I melded into fitness from fatness, I had more control over the negative consumption that had defined most of my weight loss journey. My new fit(ish) body was powerful—much
more powerful than it ever had been. My body was the target of power throughout this process. Despite the negative judgment that surrounded my weight-loss journey, my body became an unstated collaborative project of improvement. Other men pushed me without my asking. They wanted to see me join their club once they knew I was capable of being a committed member. They wanted me to have the same power they did (once I proved myself). It was as if they were cheering for me from the sidelines in my race toward masculinity.

My experiences in male body culture drive this entire dissertation project. While I understand I run the risk of perpetuating the research as me-search trope of qualitative research (see Miller, 1999), I argue that my unique experiences and involvement in male body culture equips me well to interrogate its overarching structures and its social implications. I want to explore this culture further. I want to know more about its assumptions on the nature of bodies, the nature of masculinity, and the nature of their intersection.

My guiding purpose in this study is to interrogate the hegemonic structures of male body culture. My experience in this culture has served a critical role in the construction of my own personal gender identity. It is almost impossible for me to separate my fitness and my body improvement from my masculinity and my sexuality. While this is an interpretive study, I suspect that I am not alone. Indeed, it makes sense that our bodies—the stage upon which we perform gender and sexuality and upon which we perform fitness/fatness—become host to a “variety show” of multidimensional, intersectional identity acts. In the following chapter, I explore the theoretical imperatives for this study and further situate the body as a communicative artifact.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

A literature review on bodies could span volumes. The body is an artifact that has been explored heavily in a host of disciplines, under the lens of numerous paradigms, and through a variety of different means and measures. In this chapter, I operate on the assumption that the merit of body scholarship is recognized and accepted. Rather than situating it as a site worthy of social scientific inquiry, I explore the problem of bodies and their disposable use within a heteronormative, patriarchal, and capitalistic system. This exploration is divided into three parts: (1) a theoretical foundation and justification for critical body scholarship, (2) an exploration of hegemonic masculinity, and (3) an overview of the hegemonic male body.

The Body Problem

To suggest that the body is a site of social contention would be a drastic understatement. In 21st century consumer culture, bodies “no longer represent how we fit into the social order, but are the means for self-expression, for becoming who we would most like to be” (Giddens, 1991, p. 2). 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. This body project invokes Foucauldian (1979) notions of the disciplined body; that is “a body which is controlled not by physical restrain, but by individual acts of self-regulation” (Pienaar & Bekker, 2007, p. 539).

While this dissertation work is not an exercise in Foucauldian mastery, it does rely on an understanding of the body as a site of power, contention, discipline, and identity construction. Social theorists have long speculated that the Western world is in the midst of a shift from a modern industrial culture to a postmodern culture of consumption (see Baudrillard, 1981;
Derrida, 1966; Lyotard, 1984). As culture shifts, so do cultural practices. As practices shift, so do sites of social dialogue. The body—a site of longstanding cultural critique and social dialogue—is a primary site for observing this shift. Indeed, the body has become a site for consumption, where others can observe social etchings of power.

Foucault (1979) presumed that the body was a site for the “object and target of power” (p. 136). In Foucault’s (1979) work, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he proposed that bodies are regulated “through disciplinary practices that normalized individuals into useful, docile bodies” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 73). Foucault argued that the disciplined body 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; “when docile, the body becomes useful as it can be molded as a vehicle for the technologies of domination” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 74).

Throughout this dissertation, I regard the body as a biophysical space rife with controversy because of its potentials for/of the production of power in a capitalistic consumer culture. By examining the context of sport—that is *male body culture*—specifically, I see the body as a tool used for the purpose of “self-improvement” within the overarching context of a patriarchal capitalistic framework that places value on the bodies deemed fit for the continued success of cultural (re)production. Bodies, then, are (de)classified along a continuum of acceptability. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note that, “just as wealth marked morality for the Calvinists, the ‘fit’ body marks a moral and disciplined self that demonstrates sufficient participation in the regimes of bodywork necessary to support consumer capitalism” (p. 39).
Through cultural acceptance of a fit standard, an individual’s cultural and corporeal worth are validated or invalidated based on their adherence to a specific body standard.

Foucault (1970) was especially concerned with the classification of human existence under the framework of bodies as subjects and objects of scientific knowledge. Through the classification of individuals into groups such as the obese, the diabetic, or those with elevated health risk (to name a few), Foucault (1970) argued that objectification and domination of “lesser bodies” became a medicalized commodity; an acceptable systematic domination of bodies that were deemed unfit for the capitalist framework in which they operate.

The medicalization of body aesthetics is especially visible in social discourse on fatness and fitness. In recent years, terms such as fat and unhealthy have become conflated, despite research that shows the two are not necessary correlated (Gaesser, 1997, 1999). Indeed, these terms have spawned a new era of body panic, where “fat” is implicated as an unruly, destructive force to blame for a host of medical ills. Even the World Health Organization (WHO, 2000) uses terms such as “epidemic proportion” to describe the escalating rates of obesity. By epidemicizing fat, “body fat itself has come to symbolize the out of control, unproductive, and morally inferior worker/citizen” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 70). The medicalization of the fat/fit body panic has trickled down into the widespread socialization of fat discrimination. Closely correlated to the widespread socialization of fat discrimination lies Crawford’s (1980) concept of healthism. He explains:

Healthism situates the problem of health and disease at the level of the individual. Solutions are formulated at that level as well. To the extent that healthism shapes popular beliefs, we will continue to have a non-political, and therefore, ultimately ineffective conception and strategy of health promotion. Further, by elevating
health to a super value, a metaphor for all that is good in life, healthism reinforces the privatization of the struggle for generalized well-being. (Crawford, 1980, p. 365)

By medicalizing health and creating a strong association between health and morality, disease and ill health become the responsibility of the individual and ultimately signify their “moral laxity” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 11; see also Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989; Lupton, 1995). Fat, especially, has become a site of social disgust and a symbol of moral failure in the Western world (Forth, 2014; Groskopf, 2005; Monaghan, 2007). Numerous reports confirm that the obese are negatively stigmatized to a degree much greater than nearly any other social group (Bell & Morgan, 2000; Lerner & Korn, 1972; Wing & Jeffrey, 1999). This is, perhaps, due to the unending barrage of fat shaming that exists in the Western world. From micro-level, social discrimination to the macro-level marketing of the body’s need for improvement, individuals are constantly reminded of their bodily imperfections, the potentials of the perfect body (and, correspondingly, the consequences of imperfect bodies), and their role in an age of overwhelming body panic.

In many ways, fat bodies are symbolic of the abject. Kristeva (1982) situates the abject in contrast to the “clean and proper” body. The abject is a body that leaks, produces excrement, and symbolizes physical waste and, ultimately, human mortality. Grosz (1989) defines abjection as “a sickness at one’s own body, at the body beyond that ‘clean and proper’ thing, the body of the subject. Abjection is the result of recognizing that the body is more than, in excess of, the ‘clean and proper’” (p. 78). Covino (2004) further connects Kristeva’s (1982) abjection to issues of the body-beauty duality:
Simply put, abjection is comprised by those parts of us that we refuse, those aspects of our embodied being that we do not welcome as part of the constitution of ourselves as subjects, as part of the constitution of our identities. The abject reminds us that we are animal, mortal, material bodies, and that there are no clear or impenetrable or unbreached borders between what we are and what we reject, between what we expel and what we contain. The “actuality” of the abject body is, at the same time, a cultural development: the urgency of human abjection is implied by the institutions and interests that exist to provide for it, so that the anxiety that I feel about my body rests on psychosomatic evidence intensified by the . . . [imaginary] claim that beauty maintains psychological well-being, and that the beauty industry is, in effect then, providing good medicine. (Covino, 2004, p. 4)

While Covino (2004) speaks of the abject body in terms of the beauty industry (i.e., aesthetic cosmetic surgery), it is not difficult to see the parallels between the abject body and the fat body. Indeed, even Covino (2004) asserts that:

the abject body repeatedly violates its own borders, and disrupts the wish for physical self-control and social propriety. We disavow our excretory bodies because they are signs of disorder, reminders of the body’s ambiguous limits (its leaking from multiple orifices), and of its ultimate death. (p. 17; see also Kristeva, 1982, p. 3)

The fat body does much the same thing; it serves as a disruption, a reminder of the limits of production, the potentials for health consequences, and the implications of failing to adhere to a body standard.
As noted above, fitness and morality have been intricately woven together. Throughout the spectrum of bodies and fitness, socialized discourse, along with the widespread medicalization of fitness, has implicated the body as a place of uncertainty; a space marked by a nervous cluster of potentially ill consequences for both the physical body and its social reading. Thus, the shift in the subjugation of unfit bodies has turned from the “mass, punitive external repressions to becoming internalized within the individual and located within the moral category of guilt and reproof” (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009, p. 12; see also, Kirk & Colquhoun, 1989). Fat, then, is an immoral endeavor and a motivating force for the redemption of the abject body. The motivating forces for this internal moral drive for body improvement are conceptualized in Foucault’s (1979, 1994) notions of “biopower” and Harwood’s (2009) conceptualizations of “biopedagogies”; that is, the “governmentality” (Foucault, 2009, p. 108) or “moral regulation of bios or life (i.e., how to eat, how to move, how to live)” (Rail, 2012, p. 229).

In an effort to expunge this guilt and answer the call for moral body regulation, individuals turn to confessional acts of bodily redemption through regulated discipline and moral restructuring of (immoral) corporeality. These secularized confessions tell “the story of a sinner who is asking some higher authority to take the burden away through a disclosure” (Bordowitz & Moss, 1994, n.p.). Here, there are two key players: a dominant and a submissive partner. Foucault (1978) proposes that the act of confession is a “ritual which unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires confession” (p. 61). Thus, examinations such as this dissertation research contribute to the overarching social conversation on body culture by looking at it as the object and target of power where both dominant and
submissive others interact to foster a discourse about the disciplined body and its role in the greater tapestry of human value and experience.

Foucault’s (1978) notions of confession pinpoint the act as a call for greater surveillance (in this case, body surveillance) and the cultural expectation for “infinite task[s] of telling” (p. 20). As Dworkin and Wachs (2009) suggest:

Those who hear the confession (audience or self who reads about (un)healthy eating or exercise practices) and structure its practices (health and fitness experts) set the parameters for redemption (stopping “unhealthy” behaviors), thereby shaping the confession into specific narrative frames, problems, and solutions. (p. 14)

In this project, I am interested in dissecting the overarching narrative frames of male body culture. I am especially interested in interrogating individual acts of body discipline and the underlying assumptions about the social worth of bodies that undergird these acts. Like Foucault, I am interested in the “hermeneutics of the self” (Foucault, 2005); that is, an identity “produced through sets of such forces that require the individual to continually reflect and confess his/her troubles . . . [an] incessant engagement in self-interpretation” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 138).

Throughout his final works, Foucault (1988a) turned to “the technologies of individual domination, the history of how an individual acts upon himself in the technology of self” (p. 19).

Foucault (1988b) asserted that, “the subject is constituted through practices of liberation, of liberty . . . on the basis of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment” (pp. 50-51). Thus, under the guise of autonomous liberty, individuals engage in acts of self-subjugation whereby they engage sociocultural “rules, styles, inventions” to discipline the self in an effort to mold the body into what it is supposed to be—“an oeuvre that
Foucault (1985, pp. 10-11) defined this practice as the technology of the self. These technologies:

Permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1988a, p. 18)

Through the technologies of the self, individuals present and police their body within the understood overarching power structures of body discourse. In the case of male body culture, then, these technologies of the self act as behaviors of self-regulation and discipline, whereby individuals come to understand themselves and their role in the discourses of power in body and fitness culture. Through these behaviors, individuals submit themselves for consideration as a subject and the power relations of body culture “simultaneously make the individual an object and produce her/him as a subject” (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 138).

The simultaneous occupancy of object/subject occurs through the practice of the gaze—or “Panopticon” security (see Bentham, 1995; Foucault, 1980). As Azzarito (2009) notes:

power disciplines bodies through the gaze, or the visibility of the body in relation to power/knowledge production around that body. . . . individuals police and discipline themselves to achieve or maintain a specific shape, size, and muscularity to perform ideals of masculinity and/or ideals of femininity. (p. 21)

Malson (1998) situates the Panopticon as an “economy of visibility”; that is, “a normalized gaze, a surveillance that makes it possible to qualify, to classify, to punish” (Malson 1998, p. 172). And as Azzarito (2009) notes, “the ultimate effect of the economy of visibility is the internalization of disciplinary regimes of the body and therefore the constitution of personal
identity” (p. 21; see also Foucault, 1980). Throughout this dissertation, I plan to examine more closely the role of the regulatory gaze as a both a mechanism of self and powerful “others” in regulating the discipline of the body.

While Foucault was not a gender scholar, I am particularly interested in extending the idea of the regulated, disciplined body to explore male body culture specifically. Indeed, 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, I recognize that 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 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. In the following section, I explore this masculinity through a discussion on hegemonic masculinity and its role in the discourse surrounding men’s bodies.

**Hegemonic Masculinity**

Masculinity does not exist in a vacuum. It is a complex, dynamic, and fluid identity element. As such, it is important to differentiate between distinctions of masculinity. *Hegemonic* masculinity plays a uniquely intricate role in conversations of the male body. This form of masculinity (only having been officially named a mere few decades ago) is particularly toxic and involves the advancement of the “boys will be boys” mentality. Michael Kimmel (1994) has defined masculinity as:

> A constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other and with our world. Manhood is neither static nor timeless; it is historical. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological makeup; it is created in culture. Manhood means different things at different times to different people. We come to know what it means to be a man in our culture by setting our definitions in opposition to a set of “others”—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all, women. (p. 120)

In this definition, Kimmel (1994) situates masculinity as a response identity; an embodiment of opposition to some forces deemed threatening or delegitimizing. Manhood is socially constructed as a polarizing artifact; the valence of *true* masculinity negates femininity, homosexual desire, and marginalized others. Manhood—in its truest (hegemonic) form—is the
ultimate site of power. Similarly, Connell (1995) sees masculinity as “simultaneously a place in
gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and
the effects of these practices on bodily experience, personality, and culture” (p. 71). Schippers
(2007) extends Connell’s (1995) assertions and contends that masculinity is a space that can be
embraced by individuals regardless of gender and that “when these practices are embodied
especially by men, but also by women, they have widespread cultural and social effects” (p. 1).
Throughout this strain, masculinity is identified not just as a thing, but also as a way of being; a
“scripted behavior” (Kimmel & Messner, 2000, p. 7) that is open to an array of interpretations
and performances.

The regarding of masculinity as a way, and not just a thing, can be situated within
Butler’s (1990) argument that gender is, by nature, a performance. In her seminal work, Gender
Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, Butler (1990) argues that “gender is not a
noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes, for we have seen that the substantive
effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender
coherence” (p. 24). Butler (1990) presumes that gender is a performance on a stage with
inherited regulatory practices that both mold, and are molded by, specific (gender)
performances. As Butler (1990) notes, “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of
gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be
its results” (p. 25).

Within the realm of masculinity, then, the expressions of hegemonic masculinity perform
sociocultural expectations of “the most honored way of being a man” (Connell &
Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849). These performances are an answer to the question of “how
particular groups of men inhabit positions of power and wealth, and how they legitimate and
reproduce the social relationships that generate their dominance” (Donaldson, 1993, p. 655). Often, this dominance is demonstrated vis-à-vis power over women; yet, may often manifest as control over men as a representation of universal social advancement (Gramsci, 1971). Hegemonic masculinity reaches beyond male embodiment and involves a masculinity of power, control, and dominance. In many ways, it is the ultimate negating valence of femininity (Kimmel, 1994).

As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) note, this hegemonic masculinity is produced on local, regional, and global levels. Whereas analysis on the global (i.e., masculinity woven through transnational business, media, and politics) and regional (i.e., masculinity constructed through the nation-state) levels has interesting implications, analyzing hegemonic masculinity on a local level allows for the examination of masculinity as it is “constructed in the arenas of face-to-face interactions of families, organizations, and immediate communities” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 849).

Certainly, these levels are linked and multidimensional. Still, examination of hegemonic masculinity at the local level allows for greater understanding of the nature of masculinities—pluralistic male embodiments that all seek the “most honored way” of being a man. Local analyses reveal how (hegemonic) masculinity is socially constructed through and among relational discourse. Dellinger (2004) has asserted that more research must focus on the ways multiple hegemonic masculinities are groomed and developed across contexts.

The 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.

Brannon (1976) implicates hegemonic masculinity as a four-fold performance: no sissy stuff, the big wheel, the sturdy oak, and give ‘em hell! Brannon (1976) asserts that real men “must never, never resemble women, or display strongly stereotyped feminine characteristics” (p. 14). Thus, men’s physical performance relies on deep vocal tones, minimal attention to clothing or hygiene, and the occupation of more physical space—no “sissy stuff.” This performance also involves minimal emotionality, especially in interactions with other men and the avoidance of feminine behaviors (i.e., childcare, domestic work, social support). Brannon’s “big wheel” refers to the need for men’s drive for respect, achievement, and admiration. Although this often refers to occupational success, this drive is woven through men’s experiences, broadly speaking, and can be found in men’s drive for body improvement. The “sturdy oak” references men’s supplemental emotional performance, specifically, the expression of confidence, self-esteem, and strength. Finally, “give ‘em hell,” invoke images of a John Wayne-esque masculinity—a masculinity defined by adventure, aggression, violence, and sexual conquest. These identity layers intersect, creating a hegemonic masculinity defined both foundationally and performatively by its negative valence of femininity. While Brannon’s (1976) caricatures are only one example (see also Connell, 1995; Doyle, 1994; Gerzon, 1992), they serve as a representation of the expectations of masculine embodiment that undergird Western masculinity and male body culture.
But these caricatures do not simply exist. Foucault (1972) posits that “regulated discourse” is the channel by which hegemonic groups (and the standards they impose) rise to power. Through this discourse, certain behaviors (like those mentioned above), as well as performances of the body, become the standard by which status is attained, groomed, and policed. Hegemonic masculinity “is fixed to be a complex struggle between coercion and consent, and it occurs on multiple levels in society—on the cultural, visual, political, and ideological” (Lanzieri & Hildebrandt, 2011, p. 278; see also Hargreaves & McDonald, 2000). Throughout this dissertation, I am especially interested in the visual level of masculine struggle. Below, I explore the body as a site for the visual analysis of power, dominance, and hegemonic masculinity, with special regard to the role of the body in/as discourse.

**The (Hegemonic) Male Body**

Goffman’s (1976) work helped create a general understanding that gender identity is not biologically pre-determined; rather, it is performative. Goffman (1976) argued that, “One might just as well say there is no gender identity. There is only a schedule for the portrayal of gender” (p. 8). Goffman’s (1976) conception clearly aligns within Butler’s (1990) theory of gender performativity. The portrayal and interpretation of masculinity—especially hegemonic masculinity—is intricately linked to performances of the body. According to Connell (1995):

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)
If gender is, indeed, socially constructed, we must question the means by which that construction occurs. Masculinity is multidimensional and situated across a spectrum of sociocultural gendered conditions. As noted above, masculinity is a complex, intersectional performance of behavior and corporeal expression. A featured stage for the body performances of hegemonic masculinity is the arena of male body culture. By male body culture, I again mean the overarching context of competitive sport, body improvement, and physical fitness (see Bale, 2002; Eichberg, 2009). It is a culture in which men attempt to reach the “ideal” male body through sport, competition, and continuous, disciplined self-improvement.

It is no stretch to presume that men experience a drive for a specific type of body and actively engage in disciplined body performances to reach the ideal body type. In response to this presumption, most turn to the psychological constructs of the body developed in the 1940s by psychologist, William Herbert Sheldon. In Sheldon’s 1954 seminal work, Atlas of Men, he proposed a classification of body typologies, known commonly as somatotypes, to better understand the continuum of human body composition. This continuum involved a scale along which individuals’ bodies could be classified in terms of their relationship to three extreme body types: ectomorphic, endomorphic, and mesomorphic—all of which were composites of specific ratios of fat, muscle, and bone (Kamlesh, 2011, C. 15).

Sheldon’s (1954) ectomorph occupies the least amount of physical space. This body composition is defined by such terms as skinny, lanky, thin, small, and lean. Ectomorphs often present flat, unchiseled, and undefined muscular features, a visible and delicate bone structure, and an overall thin body frame. They are “linear, fragile, delicate . . . lean, and lightly-muscled” (Kamlesh, 2011, C. 15) Conversely, the endomorph is a classification that occupies a greater amount of physical space. For ease of understanding, the endomorph can be defined as fat,
stocky, soft, and big. They are “spherical, round, soft-bodied, [and have] under-developed muscles, [and find it] difficult to lose weight, etc.” (Kamlesh, 2011, C. 15). While overall composition may vary, endomorphs often present little to no visible muscle definition but display a higher fat content (although they may not necessarily actually be overweight). Endomorphs display a larger body girth, whether due to a higher fat or muscle composition.

Situated perfectly in the middle—both figuratively and literally—is the mesomorph. Those with a mesomorphic body typology are defined by such words as athletic, muscular, toned, fit, and healthy. Mesomorphic bodies are often rectangular in shape and characteristically chiseled. They present visibly toned muscular structures, a low fat to muscle ratio, and an overall sturdy frame. In short, the mesomorph is “cubical, rugged, muscular, athletically-build, hard bodied, mature muscle mass, excellent posture, [and] thick-skinned” (Kamlesh, 2011, C. 15).

It is important to note that these body typologies are simply locations on a continuum (using a 7-point scale, to be precise). Most likely, you are not at 1 (ectomorph), a 3.5 (mesomorph), or a 7 (endomorph). You simply fall somewhere on the continuum between 1 and 7. In fact, Sheldon (1954) proposed that there were a total of 343 possible unique classifications that individuals could occupy (see also Sheldon, Stevens, & Tucker, 1940). This continuum allows for the restructuring of body typology as bodies change. And like other continuum experiences, those who land at a specific spot are likely never fully satisfied. Those who make $76,000 a year (on the salary continuum) work hard so they can make a holiday bonus and reach $79,000 next year. Those who just bought a 5-bedroom, 3-bathroom house are prone to think about “what could have been” if they simply would have bought the condo on the beach or the house down the street with the finished basement. Like any other human experience, most on the
body typology continuum are always considering the ways they can improve their bodies to reach a more ideal body type.

Perhaps this drive for body improvement comes from social judgments about these specific body typologies. Although it now stands as an embarrassment to the scientific community (see Honeyman-Heath, 1990; Rosenbaum, 1995), these somatotypes were originally interpreted within the framework of Sheldon’s (1954) constitutional psychology. Drawing on the theories of social Darwinist and popular eugenicist, Francis Galton, Sheldon (1954) attempted to correlate specific body types (according to the somatotypes) with social humanistic value. Sheldon’s (1954) work centered around a presumption that bodies were solid indications of behavior. Kamlesh (2011) recounts:

Sheldon . . . was seeking an answer to the question whether those who look alike behave alike. In this process, Sheldon rated the subject for temperament . . . [using] hundreds of terms . . . eventually reduced, through statistical procedures, to three temperament types, Viscerotonia, Somatotonia, and Cerebrotonia. Endomorphy . . . came to be related to viscerotonia (love of comfort, slow reaction, relaxation, love of eating, sociability, complacency, affectionateness, etc.); mesomorphy to somatotonia (assertiveness, love of physical venture, vigor, energeticness, need for exercise, love for dominance, risk-taking and chance, directness of manner, courage, general noisiness, need for action when in trouble, etc.), and ectomorphy was related to cerebrotonia (restrain in posture and movement, rapid reaction, over-tension, anxiety, secretiveness, action-inhibition, thought-introversion, need for loneliness, etc.). (C. 15)
Of course, the reduction of identity to mere body judgment is problematic on multiple levels. In a redemptive re-casting of Sheldon (1954), Vertinsky (2007) notes that he was merely part of the:

interwar years’ efforts of a group of clinical physicians and psychologists to develop models of mind-body interaction which might enable a more holistic medical practice—a practice which in many ways places its trust upon the whole man as understood through the surface of the body. (p. 294)

Still, Sheldon’s (1954) assumptive practices of the nature between outer embodiment and inner worth have been repeatedly denounced in scathing reviews of his work (see Honeyman-Heath, 1990; see also Vertinsky, 2007 for a counterargument).

Sheldon’s (1954) body of work has “become a skeleton in the . . . closet, one that [scientific communities] are not ready to bury and yet hesitate to put on open display” (Rafter, 2007, p. 806). The continued intrigue of Sheldon’s (1954) controversial work is likely due to the fact that we are always trying to understand what is in people’s heads by looking at their bodies. Despite its glaring weaknesses, using the body to interrogate identity is a practice we are not quite ready to give up. As Rafter (2007) notes, this is a longstanding practice:

From ancient times, scientists have looked for associations between body and mind as well as physical states and behavior. The Greek physician Hippocrates (ca. 450-380 BC) identified links between body and behavior in what he called the humors (blood, yellow bile, black bile, and phlegm), substances whose proportion and balance determined health and disease. Shakespeare played with morphological beliefs when he gave Julius Caesar the line, “Let me have men
about me that are fat.” Nineteenth-century physiognomists and phrenologists tried
to read the mind from the body. (p. 808)

While my dissertation is not a genealogy of the historical linkages between scientific
behavioral analysis and readings of the body, this association is salient given the focus of the
social implications for the male drive for physical fitness. It is also an oft-overlooked foundation
for social views of the body. Numerous researchers have demonstrated that value judgments are
ascribed based on corporeal presentation and the value of human identity, worth, intellect, and
potential and thus is still closely linked to social readings of the body.

For instance, overweight bodies have been stereotyped in Western culture as lazy, self-
indulgent, undisciplined, untrustworthy, incompetent, asexual, and unattractive (Harris, Harris, &
Bockner, 1982; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988). Conversely, studies reveal that those with
“active” bodies or those who are presumed to engage in exercise (despite frequency) have been
rated higher in independence, friendliness, kindness, and physical attractiveness (Martin, Sinden,
& Fleming, 2000; Martin-Ginis, Latimer, & Jung, 2003). But as noted in Chapter 2, this
dissertation is not a work focused on fatness. Interestingly enough, despite popular trends that
have defined the last four decades (see Cash & Pruzinsky, 1990, 2002; Thompson, 1990;
Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999), scholarly research on the body is no
longer very focused on fat either. In fact, research focused on muscular ideals increased a full
731% from 2000-2006 (see Thompson & Cafri, 2007).

Researchers from a host of disciplines are now exploring men’s drive for muscularity;
that is, the desire to become more muscular (see McCreary & Sasse, 2000). This particular
scholarship has found a reverse link between men’s and women’s body perceptions of size. For
instance, whereas women tend to estimate their body size as bigger than it actually is, men have
been found to estimate their body size much smaller than it actually is (McCreary, 2007), thus leading them to “bulk up.” In fact, between 28-68% of men have engaged in specific dietary practices to gain weight (McCreary & Sasse, 2002; O’Dea & Rawstorne, 2001). Men’s drive for increased weight has been positively correlated to a drive for increased muscle mass (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003; O’Dea & Rawstorne, 2001).

Across the board, research has found that men overwhelmingly desire and work towards a mesomorphic body shape (Epel, Spanakos, Kasl-Godley, & Brownwell, 1996; Mishkind et al., 1985; Tucker, 1984). More specifically, men desire what is perceived to be a traditional “masculine” body; that is, a body characterized by features such as “broad shoulders and a narrow waist, lending a v-shaped appearance to the torso” (Dixson, Grimshaw, Ormsby, & Dixson, 2014, p. 73). The conflation of “masculinity” and “muscularity” has been identified repeatedly (Mansfield & McGinn, 1993). Leith (2006) notes that male fitness has become a specific type of status symbol:

In some ways, being thin is more of a status symbol than it’s ever been because of how overweight some people are. If you have a flat stomach, you’re probably in control under very trying circumstances. These days, everybody has an iPod. Everyone can afford a plasma TV. A flat stomach is a much more difficult thing to come by. It’s a way to stand out. (p. 33)

Male body culture, then, is the space whereby men work to improve their bodies to attain this somewhat prescribed status. Research has revealed that men are overwhelmingly more motivated than women to engage in routine weight training (Leslie, Owen, & Sallis, 1999). And again, this method of body discipline is perceived to aid in the drive for increased muscle mass and/or toned muscular features (McCabe & Ricciardelli, 2003). Additionally, when selecting the
“ideal body,” men often choose a representative that has between 8 to 13 kilograms (17.64-28.66 pounds) more muscle than they currently have (Cafri, Strauss, & Thompson, 2002; Pope et al., 2000). Men have indicated that they desire this extra muscle to help fill out their chest, biceps, wrists, shoulders, forearms, and replace fat in their abdominal area (Huenemann, Shapiro, Hampton, & Mitchell, 1966; Moore, 1990). The general consensus is that men aspire bodies defined by athletic builds and defined, toned muscular features (Grogan, 2008; Pope et al., 2000).

The motivations that undergird the drive for muscularity in men are broad sweeping. First, the association between attraction and muscularity in men has been identified as a prime motivator. Mesomorphic male bodies have been rated as most attractive in comparison to those who occupy distinctly endo- or ectomorphic bodies (see Dixson, Grimshaw, Ormsby, & Dixson, 2014; Gangestad & Scheyd, 2005). Additionally, men have identified that they perceive women to find mesomorphic, muscular male bodies as the most attractive (Cohn, Adler, Irwin, Millstein, Kegeles, & Stone, 1992; Mishkind et al., 1985; Salusso-Deonier, Markee, & Pedersen, 1994).

This regard for muscularity as a foundational attribute of masculinity trickles down even into the foundational years. In a study on childhood toys and action figures, Pope et al. (2000) found that toys marketed to young boys—such as action figures of cartoon characters from Star Wars, Batman, G.I. Joe, and others, far exceed normal and healthy human proportions, often surpassing the body measurements of even the most elite and muscular body builders. Of no surprise, then, are studies that show that boys as young as five years old desire to embody a muscular body shape (Labre, 2002; McCreary & Saase, 2000). But as research has shown, this body ideal is not as much about the body itself, as it is about the power that accompanies and infuses it (Drummond, 2003; Luciano 2007).
Grogan (2008) argues that the “muscular shape is the masculine ideal because it is intimately tied to Western cultural notions of maleness as representing power and strength” (p. 82). This fits well within Foucauldian notions of bio-power, and supports the idea that men’s bodies are culturally shaped and signified as the machines for the continued success of capitalism. Foucault (1978) noted that capitalism “would not have been possible without the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes” (p. 141). Bodies became powerful, in that molded, skilled bodies could carry forth the continued needs of production. But if the state gets powerful bodies to do the bidding, what, in turn, do those bodies receive as compensation? The answer, quite simply, is personal satisfaction and self-esteem (albeit derived from, and understood within, the presumed and idealized body standards of the overarching body culture).

Numerous researchers and public commenters have asserted that men’s muscular bodies remain one of the few signifiers that inscribe them with strength, masculinity, and status (Drummond, 2003; Pope et al., 2000; Shaw, 1994; Shellenbarger, 2005). While men’s control over economic resources has been a significant historical pillar of masculinity, a host of variables, such as economic downturn and a workforce made up of a record number of female workers, has dictated that men can no longer relegate physical appearance as a secondary priority. Instead, masculinity has become the ultimate signifier of power, one of the few remaining “grounds on which women can never match men” (Pope et al., 2000, p. 24). It can also be said, however, that it remains one of the few grounds that separates the men from the real men.

That is what my dissertation research focuses on—the real men. Men whose bodies inscribe them as powerful and whose body improvement project contributes to hegemonic
masculinity and patriarchal domination of marginalized others. Although I take a critical bend, I give men the benefit of the doubt and believe that most do not likely consciously perceive their pursuit of muscularity as an especially “masculine” endeavor; furthermore, I doubt few, if any, see their body project as a tool of domination and subjugation. Still, I believe the conflation of masculinity and muscularity warrants a critical examination.

**Summary**

The literature summarized above implicates the body as a site of great potential for social scientific research. There are theoretical warrants to its study, namely the ways in which it exists and operates both as an object and a target of power. But this is not just about bodies—it is about a very specific type of body, a *gendered* body, a *powerful* body. Hegemonic masculinity runs rampant through male body culture and it is important to examine this phenomenon and the ways it produces, and is produced by, male body culture. It is also crucial to examine the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and male body standards. Although the media has been implicated as a significant source of this body ideal, male body culture is a deeply personal endeavor, thus it is important to examine the micro-level operations of power through one-on-one interaction with individuals who are a part of male body culture. The following chapter outlines the philosophical and methodological foundations upon which this dissertation study is grounded and details the ways in which I plan to address the problems inherent within male body culture. Based on the review above, then, the following research questions are posed:

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

**RQ2**: What are the social implications of the drive for male fitness as it relates to gendered notions of masculinity and/or femininity?
Chapter 4: Methods of Study

Using in-depth interviews and participatory photography, I attempted to interrogate the structures of male body culture, including a deep examination of the ways males who engage in male body culture regularly perceive it, its permeability, and its implications. This study provides an examination of the idealized male body and its role within (and outside of) male fitness spaces, ultimately connecting it to hegemonic masculinity and the intersection of masculinity and muscul arity.

Data collection for this project occurred in three phases: (1) preliminary interviews, (2) participatory photography, and (3) post-photography interviews. Before discussing the data collection phases, however, I believe it is crucial to lay the philosophical foundation upon which the rest of this dissertation will be built, especially with regard to methodology. Because of their intricate relationship to methodology, I present these foundations here, in tandem with my proposed methods, to foster a more clear understanding of my approach. In the paragraphs that follow, I summarize my approach to communication research and my commitment to an interpretivist-oriented research paradigm.

Communication Theory

Throughout the 27 pages of the well-read “Issues in Communication Theory” article in the fifth edition of Communication Yearbook, Bowers and Bradac (1982) explore (at great length) a very simple idea: theory—especially communication theory—is messy. This point is further solidified through Berger’s (1991) assertion that:

In the case of communication, not only is there relatively little commerce among the various sub-areas of the field, that is, interpersonal, mass, organizational, political, health,
instructional, and so on, there is apparently no common body of theory that unites research conducted in these ostensibly unique communication contexts. (p. 101)

As you can imagine, the lack of a clear, common body of theory has left room for much interpretation among communication scholars. Even now, after considerable development in the field of Communication Studies, we can identify a host of “home-grown” communication theories, but even our foundational theory textbooks (e.g., Littlejohn & Foss, 2008; Griffin, Ledbetter, & Sparks, 2014) house numerous theories (and their accompanying paradigms) from other disciplines. For example, in Griffin et al.’s (2014) well-read theory text, there are whole chapters dedicated to Leon Festinger’s (1957) Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Altman and Taylor’s (1973) Social Penetration Theory. While these theories certainly have applicability to the study and nature of human communication, their roots are in social psychology—not Communication Studies. But perhaps this is not the conundrum we have made it out to be. In a frank and entertaining discussion on the intersections between disciplines and the future of communication scholarship, Herbst (2008) notes that communication scholars face a challenge to “keep boosting the authority of the field, as a field, without joining the forces that block postdisciplinarity” (p. 612).

This dissertation attempts to do just that—boost the authority of the field of Communication Studies by highlighting its potential for contributing to current and critical social conversations. Still, I recognize that there are deeper theoretical strains and multidisciplinary roots to the problem I seek to solve. Yes, I seek to further enhance the field of Communication Studies as a unique discipline; one of rigorous methods, theoretical inclinations, and a rich history. Still, I am a researcher focused on problems—the problem of bodies, specifically—and I boldly acknowledge that my commitment to my discipline does not supersede my commitment
to critical investigation. Like others in my field (see Cissna & Frey, 2009; Craig, 2008; Frey, 2000, 2006), I wholeheartedly believe in the value of communication as it applies to changing the landscape of social equity. Although I have framed “the body” as a theoretical conundrum above, I do not mean to paint an overly dramatic or unnecessarily bleak picture. I believe that Communication Studies offers great potential for unpacking this phenomenon.

I see applied communication research as a potential answer, since it “sets out to contribute to knowledge by answering a real, pragmatic, social question . . . or problem of human communication or examines human communication in order to provide an answer or solution to the question or problem” (Cissna, 1982, p. iv). Ultimately, I seek to better understand male body culture through the lens of Communication Studies; one that does not look to a simplistic reduction of communication to mere “talking” alone, but sees the body as a significant producer/production of body discourse. Admittedly, this project is not a large-scale game of “connect the dots” between theory and results. If Communication Studies is the rigorous, methodical, and valid field that we assert it is, then this elementary approach is not necessary, nor does it advance the field in a meaningful way. I am not in the business of “plugging” in theory mindlessly; rather, I seek to examine how communication theories emerge throughout my analysis.

With this in mind, I implicate myself as a researcher driven by an interpretivist-oriented approach to the study of human communication (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Stemming from the rich lineage of pragmatism, interpretivism recognizes the social construction of action, agency, and community, and interrogates these by highlighting individuals’ own interpretations and lived experiences (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).
My commitment to an interpretivist-oriented paradigm trickles throughout every element of this project. Ontologically, it constitutes my regard for reality as constructed and the dichotomous role of human agency as both subject and object. Epistemologically, it undergirds my belief that individuals’ interpretation of their construction of reality is the source of knowledge (with a lowercase “k”). Methodologically, it implicates me as a primarily qualitative researcher; it dictates the use of multiple tools of assessment to better interrogate human agency and action. Furthermore, it (along with its loose-knit relationship to postmodern approaches) dictates my desire to “play with” research; to stretch its boundaries and to open up new conversations in communication studies about the nature and scope of human meaning and discourse (Manning & Kunkel, 2014). Ultimately, my goal is to highlight and describe my interpretations of others’ interpretations; thus, I readily admit here that the narratives and claims I present are fallible; my experiences, my ideology, and my orientation to male body culture influence my perceptions of others and their claims. I do not regard this as a weakness of this study—just an important element to note when considering the potential(s) of communication research.

I believe my dissertation can contribute to improving social equity for oppressed groups, thus I also implicate myself as a researcher oriented to a “social justice sensibility” (Frey, Pearce, Pollock, Artz, & Murphy, 1996) and thus a critical-leaning, interpretivist-oriented researcher. By this, I simply mean that I desire to use my results to foster a critical social conversation on the nature of masculinity, femininity, and the corresponding role of the body. I believe the body is used as a tool for the oppression of others and hope that the results of this study will reveal how the body is used as an operator of power. With these stated philosophical intentions and allegiances as the foundation, I use in-depth interviews and participatory photography to
interrogate male body culture and the ways in which it contributes to the (re)structuring of masculine body ideals.

**Participatory Photography**

As demonstrated throughout the literature review, the body is a visual artifact. There are many things the body does; some physical, some social, some cultural—most observable. Yet, few empirical studies have examined the body as a unique artifact with communicative value. Indeed, dozens of theoretical works in the humanities (see Bordo, 2003; Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1978; Halberstam, 2005) have excavated the body, combing it up and down, and finding parallels between its functions and the functions of capitalism and patriarchy. But if such examinations are indeed true—and we presume they are—should not a similar function be empirically observable?

Thus, this is where participatory photography (i.e., a visual methodology for assessing the social world through the eyes of those experiencing it) enters into the data collection process. Known also as photo interviewing (Hurworth, 2003), photofeedback (Sampson-Cordle, 2001), autodriving (Heisley & Levy, 1991), reflexive photography (Douglas, 1998), photo novella (Wang & Burris, 1994), and photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), participatory photography involves the integration of photographs in the research interview process (Harper, 1998). *Photovoice* is perhaps the more commonly used term in qualitative research, and refers to the expression of a participant’s “voice” through photos.

While the specifics of this method vary from study to study, the core premise of participatory photography is the integration of photography into the research process, typically accompanied by interviews. These (auto)ethnographic photo endeavors are situated in the wider spectrum of Arts-Based Research (ABR), a collective body of philosophical and theoretical
perspectives on “research guided by aesthetic features” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. xi). Leavy (2009) argues that these visual methods “adapt the tenets of the creative arts in order to address social research questions in holistic and engaged ways in which theory and practice are intertwined” (p. 3).

Photovoice and other image-based research methods are rooted in sociology and have been used to study a host of issues including gender (Bloustein & Baker, 2003), domestic violence (Frohmann, 2005), health and recovery (Radley & Taylor, 2003), and disability (Thoutenhoofd, 1997). A cornerstone of the photovoice/participatory photography methodology is its emancipatory potential. Much like Standpoint Theory (see Harding, 1987; Sprague-Jones & Sprague, 2011), it recognizes the ways in which social positionality influences perspective; as such, much photovoice research has involved photo elicitation from women (Frohmann, 2005), minorities (Douglas, 1998), LGBTQ-identified individuals (Santurri, 2014), those with health disparities (Hagerdorn, 1990), the elderly (Baker & Wang, 2006), and other marginalized groups. Perhaps this focus on marginalized groups is largely because of photovoice’s feminist roots. As Osei-Kofi (2013) notes:

Photovoice is rooted in feminist inquiry and is particularly appropriate for anti-oppressive social justice work, as it recognizes and values the subjective experiences of those involved, gives members of the community control over how their lives are represented (often challenging dominant assumptions), and is an approach that explicitly seeks to advance progressive social change. (p. 140)

Photovoice offers a valuable perspective in the examination of bodies in this project, not only because of its feminist foundations, but also because of the visual nature of bodies. Novak (2010) contends that Communication Studies, as a discipline, can benefit greatly from the
incorporation of photovoice and other digital methods. Novak (2010) asserts that the field of Communication Studies, like many other disciplines in the social sciences, has privileged the written word and disregarded visual data as “nonacademic, nonscholarly, or merely performative,” ultimately begging the question, “What knowledge and ways of knowing are being sacrificed at the altar of textocentric academic communities and their journals?” (p. 294). Tracy (2007) asserts that photovoice allows for the examination of “everyday interaction” and the “context of meaning making” (p. 32)—core elements in the study of human communication.

Photovoice, quite frankly, is a simplistically useful and intriguing method for capturing meaning that could not be produced by the researcher. In many ways, it “democratizes” the qualitative research process, and the “privileged voice of the researcher is challenged” (Novak, 2010, p. 307) and ultimately illuminated. This photographic method allows the integration of “more” voices—not just verbal ones—and helps tear down “the (false) binary between visual and verbal communication as images and words work in tandem to tell participants’ stories” (Novak, 2010, p. 308). Photovoice is an especially relevant methodology for this study given its admittedly interpretivist-oriented roots as interpretivism is concerned with the social construction of action, agency, and community (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2008; Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Here, photovoice emerges as a platform for the visualization of these experiences, showing the multiple dimensionalities of lived experiences that transcends the typical telling of those experiences that emerges with a singular method (Slone, 2009). The use of images in tandem with interview data provides a multidimensional account that helps provide a more complete snapshot of individuals’ lived experience, a point that will be further discussed below.

As outlined above, photovoice often involves the use of participatory photography to gain a better perspective into the lived experiences of dominated and subjected groups (Osei-Kofi,
Yet, as you are probably aware, this project is one focused on members of one of the most socially powerful groups—male body culture, which raises the question—is this method appropriate for this investigation? While I regard this question as an appropriate one to ask, I respond with a resounding “yes.”

Linguistics scholar Nikolaj Trubetzkoy (1975) first coined the term markedness in the 1930s as a semantic framework for understanding the ways in which one item in a pair or group is made salient at the consequence of another becoming “ontologically uncommon.” Sociologist Wayne Brekhus (1996) has extended this concept into the social sciences, using it to help frame the problem of the politically salient. Brekhus (1996) notes that terms such as “virgin” and “slut” comprise linguistic places on the sexual activity spectrum and serve as markers for uncommon or too common sexual behaviors. Consequently, there are “no explicit cultural labels from which to choose for those who have socially unexceptional amounts of sex” (Brekhus, 1996, pp. 502-503). Comparatively, then:

the unmarked term “man” can represent humankind generically or it can indicate the opposite of a woman. The marked term, “woman,” however, never refers to humans writ large. The marked term is always more narrowly specified and heavily articulated than the unmarked. (Brekhus, 1998, p. 35)

I propose that muscular male bodies—those that fit the cultural ideal—have become unmarked; the assumed standard. As noted in Chapter 2, throughout my personal journey, it was often assumed that I was seeking a muscular, fit body—after all, why wouldn’t I be? Stemming from the mediated/cultural perpetuation of the ideal male body, muscular men have become the standard representation of men in the public sphere. Fat men, disabled men, or men who
otherwise fail to adhere to the unmarked muscular standard, become saliently marked, targeted, stigmatized, or epidemicized.

Brekhus (1998) proposes a five-fold process of social marketedness with implications for the research involving un/marked populations:

1. the marked is heavily articulated while the unmarked remains unarticulated;
2. as a consequence, the marking process exaggerates the importance and distinctiveness of the marked; (3) the marked receives disproportionate attention relative to its size or frequency, while the unmarked is rarely attended to even though it is usually greater; (4) distinctions within the marked tend to be ignored, making it appear more homogeneous than the unmarked; and (5) characteristics of a marked member are generalized to all members of the marked category but never beyond the category, while attributes of an unmarked member are either perceived as idiosyncratic to the individual or universal to the human condition.

(p. 36)

I see male body culture as a perfect representation of the *unmarked* in that it is situated in the middle of a body dichotomy. Like Durkheim’s (1965) distinction between sacred and profane as a mapping of cognitive asymmetry, “the marked represents extremes that stand out as either remarkably ‘above’ or remarkably ‘below’ the norm. The unmarked represents the vast expanse of social reality that is passively defined as unremarkable, *socially generic*, and profane” (Brekhus, 1998, p. 35; see also Brekhus, 1996). I propose that men in male body culture are neither remarkably above the standard (i.e., they are not, often times, male models, exuding perfect muscular form), nor are they remarkably below (i.e., they are not, often times, morbidly obese or otherwise physically/aesthetically abject). Instead, they are often in a linear journey
from a less-desirable body shape toward the ideal standard. They are, in short, the unmarked—reaching for marked (i.e., muscular) status.

While it makes sense to have *fat* men document their experiences in male body culture—and indeed, this would be a fantastic and worthwhile endeavor—I am interested in exploring the *unmarked* in male body culture, under the assumption that hegemonic masculinity is a particularly heavy hitter in the drive and motivation to reach the marked/muscular status. I am not interested in contributing to epistemological ghettos; that is, spaces formed around “morally critical, socially visible, or factually exotic populations, spaces, and behaviors” (Brekhus, 1998, p. 38). While I recognize I am still making distinctions by examining a specific sub-culture of masculinity, I propose that this culture has not been the subject of critical examination (especially from a social-science anchored, communication-based perspective) and is deeply warranted.

I am, then, *flipping* photovoice on its head—hence my regard for it as “participatory photography” (though I use both terms interchangeably). I pull on many of the postmodern influences that guide this study and see the potentials of “playfulness” in research (see Fahy, 1997; Gergen, 1992; Manning, 2013). This playfulness is not referring to frivolity, but rather to 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 create new meaning and understanding of social problems. I am driven by Manning’s (2013) idea that communication scholars should not be afraid to radically redefine the traditional notions of research paradigms, incorporating some elements from one, and different elements from another, in order to more appropriately address the research questions driving our inquiry.
I am further motivated by the framework of crystallization (Ellingson, 2009), a concept that emerged as a postmodern (or postmodern-leaning) response to the idea of triangulation. This crystallization involves the combination of:

- multiple forms of analysis and multiple genres of representation into a coherent text or series of related texts, building 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)

Steering from the work of sociologist Laurel Richardson (2000; Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005), this framework allows qualitative researchers to “construct and articulate multiple lived truths, rather than force [us] to choose among them” (Ellingson, 2009, p. xi). This approach is especially appropriate for this study given my stated desire to examine the body using creative yet rigorous approaches. While my dissertation is not a full-blown postmodern project, it certainly is not one committed to positivist or post-positivist approaches. I see it as a “mixed-genre” endeavor (Richardson, 2000, p. 934) and therefore regard crystallization as an especially valuable framework. As Richardson (2000) notes:

In postmodernist mixed-genre texts, we do not triangulate, we crystallize . . . I propose that the central image for “validity” for postmodern texts is not the triangle—a rigid, fixed, two-dimensional object. Rather, the central imaginary is the crystal, which combines symmetry and substance with an infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multidimensionalities, and angles of approach . . . Crystallization provides us with a deepened, complex, thoroughly partial,
understanding of the topic. Paradoxically, we know more and doubt what we know. Ingeniously, we know there is always more to know. (p. 934)

I also articulate a crystallized approach in this study out of respect for its admittedly feminist roots. As Ellingson (2009) notes, “feminist theorists and methodologists have long posited such disruption of conventional methodological practices as positive interventions into hegemonic (masculinist) disciplinary norms” (p. 3; see also Cook & Fonow, 1990; Harding, 1987). Crystallization fits within my commitment to an interpretivist- and feminist-oriented approach and provides the necessary theoretical foundation for a creative critical analysis of male body culture.

I straddle paradigms and alter methodologies with extreme caution and careful consideration; I believe the use of participatory photography, albeit contrary to the original nature of photovoice work, is a valuable methodology for better understanding male body culture. I believe my methods fit within an interpretivist-oriented approach (Manning & Kunkel, 2014) and have given careful attention to not only the integrity of specific methodologies, but also to their consistency within and adherence to an interpretivist-oriented paradigm. It is my hope that this project is a creative, boundary-pushing endeavor that opens up new conversations on the body within the field of Communication Studies.

Participants and Procedures

Because this is a work focused on male body culture, it makes perfect sense to collaboratively analyze that culture with those who are actively involved in it. As such, participants for this study were recruited from the general research pool in the Department of Communication Studies Basic Course at the University of Kansas (see Appendix A). This course is one of a small handful of courses that sees almost every student admitted to the University of
Kansas. While samples of convenience are quite common in dissertation projects, this particular sample goes far beyond mere convenience. Because of the aged, sexed, classed, raced, and sexualized nature of male body culture, it simply makes sense to recruit college-aged men (i.e., active participants in male body culture; see Thompson & Cafri, 2007) as key informants.

Criteria for participation in this study 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 60-90 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, it was my hope to engage with a variety of men with a variety of body types to better understand the multidimensional nature of male body culture.

Because of the time frame of data collection (the first several months of 2015), participants must have worked out consistently (at least two times per week) for the past year. This criterion was established in hopes of curtailing a high volume of participants starting a new fitness journey—all too common after a series of New Year’s resolutions. This criterion also
allowed me to converse with men about the longitudinal nature of male body improvement and
the trajectory of male body identity throughout the body improvement process. Methods for data
collection were threefold and represent three distinct stages in one overarching data collection
process. All methods and procedures for this study were approved by the University’s IRB board
(see Appendix G). Additionally, the University of Kansas Recreational Services Office provided
enthusiastic consent and support for my study and offered to make specific staff available for
participants who choose to document their visual journey at any of the University-based fitness
facilities (see Appendix F). The paragraphs below highlight the phases of data collection.

Participants. Participants in this study self-elected to participate. In exchange for their
participation, participants received the full, required research credit in their Communication
Studies basic public speaking course. Because of the demographic requirements for participation
(see above), participants were largely homogenous. A total of 27 men completed phase one 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 only one indicating otherwise:

\[
\text{Uh...I mean...I...I'd say straight but I'm probably not straight in the strictest sense; I mean, I wouldn't be that surprised to say that I'm at least partially bi. I'm not opposed. I tend to gravitate toward being more attracted to women, but I won't say I haven't ever been attracted to a man.}
\]

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 19-26 \( M = 20.31 \). All
participants’ names were replaced with pseudonyms in this final manuscript to protect their identities.

**Initial in-depth interviews.** After participants voluntarily sought to be included in this study, they established a time to complete an introductory in-depth interview. During this first interview, participants reviewed the procedures of the study and signed an Informed Consent Form (see Appendix B). In these interviews, I engaged in a conversation about the study with all participants and ensured they were well-informed about the nature and structure of all phases of the study. After this conversation occurred, I followed Leech’s (2002) process for completing semi-structured interviews, which first involved gaining a rapport with my participants. I did so by showing images of my fitness journey in some cases and through casual conversation in others; no one interview looked like another, and I actively strived to have authentic interactions with my participants so that our interview felt more like a conversation between friends than a sterile interview. After gaining a rapport, I used non-prompting, open-ended questions in each interview. Although I used an interview script (see Appendices C and D for interview protocols), I often diverged from this document. As participants answered interview questions, sometimes their answers warranted deeper conversation regarding a theme that manifested in a previous answer. In these cases, I felt that it was necessary to explore those themes, as opposed to rigorously following an interview protocol.

Still, there were general categories of questions that I asked in (nearly) every interview in this first phase. Participants answered a series of demographic questions (e.g., age, race, gender identity, sexuality, student status, and socioeconomic status). All participants were asked questions regarding the length of their fitness experiences (“So how long have you been working out?”; “What prompted you to start 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?”).

Additional questions in this initial interview were dependent on themes that emerged in response to those questions. For instance, in an interview with one participant, Oliver, a response to a question about what motivates him to engage in rigorous workouts 6 days a week, he noted the following:

> I’ve never really had much luck with those girls, and I’ve really been attracted to [certain kinds of] girls my whole life, and I’ve noticed that they seem to be with really buff guys. I’ve never really been buff or have ever enjoyed the lifestyle of trying to pursue a physically fit body so I never really did it. So I guess 3 years ago, I just decided I’m gonna’ have to make some sacrifices, I guess . . . I’m trying to appeal more to really hot girls. That’s the reason.

Oliver’s answer to this question led us into a deeper discussion on the types of girls he was attracted to (“super-hot girls with Uggs and leggings”) and his admittedly high level of anxiety in conversing with members of the opposite sex. While this is just one example, each interview had its own flavor. Because I wanted to yield authentic results from participants in the additional phases of the study, I felt that it was important to explore these themes in depth during this initial interview.
At the conclusion of the initial interview, I asked each participant if they were willing to participate in the subsequent phases of the study. If they agreed (all did, however not all followed through; see results), I provided them with the relevant information needed to engage in the weeklong participatory photography activity.

**Participatory photography.** During the second phase of data collection, participants captured what it *looks like* to be a part of male body culture. As outlined above, there is a theoretical imperative for using photovoice as a method for capturing the journey of the unmarked—in this case, those who are active participants in male body culture. Participants in my study were (surprisingly) enthusiastic to capture their body efforts. I was strategically ambiguous in my instructions to participants as to how they should approach this task. 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, some participants voluntarily admitted they “only do this for the girls” and, as such, referred to their fitness in terms of muscularity and aesthetics; in those instances, I asked participants to capture what it meant to be a *man* pursuing *muscularity*. However, I thought carefully about these distinctions; 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, some participants highlighted “health” as a motivator; I did not ask any participants to visually document what it meant to be a man pursuing “health,” because it seemed to deter from the focus of my study, which is fixed on the body and body politics. In those cases, I used “fitness.”

Although I had planned to provide cameras to participants, I allowed them to elect to use their own smartphone cameras or other devices if they had one—all did. Because data return can
be a significant obstacle in photovoice studies, I hoped that allowing participants to use their own devices would help ensure they followed through all phases of the study. After ironing out the details of photo collection and the general theme of the project, I provided participants with additional requirements. All participants signed a photo release form (see Appendix E). 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). This requirement exemplifies the Foucauldian (1978, 1985, 1988a) themes that undergird this study, seeing the body as a site for both the object and target of power with specific regard to physical spaces and places of body discipline.

Participants uploaded images to a secure shared online folder, which only I had access to. Some participants uploaded images image-by-image, others day-by-day, and others all at once. After all images were uploaded, I downloaded the image folder, ensured all images were in a readable format (i.e., .jpeg), and uploaded them to online individual photo galleries. Images were not uploaded in any particular order and I elected to have the gallery platform sort photos at random; this helped ensure that I was not placing value on any particular image. After this process was complete, I invited participants to schedule a second interview.

**Final in-depth interview.** Because each photovoice endeavor was highly individualistic, I opted to conduct individual interviews with participants. This is an important distinction. There is no universally accepted format with photovoice interviews; both one-on-one interviews as well as focus groups are acceptable (see Harper, 1998; Hurworth, 2003; Wang & Burris, 1994; Wang & Burris, 1997). There are certainly benefits to each; however, in an effort to connect images back to the deeper themes that emerged in preliminary interviews, a one-on-one format seemed most appropriate for this study.
One of the strengths of photovoice methodology is that it allows participants to operate in full agency. They choose the images that they believe symbolize the topic at hand and it is their words that provide the meaning for that image. While it is a wonderfully emancipatory method—especially for those from subjugated populations—it is, to be frank, a researchers’ nightmare. As will be discussed in a later chapter, there are a host of complex issues involved in photovoice, a significant one being that it requires the researcher to yield full control to the participant. Even for feminist researchers who are happy to yield power, we are still researchers—and we like to be able to control our data, just like anyone else.

I quickly realized how little control I had over this interview as photos began to pour in for this study. I had planned to simply allow those images to be prompts themselves for the second interview; and in some cases, this worked. Still, some participants got very creative with their photos. From dead animals to drunken evening events to more shirtless selfies than I cared to see—it became readily apparent to me that the image pool for this study was incredibly diverse. Thus, I revisited the audio from the first interview and attempted to pull out deeper themes that I wanted to revisit in our second interview. In some cases, these themes connected to the images, in other cases they did not. This allowed me to have a little more control over the results so that I could ensure saturation was reached in spite of an incredibly diverse set of image results.

Still, there were commonalities across this second phase of interviews. I began each interview by asking participants, “How did this work? What was it like taking these images?” While droll, this allowed me to have a glimpse at participants’ thought process, motivation level, and general approach to taking images. From there, I asked participants to scroll through all the images, ensure they were theirs, and to think about the feelings they had as they took those
I then asked them to identify a “cover photo” among their collection—one that stood at as the most important among all. When discussing specific photographs with participants in photovoice studies, many recommend the SHOWeD method (see Wang, Morrel-Samuels, Huchinson, Bell, & Pestronk, 2004; Wang, Yi, Tao, & Carovano, 1998), which involves asking a series of questions that correspond to the acronym: (1) What do you See here? (2) What is really Happening? (3) How does this relate to Our lives? (4) Why does this problem or strength exist? And (5) What can we Do about it? Of course, these questions are generic and subject to interpretation (see Novak, 2010); still, they serve as effective prompts for discussion participant-solicited images.

Unfortunately—SHOWeD did not work for me. It did not feel natural and in the first few interviews I used it in, participants repeatedly asked me to clarify what they were supposed to do. Instead, I asked each participant 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? I also asked participants to provide a caption for each photo. Additionally, I incorporated 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.

After discussing all images, I asked participants to again review all the images in their gallery and reflect on them. I concluded second interviews by asking participants the following question: “If I had never met you before and could only get to know you by looking at these images, what would I learn about you?” This allowed participants to reflect on the larger themes that manifested across all images (including those we did not discuss). I also asked participants if
there were any images they thought about taking but did not and what images they might take if they were asked to do this project again.

All interviews were recorded using a digital, handheld audio recording device, as indicated in the consent form (see Appendix B). These recordings were transcribed verbatim on paper by an independent professional transcription service. All transcribers signed a non-disclosure agreement in order to protect participants’ identities. Audio recording of all interviews equated to 29 hours, 47 minutes, and 11 seconds. Transcriptions of these interviews spanned over 672 single-spaced pages of text.

During these interviews, I also took active notes on the interview as it unfolded. I operate under the assumption that the interview occurs within a specific, non-naturally occurring rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968). Taking notes on nonverbal aspects (i.e., eye contact, fidgeting, attire, etc.) helped illuminate the greater meaning-making endeavor and helped ground participants’ voices and highlighted their experiences to a greater degree. These notes were matched with the interview transcripts and used to illuminate participants’ words.

**Procedures**

Visual research is messy research—no doubt about it. Novak (2010) notes that, although “visuality remains a key aspect of engaging and understanding the social world . . . alternative (i.e., nonwritten forms) of data presentation and analysis are disregarded as nonacademic, nonscholarly, or merely performative” (pp. 293-294). In order to overcome the inherent obstacles of visual analysis, it is imperative that visual analysis follows a stated, rigorous, and theoretically-accountable method. As such, I made a decision to embed images within transcripts. Although I did not code images as visual artifacts, I wanted participants’ descriptions of images, discussion of themes, and interpretations to be treated with the same regard as
interview data. All final transcripts were uploaded to MAXQDA, a qualitative-based analytic software, which helped me facilitate the large-scale coding process. MAXQDA does not run qualitative analytic computations (as quantitative programs often do); rather, it is merely a data organizational platform which allowed me sort large amounts of data and code transcripts in an organized way.

Prior to coding, I had a discussion with Dr. Adrianne Kunkel, my dissertation advisor, and Dr. Angela Gist, a member of my dissertation committee, about how to organize and code interview data (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). While Dr. Kunkel and Dr. Gist were not active parts of the coding or analytic process, these discussions helped to create a system of rigorous accountability and helped me ensure that all coding procedures honor the integrity of the stated research goals. Dr. Kunkel and Dr. Gist advised me to treat the interview process in two phases; each interview (i.e., the preliminary interview, the final interview) was regarded as a separate interview experience.

Before analyzing data, I read through research interview transcripts no less than three times each to gain a more complete understanding of the overarching themes and ideas. During these read-throughs, I took detailed notes on any themes that might be salient and the overall fit of the data within the transcript. I then engaged in a two-fold coding process. First, I used open coding (see Strauss & Corbin, 1998), where I attempted to identify, name, and organize any emergent phenomena (i.e., any theme that emerges throughout participant data, despite its assumed ir/relevance). I took notes on codes as they emerged throughout analysis. I re-read the documents multiple times to ensure a thorough open coding process. Using the constant-comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994), I attempted to identify the ways in which themes manifest and guide discourse, with special attention 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, I then categorized and organized data 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, I collapsed themes into several distinct coding categories, including body talk, other talk, eating control, security and surveillance, dominance, gender, discipline, procedures, attraction and sexuality, social support, intrapersonal support, social identity, community involvement, and workout specifics. These categories were not meant to be all-inclusive or descriptive in nature, merely broad categorizations under which a host of multi-dimensional sub-themes intersected. In an effort to explore data at a depth greater than mere surface level, my 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, I allow these themes to interact with each other, creating a rich pathway, which will arrive at theoretically-grounded, methodologically-rich answers to the guiding research questions.

Conclusion

The methods and procedures outlined above served as the stated outline for this dissertation study. Through the use of participatory photography and pre-/post-photograph-elicitation interviews, I hoped to answer not only the stated research questions, but also the resounding call for visual, body research. As a critical qualitative researcher with an interpretivist-oriented bend, I admit truthfully that these methods shifted, changed, and adapted
as necessary—leading not only to interesting results but a newfound thinking in regard to critical methods. Hopefully, this study will add to that body of rigorous, timeless, and boundary-pushing research and contribute to social conversations on bodies, power, gender, and domination, as well as the methods used to investigate those structures.
Chapter 5: Results and Findings

Introduction: In Defense of “Male Body Culture” and “Musculinity”

Research requires a very specific set of skills, one of them being the ability to craft witty phrases that draw the reader in. As I conversed with others about this dissertation project, it became apparent to me that most people thought this is what I was doing with some of the key terms I have used to define this project—namely “male body culture” and “musculinity.” In the first chapters of this project, I regularly discuss the idea of male body culture, a term I use to refer to the social discourse and spaces of male body improvement and physical fitness. The idea of space is critical here because it situates a center point for the development or grooming of hegemonic masculinity within my given context. While I establish this term within my own experiences and attempt to situate it as a living context for hegemonic masculinity, I believe it is first necessary to validate it within the context of this study.

As the results below show, participants regarded the overall structure of their fitness journey as its own, unique context. As the men in my study discussed their pursuit of fitness/muscularity (hereafter used interchangeably, as was dictated in individual interviews), they did so with an understanding that that pursuit happens somewhere. This context is of special importance, as it helps validate that male body culture is, in fact, a cultural space suitable for investigation. The subsequent chapter (i.e., Chapter 6) situates male body culture as a living context, worthy of critical investigation.

Membership and Structures

Male body culture is a context suitable (perhaps especially) for a visual investigation. Participants had no trouble describing the scene of male body culture. During my first interview
with Brant, a tall, lanky college kid with a booming deep voice, I asked him to provide me with a “visual snapshot” of his workout experiences. He had no problem doing so:

*There are people who are there [the gym] that are a lot shorter with bulky muscles. There are guys there who are taller with big muscles. There are people who are just there...really skinny trying to work out and get bigger. There are a couple of guys who look like they’re trying to lose weight and get back in shape... If people are more overweight, I really admire that because being skinny and going to the gym was a little different. I was in shape. People may have looked at me like I’m not that strong, but I was in shape.*

Indeed, individuals within male body culture recognize it as a unique cultural space and quickly recognize how they fit (or do not fit within it). Once an active member within it, spaces of male fitness become spaces of comfort and familiarity; almost an exclusive private club. Jack, a former all-star high school athlete, noted:

*Sometimes I go to the gym and I don’t even work out. I just go up there because I love being at the gym. And sometimes, I will go to the gym and I’ll spend 30 minutes just sitting around hanging out before I decide to go play basketball or go run or something because I love being at the gym... There’s a social aspect to it.*

Similarly, Jackson, a participant with a cheeky demeanor and an all-around happy-go-lucky guy, articulated that his motivations to work out started because of his own desire to pursue “fitness”; however, that motivation changed. Jackson’s daily workout regimen was incredibly rigorous—five times a week, one muscle group per day with a bicep day, a triceps day, a shoulder day, a back day, and a general “weight” day. His general approach was simply to

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1 Throughout this dissertation study, I italicize participants’ words only when the language was copied verbatim from interview transcriptions (see Manning & Kunkel, 2014; Sprague, 2005).
be “bitchin’ every day.” When I asked him what motivated him to keep such a rigorous workout regimen day after day, month after month, he replied:

*Now it’s because I don’t want to lose what I worked so hard to get. But at first, it was…I started because I thought the whole culture seemed cool. Like weight lifters…I liked going to the gym; I liked the sound of the weights and stuff. I guess the reason I started was to look like them. I keep going so I don’t not look like them . . . it gives me a characteristic, I think. Like something for people to describe me. It gives me a quality; a distinction.*

This “quality” and “distinction” is of special importance here. These benefits of membership implicate male body culture as a unique cultural space with clear structures or metrics along which participants’ involvement is gauged. In particular, individuals’ “quality” seemed to translate into their position within male body culture. Consequently, this hierarchy dictated how participants operated within body culture. While the focus on aesthetics mentioned here will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, it is important to note that they are a crucial element in men’s “quality” and distinctive role within male fitness spaces.

In particular, within male body culture, the procedures of discourse are seemingly dictated by the qualities or distinctions of men’s bodies. Brent, an average sized (yet visibly muscular) young man with side-swooped blonde hair, was the first to note that the visual presentation of male bodies in male body culture dictated their communicative behavior. More specifically, he noted that having a big (i.e., more muscular) body awarded a type of “intimidation.” Struck by the oft-negative connotations of the word, I asked him to clarify:

*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.

Oliver recognized all too well how intimidating other men can be. He modified his communication with others (particularly females in the gym) accordingly: “I just think, like, ‘Well, I don’t wanna’ talk to these girls because I’m among way better competition. I’m, like, way lower on the totem pole at this place.” Many other participants commented on the structures of communication within male body culture as well, with most noting that they actively regard (if not appreciate) other men’s bodies but rarely communicate with them. Brant elaborated:

There are some people at the gym…I look at them and try to figure out their workouts, but even then, there are a lot of people there putting out mass. There’s this one guy…he’s pretty tall, probably around 6 feet. He has a good body that I wouldn’t mind having. He’s big, but not too big. His muscles look like he’s gotten a full workout.

When I asked if he ever communicated with this man, Brant noted that he admired him from afar—“I don’t know him. I just see him.” Interestingly enough, despite widespread appreciation for other men’s performance and bodies, men in male fitness spaces tended to follow an unspoken set of rules regarding discourse within those spaces—they did not talk with others. Instead of communicating with words, men communicated with their eyes. Bodies were a type of discourse, in and of themselves. They emitted clear messages regarding men’s value, worth, and place in the male body hierarchy. Throughout nearly every interview, participants
discussed the idea of visually reading and consuming others’ (especially other men’s) bodies. The following section provides greater detail on this phenomenon.

Body Consumption

To Consume. In addition to its fitness identity, male body culture also takes on a distinctly aesthetic function. It is a place where bodies are on full display for others’ consumption; and indeed, there is a lot of body consumption within male body culture. By body consumption, I simply mean the visual acknowledgement/reading of other men’s bodies, often in regard to the ways in which they measure against an assumed social standard or against participants’ bodies, themselves. The idea of body consumption was first noted by Oliver:

*There are guys at my gym who are probably a 10 and there are more people who are attractive and more attractive than me at the gym. It’s a location where I don’t feel very secure . . .*

Oliver identified men who were “a 10” (i.e., a 10/10) and immediately used that evaluation as a comparison metric for his own body. Oliver was not alone. Many other men fell prey to comparing their bodies against the bodies of others in male body spaces. Brent similarly noted:

*You see a guy in the gym and you think, ‘Wow! I bet he could get any girl.’ I mean, I’m, like, straight and everything, but you still see a guy and you’re like, ‘Wow! I’d love to look like that.’ So I think just that and just experiences in seeing what type of guys attract girls and stuff like that. You can just tell in the gym when you’re looking at that guy.*

Brent’s clarification about his sexuality shows that the term “body consumption,” as used here, is an appropriate one. While the term evokes sensuous imagery and a sexualized
motivation, the act itself is sensuous and sexualized. The reading of other men’s bodies involved intent focus on their aesthetic details and analysis of how those details presumably led to increased social capital. Simply put—men check out other men in the gym. As will be noted later in this chapter, men consume other men’s bodies nearly the same way they consume female bodies. For instance, Jackson was incredibly candid. He admittedly spent a lot of time working out in the gym, so I asked what he did to occupy his time. His response: “Lifting. I look at the girls.” I asked if he looked at anything else: “Yeah. I like the male body, I guess. I like male bodies that look like they’ve put work into them. . . I think it looks better.”

Taylor was a challenging participant—I had some trouble getting him to engage with the questions—except when we started discussing the ideal male body. Once he began to talk about men’s bodies, he quickly opened up:

*Did you ever see the ads for like Calvin Klein and stuff? Those guys are really cut... Bigger, usually broad shoulders. If you ever look at a clothing line in a store, like a Dick’s Sporting Goods, they show athletes that are these big, 6’4” jacked dudes . . . If I had to put a role model of how big I want to be, I’d say, like, Mark Wahlberg . . . He’s like jacked. He’s not so big that he can’t move his body. He’s probably mid-30’s now. He’s probably, like, realistic in size . . . Body fat under 8% . . . Bigger legs, bigger chest, broader shoulders, and maybe a little bigger arms... but still athletic and still able to play sports and move my shoulders.*

Taylor knew, without hesitation, what the ideal male body standard was for him. He had thought a lot about it. Clearly, he had seen it many times. As Taylor actively consumed other men’s bodies—in this case, male models and a well-known celebrity, he internalized those
bodies as a type of standard. His consumption was so rich that it surpassed mere aesthetic appreciation; indeed, the aesthetics of the widely publicized male muscle trope were embedded onto his identity, both as a man and as a fit man. Taylor was not alone. Many other participants documented the idea of consumption within male body culture. Dale, a participant with a propensity for humor throughout all interviews, visually documented this body consumption with the following image:

![Image of a gym room with people exercising.](image_url)

*Figure 1. Judgment*

_The dumbbell room. It’s kinda’ the same as basketball. I feel when you walk in there, you are very judged. People look around and it’s kind of the respect thing. Everyone’s doing their own thing, but they’re looking over their shoulder to see_
what the guy next to them is doing . . . There are dudes in there who are massive.

I would definitely say I’m above average when I walk in there. It’s a good feeling.

Yeah, I don’t feel not confident when I walk in at all.

Dale felt like he “measured up.” Maybe he was not the most massive man in the room, but he was, thankfully, “above average.” But what is average? If average exists, doesn’t there need to be a standard? Participants noted there was and it was a visual standard. This visual aspect was especially salient in male fitness space, but as noted in the preceding chapter, male body culture is not bound to this context alone. In my conversation with Derek, an incredibly inspiring and nice participant who had lost over 100 pounds in the last year and dropped from a size 62 to 44, he noted that other men’s bodies were regularly used as a metric for success. Derek provided the following image as a man he pointed to that had the “ideal body”:

![Figure 2: Ideal](image)

He’s a really good buddy of mine. Just met him after this year and we’ve been really good friends since. He’s about 6’ 5”, so he’s quite a tall guy. I took the
picture because he, I think, is probably the closest thing I get to what the ideal man looks like. . . It’s kinda’ hard to see ‘cause his hair is so short, but he’s got blonde hair, blue eyes, he’s got some facial hair, he’s over 6 feet tall. . . he towers over me, so pretty tall guy. His shoulders, just this perfect broad...just perfect.

I was struck by the relatively conservative metric Derek used as the standard of male body perfection, especially in light of other examples provided by participants. For instance, Oliver selected the following photo as his album cover (i.e., the most important photo of his collection):

![Figure 3. The Ideal Build](image)

That’s probably, like, the ideal figure I would say. Like, if I were to...you asked me in the first interview what the ideal body type would be. I think whatever guy this is— the Abercrombie pic...this big is probably the ideal physical build . . . I don’t measure up at all.
Oliver’s ideal male body standard differed greatly from Derek’s. As more interviews unfolded, I realized that nearly all participants had a different standard of body excellence. For instance, Brock, a genuinely nice, smaller guy with blonde hair, captured almost a dozen photos of his idea of the ideal male body. We started our conversation by talking about the following photo:

*Figure 4. Excellence*

> When I think of exercising, there’s a clear bicep down into the chest [he pauses to point at a chiseled line running down between his pecs]. There’s a clear triceps. You can see that separation . . . When I think of masculinity, I think of confidence so with his [Michael Jordan’s] tongue out, I think that he’s almost taunting. . . I think this photo screams confidence.
But it wasn’t just Michael Jordan that Brock identified as having the ideal body. To him, Michael Jordan’s body was a bit unattainable because his whole life depended on his physical fitness; as such, his body reaped the rewards of intense training and discipline. Instead, Brock pointed to the following two images, screenshots taken from his Instagram account featuring male models from popular fitness inspiration social media accounts:

![Figure 5. Achievement and Dedication](image)

This guy [on the right] looks to be...I’ve never been one for tattoos but just, like, the sheer size of this guy. When I look at this one [on the left], I think of, like, how much time he has to take in, like...I mean, that’s diet. That’s all discipline. That can be all built [points to the guy on the right], but that core right there is all diet and running [points to the guy on the left]. So, to me, that’s just...that’s obviously a lot harder to obtain than that [on the right].

Brock and I talked for almost a third of our second interview about those images. He repeatedly brought up the body standards that he identified as the most important:

I’m only 165. I know I’m not...I’m relatively small in comparison to guys like this and guys like this [in the images above]. I know that . . . I want to get stronger; I
want to look broader, you know? I wanna’ have that defined jaw line that those
guys have. When you’re just sitting, there’s nothing hanging down here [as he
gestures to his chin area]. And then, I mean, compared to others, you just wanna’
have cleaner abs than someone else or you wanna’ have wider shoulders or
bigger circumference on your arms. . . . If we were to go on Spring Break—like,
me and five other dudes—if we all had our shirts off and were just hanging out,
which of the five guys or six guys would someone notice right away? You want to
be that guy.

Participants throughout the study regularly engaged in the conscious consumption of
other men’s bodies. This body consumption implicates male body culture not only as a space
worthy of investigation but as a space worthy of critical investigation. In particular, body
consumption within male body culture places its members in a unique subject-object
positionality. While certainly subject—that is, an observer to the surrounding context and
discourse—the seemingly well-accepted notion of body consumption and comparison within this
culture means that all bodies are objects, too (even the observer’s). Thus, male body culture is a
space rife with the contentious dichotomy of self and other. To consume or be consumed—both
seem inevitable. The paragraphs below detail the act of bodily comparison that extend from
men’s consumption of bodies.

To Be Consumed. A key idea that emerged in my conversations with participants is that
men actively strive to have a better body simply for the purpose of consumption. In short, men
wanted their bodies to be in optimal condition so that they could be appealing to others. For
instance, Jay, a timid and gentle guy, noted the following:
You’re going to compare yourself to everyone else. You want to be seen as...I want to say...more attractive...or you want to be seen in equal terms. And so if, say, this guy over here has six-pack abs and you just got regular abs, you’re going to want to try to get six-pack abs because you might see something in him where he’s, like, he’s got a lot of girls talking to him whenever he takes his shirt off for some reason, or a lot of girls look at him, whereas not as much girls look at me...

Jay revealed that consuming other (male) bodies is, indeed, a common occurrence within male body culture; however, that consumption drives a cyclical compulsion to be consumed as well. Jay’s consumption of another fit man’s body led to his desire to improve his body so that it would be regarded similarly, specifically by the opposite sex. Jay was not alone. Many other participants were quite frank about their motivations—they wanted to be appealing to others (namely, the opposite sex):

> When I think of exercising, I solely—well, obviously, it’s being healthy—but I truly do it to look better for girls. I won’t deny that to anyone and that’s the shallow aspect of it. (Brock)

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Honestly, it’s...probably the biggest reason is the ladies. They are the ones that push you to lift 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 want to make up that difference to get closer to that 10 [i.e., the 10/10 woman], you’ve gotta’ put in the work. (Zeke)

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3 It is important to note that participants overwhelmingly identified as heterosexual.
Even though I have a girlfriend, it’s just, on me, it’s a huge motivator. I want girls to look at me and go, ‘Wow! That guy’s gorgeous!’ I want to, when I walk in a room, I want them to think, “Whoa! Holy shit! That guy’s good looking” . . . “I wish I knew him,” or “I wish I knew that guy.” I want girls to feel the way girls made me feel when I was a kid. They intimidated me. But it’s horrible of me. . . Honestly, I want to intimidate them like I felt intimidated when I was a kid. (Nick)

I won’t say I work out for the chicks, but I will say if I’m at the gym and it’s a crappy day but there’s a really hot chick there, I will definitely work out harder. (Taylor)

I mean, of course, a good body is gonna’ appeal to women, so that’s always a good thing to look for. (Adam)

Participant after participant hinted at or directly addressed the association between attractiveness and body improvement. I asked Oliver if he had always been this focused on getting girls’ attention by pursuing fitness. His response? “Yeah, very debilitating so.” While I’m not sure it took a dissertation to prove the point, the basic truth is this: most men work out to be physically and sexually appealing to potential partners. Chad proved this point pretty directly with the following image:
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.

I appreciated Chad’s straightforward assertion, but he was not alone in his frankness. Oliver was admittedly incredibly driven by sexual desire. One of the images he took for this study was actually a screenshot from his Tinder profile. Tinder is a social networking application used primarily as a means of connecting people. In the mainstream, it has become regarded as mostly a hookup app. Given Oliver’s stated desires, this description seems appropriate:
I’m extremely perverted, like, to the point where I used to work in an auto shop and I was too perverted for the auto shop guys. They were telling me, ‘Calm down!’ . . . Yeah, like, I’m a very, very sexual person . . . I really wanna’ sleep with girls like this and I like talking about that, but girls don’t really like it when you’re just coming in and are like, ‘Oh hey! I’m really perverted.’

To be fair—it isn’t 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
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. How novel an idea—that men do things to impress women. Admittedly, this is a simple notion but an important one. Perhaps it is not the act itself, but the valence(s) and the manifestation(s) of it that provide a deeper understanding of male body culture. In the paragraphs below, I explore how the act of body consumption leads to the regard for the body as a type of currency or social capital.

**Body as Currency**

In regard to the ways in which men’s drive for sexual satisfaction manifests in male body culture, numerous participants revealed an interesting phenomenon: their body was a type of *currency*—a bargaining chip that helped tip circumstances in their favor. Thus, participants were motivated to improve their physique simply because it meant that they were more likely to have a competitive edge in some social arena. For instance, early in our conversation, Derek regarded his body as type of currency. When I asked him what motivated his strict workout regimen, he had no problem telling me:

*I see beautiful women [everywhere], but I want to raise myself to their standard of beauty and what they are looking for in a man. I wouldn’t feel right if I did pursue them and try to go for that kind of relationship because I don’t think I look like the kind of guy they deserve or want. So I discipline myself to keep*
going down even more . . . The body is sort of...The body is the...it's kind of the hook. So the body part is to try to finally have someone say, 'You look attractive enough, physically speaking....'

Derek’s idea that the body is a type of “hook” resounds many of the themes echoed above—that men are striving for better (i.e., more socially acceptable a la more fit) bodies so that they can attract women. But his words also echo deeper themes than mere improvement. He went so far as to note that he “wouldn’t feel right” pursuing certain types of women because his body does not measure up to what is, in his mind, a “fair” exchange. In Derek’s mind, one type of body deserved another. The idea of the body as currency within a body marketplace manifested repeatedly in my conversations with participants. More specifically, this theme involved elements of the conversation where participants indicated certain types of bodies were “owed” to others. The body itself was a neutral currency, given more significant value only when it was well-finessed, with clear physical aesthetic value.

For instance, Brent was in a “very committed relationship,” yet admitted that girls, broadly speaking, were a “huge” motivation for him to work out. He noted that his body allowed him a certain level of confidence in navigating the turbulence of his relationship:

*I would be lying if I said there aren’t times where you kinda’ wanna’ say, ‘Hey! You better, like, continue to treat me well because I could always...’ I can tell you right now, my girlfriend has told me several times, ‘I’m jealous of the way I can tell girls are looking at you,’ and stuff like that. So yeah, definitely some leverage.

For Brent, his body was a corporeal savings account of sorts; an investment with immediate value but also something he contributed toward for should an “emergency”—in this
case, relational—arise. Chad corroborated, noting that he was still adding to his “body account,” but he knew what he was saving for:

![Figure 8. The Goal/The Prize](image)

*This is, like, the...if you set goals for yourself, this is like “THE GOAL” all wrapped up into one package. Trying to get that kind of girl and how do you do that? Money, power, influence, good looks, strong...stuff like that...I mean, like, that’s how you, like, why you get in shape, why you do all of this stuff...besides for your own health and your looks and stuff. Major drivers for me and most people I know are probably women and things like that.*

Chad’s body factored very heavily into his self-perceived market value in the “hookup marketplace.” Closely correlated, Chad identified “money,” “power,” and “influence”—all factors associated with hegemonic masculinity (Donaldson, 1993; Pyke, 1996). Still, the body
factored most heavily. Chad noted later in his interview, “It’s hard to go out there and get yours without a fit body.” Many others validated and had no problem telling me exactly what it was they were trying to “go out and get”:

Between 5’ and 5’4” in height, blonde, name ends with an ‘E’ sound, squeaky voice and aspirations to be a dental hygienist or a lawyer or an orthodontic assistant; those types of girls . . . Fit. Not, like, buff or anything but just athletic . . . Well, 110 or 120 at that height, I guess. Tan...manicure, pedicure . . . Not very visible body hair. People have arm hair and whatnot . . . No pubic hair, just real feminine. Straight teeth, white teeth, pretty eyes, eye makeup, good use of makeup . . . Small boobs. I like small boobs. A big butt is always nice . . . I’d like for her to be younger than me. (Oliver)

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Skinny . . . Not skinny where she’s constantly counting calories and not fat where she’s constantly eating what she’s not supposed to, but somewhere in between that. (Andres)

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Definitely a thin stomach. Butt. Ribs not really showing as much, you know? Maybe. . . If you train your obliques, you have a framed stomach, which I think looks really good on women. Definitely built thighs...and a pretty big ass. (Adam)

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About 5’6”...blonde, probably. 120-140 pounds . . . I don’t know . . . a bubble butt? [giggles] . . . I’m more of a butt guy, myself. (Chuck)

***
Short. About 5’2”. Fit...as in running. Skinny, but not skinny-muscular. Petite. A small body. Very attractive . . . I’m more of a butt man myself. I would say smaller in the chest area, larger in the waist. Not fat—but not muscular. (Caleb)

Participants knew what they were sexually attracted to and were not afraid to make it known. Their plans for meeting this goal? Body improvement. Participants often discussed a “matching up” of bodies. For instance, Oliver, who had been in a lengthy pursuit of fitness, admittedly only for sexual appeal (remember, he was “debilitating” motivated by sex), had no problem telling me how this pairing process worked. Despite an insatiable craving for sex and intimacy, Oliver had only ever been in one relationship. At the time, his body was less than stellar in his mind. Of no surprise then (to him, at least), it was paired with a female body that was also less than stellar: “She was fatter. She had yellow teeth. I didn’t think she was very attractive. I was a virgin and she was down, so I just figured—why not?” I pressed him further, asking him to provide me with some index of his self-perceived attractiveness: “On a scale of 1-10, I’d probably give myself an 8. I feel like I’m decent looking.” He noted that before working out, he would classify himself as a “6” and that with the body improvement he would soon reach “9” and be able to land a “hot girl.”

Many other participants corroborated. For instance, Brant noted that the body is a type of compensation not used only in relational/sexual transactions. In his experience, his body awarded him certain leverage in the gym: 

I see a lot of guys who have no idea what I’m doing. I’m not as strong as they are but I feel that I’m on my way to their level. I feel like I’ve been to the gym a little more...know what I’m doing. I feel more on their level, at the same time, I’m not quite there yet. It’s not an awkward thing, like, ‘I need to get out of this guy’s
way.’ It’s more, ‘I have a right to be here too. We’re all here to work out.’

Everyone got started somewhere.

But even he noted that this body currency was also heavily related to attraction, romance, and sex:

*I’ve never really been a guy to go out and talk to girls. I’ve always been shy about that…but I’ve definitely noticed my standards have gone up. Like, look around, like, what I’d want to…Like, before I was a little more complacent with dating girls but now I really want more athletic girls…and really attractive.

Zeke chalked it up to dominance. For him, the body was yet another element in his overall pursuit to hold sway over others:

*If you want to be dominant in a sport, which is a pretty masculine things most times, you wanna’ be able to be fit. When it comes to the women, you wanna’ be dominant over your peers and be able to get the woman you want, not, like, the second hand woman—I know that’s not a good word. And the fitter you are, the easier it will be for you to get that.

Dale indicated that the idea of body as currency was a common phenomenon and not something restricted purely to male body culture or his own personal experiences. He selected the following photo as the most important of his collection:
When I asked him why, he noted:

*I found that most of my pictures were, like, about impressing other people . . . I thought they both—as far as physical health—I’d probably say they’re on the same level which was also one of the reasons why [he took the picture]. Most of the time, you don’t see people on opposite ends of the spectrum as far as physical appearance.*

Many participants touched on the idea of body currency, but few offered any rationale or explanation for its occurrence, except for Brock, who simply chocked it up to evolution and survival of the fittest:

*When girls think of who they wanna’ marry and I guess mate with—which is a pretty terrible word but you know where I’m going with it—they want good genes so they’re gonna’ look for someone tall so their kid can be tall. They’re gonna’*
look for someone athletic because they want their kid to be athletic. Someone pretty good looking, you know? . . . My whole family is very short, so it’s...I sometimes see it as a disadvantage being only 5’8” and the only thing I can think to do to make myself more aesthetically appealing is exercising and trying to broaden up.

Participants’ regard for the body as currency hint not only at the social construction of aesthetic beauty that exists within and stems from body culture(s), but also how these cultures influence a host of other phenomena, including romantic attraction, relationship potential, self-worth, drive to communicate, and more. Body work, then, becomes identity work.

But just what does this process of body/identity work look like? Clearly men are engaged in body culture for the results and the corresponding social benefits that come with them but just how far are men willing to go to attain those benefits? The following section summarizes the regimens men go through to groom their body for optimum social success.

**Hard Work and Body Discipline**

I was repeatedly fascinated by the level of work and dedication that participants held to when it came to their workout regimen. Participant after participant told me about their day-to-day fitness routine. All participants worked out at least three times each week, and many worked out much more—sometimes every single day, multiple times a day. Additionally, most workouts were quite laborious, often involving over an hour (sometimes several) of strenuous physical activity. Participants reported a wide variety of workout activities and levels of intensity.

*Six days a week. I usually take one day off for rest. I break up my upper body in two days. Today, I did back and biceps. So, tomorrow I would do chest, shoulders, and tri[cep]s. So, I break that up into two. After every two upper body, I do a leg*
day. So four are upper body and two are leg days. With leg days, I usually do abs as well and then I usually run afterwards to cool down... [The whole routine is] like an hour and a half. (Dale)

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Four or five [days a week] . . . I have three main different workout days where I work out different muscles. There’s my chest and tri day, my back and bi[ceps], and my legs and shoulders. They’re about 40 minutes per workout. If I do play basketball, I play basketball before I work out. (Paul)

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I try to go every day but the last couple of weeks I’ve gone two or three times a day; Plus I have practice for boxing twice a week or three times a week . . . I’ll usually do, like, a split. Like leg day, or upper body day, or sometimes I’ll do at least one full-body workout a week for lifting. For boxing, I’ll be doing hours of stuff, hitting pads, various running and stuff like that. As far as lifting goes, usually I’ll hit a main lift and then I’ll hit auxiliaries for that and then another main and auxiliaries again. (Elliot)

***

Six or seven [days a week], depending on how busy I am that week. Like, today, I lifted twice already . . . I did back and bi’s today, so I should take 48 hours rest before I hit the same muscle groups again. I usually do two muscle groups a day. So tomorrow, I’ll do chest and tri and then legs and shoulders. Then, I start over the rotation. I usually try to take Sunday off because I’m busy anyway. (Taylor)
There were no consistent workout regimens throughout the study. Although all participants worked out at least three days a week, some did far more. Additionally, some counted recreational sports as working out while others defined it strictly as bodybuilding. Regardless, an overwhelming majority of participants demonstrated an incredible level of commitment and discipline in maintaining a rigorous workout regimen.

Some participants’ regimens were especially notable. For instance, Caleb was a member of a campus-based ROTC unit. As such, the motivations for his workout were likely different than others not aspiring to complete military duty. Still, his dedication to working out far surpassed the output level necessary to satisfy the minimum requirements:

![Figure 10. The Work](image)

*This morning, I took this. Uh, we got up at 5[a.m.] and we went and ran sprints on this hill… and it was nine degrees outside . . . and it was a painful morning. No one else really wanted to be there but, uh, this hill…it just means a lot cause we run it. If you ever stood at the bottom of that hill, it’s a very large hill. And we*
would sprint all the way up the sidewalk and around, down this, and over here.

And we did that just over and over again . . . ’bout an hour.

Additionally, Xavier was a college athlete who truly articulated a *lifestyle* of fitness. He ran anywhere between 50-70 miles, completed three or more weight training sessions each week, and often competed in a formal sprint, hurdle, or track competition each week. Because of NCAA athletic regulations, he was required to have one day off but noted that he still ran on that day, as well. His body was a significant gauge of his progress:

*Most of the time, when it’s really, really warm outside, we work out shirtless so you can tell and the coaches are like, ‘This is good because we can see your abs’.*

*Or if someone is coming back from an injury, the coach would say, ‘You have to worry about what you eat so we can see your ribs again.’*

Of course, I asked him the inevitable—were his ribs visible? They were.

*Figure 11. Light Makes You Fast*
He noted that when he cannot see his ribs he feels “fat.” “It makes me feel like I’m not disciplined enough or that I have to make better decisions. It makes me feel that I’m not going to be as good as I could have been.”

Participants like Caleb and Xavier revealed a much more rigorous side of male body culture. Their excessive body discipline stuck out, even in a crowd of other participants who had high standards for their fitness and physique. As the second phase of interviews unfolded, more participants corroborated this excessive body discipline. Sometimes, participants pushed their bodies beyond corporeal capability. Talk of injuries became common but participants simply found ways to work around them, never abandoning this pursuit of the ideal body. Caleb visually documented a recent (and significant) injury:

![Figure 12: Goals](image)

*My Achilles tendon was that bad it was just huge. It was swollen and when I moved it—it still does some now—but when I move it, it creaks like an old piece of rubber band...and it’s nasty and you can feel it grind, kind of. And it’s...it’s*
painful. And I had all this pain and I hurt it...I was running... I took a week off to heal... I figured out that I can’t take more than a week off this because if I do, then I’m not gonna’ be in shape... So I just keep going.

Like Caleb, Jared also shared that he had several “obstacles” to overcome in regard to working out. In his case, those obstacles were injuries that kept him back from his self-perceived full potential:

Everybody has their own things to overcome... If you were to see me at the Rec [the recreational center on campus], you wouldn’t know I have a bulging disc in my lower back and asthma and that my shoulder is bruising through my entire arm. You just wouldn’t know that looking at me.

In Jared’s case, his experience with injury led to compassion: “You might not know that person broke their shin a month ago, or that person separated their shoulder last week.” Others, however, noted that injuries were a visible marker of pride. For instance, Jack noted:

I can be proud of injuries. When I was a junior in high school, I hit somebody and my helmet came up, my chin strap came up, caught my nose and caused me a nose bleed. We were at the 20-yard line at the time. I went...the trainer pulled me out, got my nose cleaned up and wanted to keep me out a little bit longer. I just went back out and played and we scored a touchdown. I was pretty proud of that.

Brant also affirmed that there was a deep connection between brushing off injuries and masculinity. For him, “sucking it up” was a particularly masculine endeavor. He presented the following image to further elaborate:
Injury is a big thing. You almost don’t wanna’ act like you’re tired, injured, or whatever. You’re like, ‘Oh, I got this. I’m good!’ I’d definitely say that’s a very masculine thing—to be tough.

Additionally, while talking about his gay cousin and partner, he noted that they were more on the “feminine side.” His metric for evaluating their gender role orientation was their orientation toward pain and injury:

They aren’t that tough. If they hurt themselves, you know they don’t give off that vibe that, if they stub their toe, they’d be like, ‘Oh, whatever!’ Or, if you’re walking and hit your elbow on the door, they’d be like, ‘Ow!’ as opposed to, ‘Oh,
whatever!’ . . . It’s definitely seen as more feminine when you’re acknowledging when you’re hurt.

Other participants corroborated. Nick proudly affirmed the connection between body discipline and hegemonic masculinity—that is, masculinity in its truest form (namely a heterosexual masculinity ripe with power). For Nick, aesthetic evidence of this discipline yielded positive responses, namely from women.

![Figure 14. Red Knuckles](image)

*I box usually three to four times a week . . . it...looks badass, but it’s kinda’ symbolic of the effort and work I put into my physical fitness more than anything . . . I mean, it fucks my knuckles up . . . Of course, um...well, you know, well, what initially did it was when some girls made a mistake of telling me that finding guys that fought other guys were hot . . . It’s totally sexual to a girl to ask me, ‘Hey, why are your knuckles fucked up?’ I would...I would fucking ROLL with telling her, ‘Oh, it’s because I box a lot and then get fucked up—I do hardcore stuff like that.’
For Nick, the end result of excessive body discipline was sexual attraction; again validating the idea of body as currency within male body culture. Still, for others, this body discipline had a much greater purpose—it was a masculinity supplement in their overall (masculine) identity project. In particular, constantly pushing the body past its limits meant greater gains in the gym and also greater social gains among other men (and women). The following section details how male body culture helps groom a hegemonic and dominant branding of masculinity.

Boys Will Be Boys: Masculinity and Dominance within Male Body Culture

As I discussed male body culture with Andres, the idea of body improvement as a masculine community emerged. Andres was 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:

I guess it’s just fitting in. Yeah, ‘cause I mean...as a person of different descent, you always have those people pointing out the differences; not critiquing it, but just pointing them out. . . 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. 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. Andres provided the following image to further explain the relationship between masculinity, fitness, and power:

*Figure 15. I Came. I Conquered.*

*I see a manly body for my age and size. I see a manly teenage body. That’s what I see . . . That picture, just my arms and how I’m giving myself off, like I’ve got a nice...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.*

Dominance was a key focus on Andres’ desire to participate in male body culture. 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 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 are 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:

*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:

*Well, if...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.

These two quotes above implicate 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:

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. (Jack)

***

I don’t want to say intimidating [to describe my motivation], but . . . people look
at you and if you’re strong, they assume you can beat them up. It’s gonna’ be like,
‘Dude, I wouldn’t mess with that guy.’ (Jackson)

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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 . . . just
being able to defend your own. (Chuck)

***

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. (Elliot)

But wait—does that really happen? Because I spent two complete interviews with my participants, I got a solid understanding of their backgrounds. True to my undergirding assumptions about the raced, classed space of male body culture, most were white and came from admittedly middle- to upper-class families. I did too, and not to suggest that all experiences are universal, but I was certainly not familiar with this rampant violence and need for self-protection. No one had ever tried to mug me. No one had ever tried to rob me. No one had ever tried to harm my family. So I asked, is this something that happens frequently? Elliot noted, “To be fair, [in my town], people pick fights for absolutely no reason…” But even he (along with others) agreed that these occurrences are not common.

So really, then—what is the purpose of this intimidation factor? As a whole, that term cues negative connotations. Still, body culture, specifically, 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 masculinity and body improvement. Many participants wanted to look “intimidating” to others. Others 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... Its just kind of like you’re a warrior or you’re fucking He-Man.”

Of no surprise then, several men provided images of weapons. Their explanation? These weapons simply made them “feel” more manly. Oliver provided the following image to further explain:
Figure 16. 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 the following two images to further discuss his point:

Figure 17. 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 18. Protection Beyond Your Fists](image)

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:
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 paint 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 tried to summarize it for me: “…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 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 themselves, 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 the images provided above hint at deeper and more violent interpretations of this dominance, they were (1) relatively conservative in regard to their violent nature and (2) only a small subset of the overall theme. Still, ultimately, men felt a pressing need to exert dominance, but did so along a continuum. As noted above, the way participants expressed this dominance ranged drastically. Additionally, the payoff they expected for perpetuating dominant masculinity varied greatly. One thing was consistent, however—there was nearly a universal acceptance of the idea that men—fit men, especially—needed to be dominant. 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 the following image:

*Figure 20. 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.

Here, 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 this image of Goldman Sachs, using it to help further explain his idea of masculinity:

*Figure 21. Goldman Sachs*
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 the following image to frame his discussion of the relationship between the body and money:

![Figure 22](image.png)

*Figure 22. 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 23. Rise to Power

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:

*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*. In the section below, I highlight this focus on masculine control, both as directed toward self and others.

**(Self) Control.** The expectation to be a dominant man manifested in a variety of ways. It was physical. It was social. Ultimately—it was personal. As the theme emerged throughout several initial interviews, I questioned who was policing men and ensuring they met this seemingly understood “dominance requirement.” Participant after participant confirmed that they, themselves, were the monitors of this standard. Derek, who had recently lost a significant amount of weight, commented that perpetuating dominance (specifically through his body) was
something he did for himself. He provided the following image, which showcased a pair of size 60 pants that he used to wear before he started losing weight:

![Figure 24. Patience](image)

I think of the person who used to wear them and I think of...they weren’t very happy... That’s, like, the strongest thing. It feels like there’s a deep disconnect now that I look back. ‘Was I really that fat?’ I mean, that’s what goes through my head... It tells me that...in terms of being a man...I think we have more control over our bodies... and I thought, looking back at it...looking at that...that showed about a person who didn’t really exercise that control... This just reminded me of having control. Like, being a man...it’s not like letting an emotion getting the best of you. Not suppress them, but you’re not supposed to let them control you. You’re supposed to have a grasp of what you’re feeling... It just symbolizes back in a time when I didn’t have control and now I do.

For Derek, body discipline was something he could control. It not only awarded him dominance in relation to other men, but it allowed him to have dominance over a past self and control over his future. Self-dominance emerged regularly throughout interviews:
At this age level, it’s something I can control. I mean money…I can work little jobs an 18- or 19-year old can get [but] 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. (Brent)

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The only reason I feel fitness is important when it comes to looks is because it’s something you can change if you want. If you don’t want to be weak, if you don’t want to be bigger, you can change it. Yeah, it’s hard, but you could do something about it. People are born with the noses or the ears or the eyes they have; those things you can’t change. If I don’t like my ears, I can’t do anything about it, so I don’t care…But if I feel like I could be fitter or stronger, that’s something you can change. (Zeke)

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I feel like…there’s a commercial I saw that says, ‘Happiness is related to health.’ I feel like that’s very true because…if you just sit around and do nothing all the time, you get depressed, you feel badly. I feel like, and I feel like people…I’m a very independent person. I’m an atheist. I’ve pretty much made it myself in my own life, so I feel like you have to fix your own problems. I’m very self-reliant. If you have a problem, you have to look at how to fix it. (Matt)

Whether the outcome of self-dominance was for the purpose of attraction (as with Brent) or personal standard-setting (as with Derek, Zeke, and Matt), self-dominance emerged as a defining element of male body culture. The standard that men set for themselves—and other
men—relate heavily to the idea that true masculinity is aggressive; it is disciplined. True masculinity is dominant, over both self and others.

As interviews developed, participants seemed to visually paint an image of the ideal man. In addition to dominant, this man was socially constructed using a host of criteria combined from participants’ perceptions of the social expectations that dictated masculinity as well as criteria that participants imposed upon themselves. In an effort to better understand the micro-level functions of male body culture and in an effort to capitalize on the participatory photography function of this study, the following section will provide a detailed overview of the body expectations men within male body culture perpetuate and feel compelled to adhere to.

The Ideal Male Body: Social Motivation

As I have waded through this study, I have used a variety of terms to capture men’s experiences within male body culture. Terms such as “fitness,” “muscularity,” “body improvement,” and others have been used interchangeably. This is not an indication of haphazard design; I simply recognize that participants have a wide range of experiences that dictate how they see male body culture and their motivations to be a part of it. A term I was careful to never use was “health.” In short, I felt that it was too loaded and perhaps too easy an “excuse” for participating within male body culture. True to my expectations, some participants regarded health as a significant motivator for their body improvement endeavors. Below, I highlight health as a motivator for men’s physical fitness.

“I just wanna’ be healthy”. I expected many participants would cite health as a major reason they engaged in such excessive workout regimens. I, too, had fallen prey to the “health”-fueled body panic that has swept throughout our culture in recent years (see Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Several participants confirmed—they did this for “health.” However, health as a
motivator was discussed almost flippantly. When I asked their motivation for working out, the following participants responded:

Like, I think for me, my goal is to be in shape. (Brant)

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The number one thing, by far, was blood pressure and I wanted to feel better. I always wanted to be really fit, but that’s easier said than done. It was the blood pressure...that was the tipping point... I’m obsessed with health; I just love to feel healthy. (Brent)

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Confidence. Health. I feel like I’m healthier... It might be that I feel healthier, but I don’t know that I am. (Chuck)

***

It’s a good outlet for me... it’s healthy. More than anything, it’s one of the few healthy outlets I have... I spend the majority of my time f**cked up... Usually I’m drunk and stoned everyday. Everyday... everyday on the hour, usually by 6 or 7 o’clock, I’m pretty f**cked up... so I’ve been trying to find more healthy outlets.

(Nick)

One participant’s use of the term “health” felt extremely sincere. Derek, who had recently lost a significant amount of weight recounted the experience of losing his father at a young age to health problems:

He was much bigger, a smoker... and eventually he passed away from a massive heart attack. He had diabetes so badly that his legs... ‘cause there’s a symptom of diabetes where legs will actually swell with lots of fluid, and his legs were to the
point where one was infected and the other was perfectly normal...but the other one was enormous. It was probably twice the size of my legs now... He died in our current home. He died in the garage while I was asleep at home... It scared me... I don’t want to end up like that. I don’t want to have my son or daughter find me like that...dead. It was a terrible day.

Derek wove in themes of his father’s health throughout the study. One of his most discussed images was a pair of size 60 shorts that he used to wear. Although the image was cited above as it related to Derek’s desire to have control over his body, he elaborated on the image to a greater degree, tying it to memories of his father:

It reminds me of my dad, actually ‘cause he was a fairly big guy and he was probably bigger than me at one point. So it just seems...the waist or the way its hanging...it does remind me of my dad...because when I used to see my dad’s pants or see his clothes, it would always stretch out to here [as he spreads his arms widely]...And I thought, ‘Wow! That’s really big!’ And now, looking at it, I’m getting the same exact reaction but those are mine...those are my pants... I was becoming my dad... I don’t want to die like that...I don’t want to be my dad.

Derek’s motivation for fitness was largely (and perhaps the most authentically) motivated by a genuine pursuit of health. With him, it did not seem merely a quick-shod justification for his regimen. While I am certainly not making assumptions about the intent of others, even those who cited “health” as a motivator, I must recognize that health did not manifest as clear motivator for men’s general desire to workout. Still, it was an easy motivator to cite. Who can fault someone for wanting to improve their health? In my first interview with Chad, he kept noting that he worked out to be healthy. Citing changes in his diet and his workout routines, he kept noting that
he worked out to be healthy. I was surprised, then, when he submitted the following image to the study:

![Grizzly Man. Rugged Dude. Tough Guy.](image)

Figure 25. Grizzly Man. Rugged Dude. Tough Guy.

Of course, I questioned Chad:

*I guess, for me...thinking about it...if I was gonna’ do something, I’d rather, for, like, in my thinking, I’d rather chew than smoke cigarettes. I get that it’ll mess you up for the long-term and stuff, but with this stuff, you can still work out and chew, but if you smoke cigarettes, it’s a lot harder to run and do stuff like that. . . . Obviously, it’s not for the healthy/fitness types. I don’t know, but in my mind...it’s not like taking away from your six-pack or your biceps or something like that. It’s ruining something internal—which is worse...but...*
I was caught off guard by what I saw as a competing dichotomy. Chad wanted to be healthy, which to him meant never weighing in at more than 200 pounds, but had no qualms about chewing tobacco. In my mind, and in the minds of health research (see Henley, Thun, Connell, & Calle, 2005 for a review), Chad’s focus on “health” seemed a bit misinformed. While I certainly cannot decry the validity of health as a motivator on Chad’s case alone, it, in tandem with other men’s focus on aesthetics as a main motivator, at least call into question the true motivation for men’s body modification practices. In short, “health” often felt like a stock answer; a way to justify excessive body discipline.

**Aesthetic Motivation.** Even those whose “health” citation felt genuine noted that it was still only a part of their overall motivation. I asked Derek how important looks are in his pursuit of fitness: “*Quite a big one.*” He further explained:

> The body is the...kind of the hook, but it’s only the hook and that’s it. So the body part is to try to finally have someone say, ‘You look attractive enough, physically speaking.” But then the intimacy and the closeness is what comes from my personality. . . The body part is what I need to get down because I don’t think I’ve ever had that part down. I don’t think I’ve ever looked attractive enough so that I can say, ‘I think I do look attractive.’ I can’t say that now.

For Derek, like many others above, the payoff for the aesthetic benefits that came with working out yielded a greater degree of leverage with women. Others joined Daniel’s pursuit of aesthetics, most without any regard to the reward they bring. For many participants, this aesthetic reward was the gauge by which they measured their progress. For instance, Andres noted:

> I want an ideal body...I just feel like once I get there, I’ll know. . . My motivation is just basically looking at myself and looking at where I was. I went from this to
this. If I keep on going, I can see myself now and look at what I am in a year and be like, ‘I’m glad I kept going.’

Matt expressed an extreme aversion to becoming fat: “I just don’t like it. I look at myself in the mirror and I’m just like, ‘Ew!’” I asked him how he gauged if he was fat or not fat in his own mind: “That’s a good question. It just goes by my looks, really.” Brent noted that his shirtless body profile was the biggest indication of his success or failure: “Every time you eat an unhealthy meal...like, if I eat at McDonalds, the first thing I’m doing is going to the bathroom and taking off my shirt and just checking.” Similarly, Xavier, who noted above that his visible ribs indicated his body fat percentage was most ideal, commented: “I look at myself in the mirror, I think, ‘Oh! That’s perfect!’.” Nick corroborated. The mirror was his gauge as well and he provided the following image to share his perspective:

![Figure 26. Mirror, Mirror](image)

I look at myself. I guess I just start picking out things that aren’t at my standard...which I think is kinda’ funny since my standard is always raising... I guess, in my head, I just really like super duper fit guys...like every single muscle is toned...is sculpted to their bodies. I mean, yeah, I guess that’s where I want my body to be.
Nick spent a great deal of time discussing the role of aesthetics in his overall motivation. He further clarified:

*I feel...honestly, I feel a social obligation to work out...almost like a modern-day, 21st century male. I think that’s the way, I don’t know...all men, just like women, face a lot of double standards too and I think there are a lot of images that we’re expected to look up to as displayed by the media...More than anything, I want to look good. I feel like I should look good and I’m expected to look good. I feel like girls look at you and you’re expected to look good as a male.*

**Social Expectations.** Above, Nick implicated body standards as something perpetuated by an outside force, a theme woven throughout many of my conversations with participants. Indeed, there appeared to be a set of unspoken norms or rules which dictated the ways men felt their body should look. Caleb noted that both men and women are expected to adhere to certain body norms:

*I think it’s more of the sociological thing—that is, masculinity and femininity. The stereotypical thing, you know? You look at it and you see it’s culture-driven. It’s not just personal... Everybody has a type of woman or man that they’re attracted to. It’s not just brought up by you; it’s also brought up in the culture around you. It’s how you were brought up and what’s instilled in you from a very young age.*

Taylor felt a similar level of pressure. As noted above, for him, it was in part due to the ways in which media depict male bodies:

*Did you ever see the ads for, like, Calvin Klein and stuff? Those guys are really cut. Bigger ...usually broad shoulders. If you ever look at a clothing line in a*
store, like at Dick’s Sporting Goods, they show athletes that are these big, 6’ 4” jacked dudes….so I think there is a lot of pressure from society to get bigger.

Many other participants also implicated the media as a source for male body standards. I asked them where they learn what they want their body to look like:

I think just watching TV shows and movies and the gossip magazines you would see at Wal-Mart or in the store. You see these...they’re models and they’re a little airbrushed but still...you would see those bodies had some veins showing and those six-pack abs. And I figured, why can’t I have a body that looks like that?

(Derek)

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It’s media…it’s media. It’s all over the TV. It’s all over the social media. Everywhere. Um...as much...as much as I’d like to say everything is all on me and I’m not doing it for anybody...well, I am doing it for me, but, at least my goals, they come from social media or TV or anything like that. Because, you know...that’s what you see and what is desirable. They make it seem like that is desirable. (Elijah)

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I mean...definitely just culture. Things obviously...famous actors who are known for being, you know, masculine or attractive...you can definitely identify patterns with that just by having big, cut arms and legs and abs and it’s funny....I probably...a lot of it is from, you know, from movies and TV...because I think that’s where a lot of people are exposed to overly...you know...above average.

(Gabe)
***

Media. Like movies...everything you see. If you watch, like, a romantic comedy, you see a huge jacked dude always getting the girl. They feed into that, obviously. It’s definitely...THAT [media] probably...maybe first of all. Then, kind of the people around me, like, push. (Dale)

***

You know, the media likes to tell you what it all looks like, but you have to understand...everybody in the media is just trying to sell you something. Once you realize that, you realize it’s not the end of the world. (Zeke)

I agree with Zeke—it’s not the end of the world. However, it certainly is an interesting observation. Many have identified a link between media and body standard-setting (hooks, 2000; Kilbourne, 1994. 2003) but it men’s own regard for media (body) agenda-setting that validates that body of literature to an even greater degree. While interesting, that connection is not a core focus of this study. Instead, I am interested in the standard that has been established—be it from media, other social forces, or somewhere different altogether. One thing clearly emerged from this study—there is an ideal that (these) men are trying to reach. Despite interviewing men of all shapes, sizes, and fitness regimens, that ideal was surprisingly consistent. As men fleshed out what the ideal body was, they did using a variety of linguistic and visual descriptors.

This was a visual study, through and through. Although I am not interested in analyzing images specifically as independent artifacts, the aesthetics captured during participants’ participatory photography endeavors validate that male body culture is one categorized by visual stimulation, motivation, and presentation. This became readily apparent as individuals began to describe just what it was that they were pursuing. Truthfully, they had no trouble providing me
with a working definition of the ideal male body, complete with visual affirmation. The following section details participants’ visual accounts of the ideal male body.

The Ideal Male Body: A Snapshot

This study was designed to better understand motivations for working out. I expected that men would produce images that captured their own bodies. True to the interpretivist-oriented underpinnings of this study, I was careful to not specifically guide participants in any particular way. So many participants asked, “So, are you just looking for, like, selfies?” I would tell them that I was emphatically not just looking for selfies (but those were fine, too); ultimately, I wanted them to capture what it “means to be a man pursuing physical fitness” (which became my mantra as I dialogued with over 30 participants). Still, and of no surprise, I collected dozens of images of men’s bodies. Below, I segment these bodies part by part.

Arms. If I were to guess on the front end what might have been the most common body part men targeted for improvement, I would have guessed arms. After all, the stereotypical account of muscular men conjures up images of those men flexing and showcasing bulging biceps. And for some men in my study, this held true. When asked what part was the most significant target for him as he worked toward body improvement, Elliot responded:

Maybe arms, I guess. That’s always been my weakest. My arms...don’t get built when I lift. They kind of stay the same . . . I don’t take my shirt off. . . . you’d look good...really good with your shirt on.

For Elliot, arms were the part with the most public-facing value. Taking his shirt off in public violated social norms for most contexts, but muscular arms could be showcased without violating those body norms. Although Taylor initially cited legs as his target—because of their utility in sports and recreation—he later corrected himself:
My legs are a more physical answer... But aesthetically and as far as women go...yes, arms...definitely. I think most girls are looking for arms and abs, but we don’t walk around 24/7 with no shirt on, so I think arms definitely do help. A lot of my friends give me crap because they say I can pick up girls really easily. They think it has a lot to do with my physical appearance.

Gabe confirmed that arms have a certain aesthetic value to them, especially when it came to opposite-sex attraction:

Um...for me...probably bigger arms. I feel like that’s...you know...I even hear girls talking, ‘Oh, that guy—he’s not that attractive, but he’s got great arms,’ and they’re all like, ‘Oh yeah.’

But for Gabe, arms were also a way to gauge his own success:

![Figure 27. Pleasantly Surprised](image)

So I was just sitting there doing my homework and I went to roll up my sleeves and I just, like, rolled it up and it was, like, caught up on my arm—which is just something that I was...just...it nev...it never used to happen to me until I started working out a lot more often. And it was just a little like, ‘Wow! What I’m doing is actually starting working, like, my muscles are actually getting bigger!’ And so it
was just, like, one of those little thing. You can look at your arms and you’re just
like, ‘Eh, it’s an arm—whatever.’ And then…it’s almost a quantitative thing.

Surprisingly, save the few mentioned above, arms were not heavily cited as a targeted
body part. In fact, of all discussed body parts, it was the least cited. Few even commented on
them, and those that did included them as a subset in their lengthy laundry lists of ideal body
modifications.

**Legs.** I never cared too much about my own legs. For me, there were too many other
public-facing parts to worry about. As such, I expected that legs would not emerge as a critically-
targeted body part. True to my assumptions, it was the second least-cited part. However, some
found them incredibly important—like Xavier:

*Legs . . . That’s the most important part of your body....when you run. . . That’s
my life. That’s my life. For example, if I hurt myself on a corner...if it’s my arm, I
don’t mind because...I don’t know, it isn’t gonna’ bother my running but if it’s my
foot, it will make me worry about it.*

Xavier was a college athlete—an International student from Canada on a paid scholarship
for running on his university’s track team. As such, legs as a core body focus was all about
utility, especially in regard to his performance as a track athlete. He went on to describe his *most
ideal* legs:

*The calves would be really big. I’m sure you’ve seen. . . When they have huge
calves [winks approvingly]. Mine would be really big. You could really tell the
Achilles is really defined. You see, you can get defined but not big...*

He provided the following image as visual evidence:
But in his mind, his legs were perfect. I asked what he would think if he saw another guy with his legs:

I’d be jealous. I think it’s really good legs. I’d be proud of that guy because I know it’s not just like a gift to have these legs. It’s hard work. Most people don’t have these defined muscles. You need to spend hours in the gym and running to have good legs and veins and stuff.

While Xavier initially chalks his leg obsession up to utility for running purposes, his later explanations also reveal that there is an aesthetic stimulation to pursue greater leg girth. Thus, the case can be made that even Xavier pursued leg improvement at least in part because of the aesthetic significance he assigned to them. He was not alone. Brent also heralded legs as the most important as well; however, unlike Xavier, girth was exactly what he wanted to abandon.
After losing a fair amount of weight, Brent felt that his thighs were one of the major areas that hid his results:

*Number one is my thighs right now. They’re just big, but when I was down to 155...that was considered a very healthy weight for being 5’9”, my thighs were still big. I don’t know if that’s just genetics...that a lot of the fat in my body is in my thighs...But I would say, if I could have skinnier thighs, that would be one thing [to improve].*

For Brent, weight loss had led to thighs that were not muscularly defined; to the eyes, they did not look as finessed as he thought they should—their aesthetic value did not match the value of discipline he exerted to improve them. As such, Brent felt self-conscious about his thighs, affirming to an even greater degree that even legs are targeted for their perceived attractiveness to others. Nick noted that legs were far from the most important body part, however, when it came attraction. He only recently started working to improve his lower body:

*Um...you know, I wish...I need to work on my lower body a lot more, which I started doing more a lot recently...But when I started lifting weights, it was because I was, like, I just wanna’ do the muscles girls care about, so that was arms, chest, back, and stuff.*

As a whole, men regarded legs as important but not *that* important.

**The Upper Body.** Nick was one of those men. He recently began focusing on his lower body (including legs) in an effort to balance out years of effort finessing his upper body. As he notes, the upper body is an especially important target in male body culture.
That is, men, seemingly across the board, are interested in “improving” their abs, pecs, chest, back, and core.

Many participants were quick to recognize their body-concentrated efforts in these areas. In short, everything from the waist to the chin was heralded as the holy grail of the male body. Even the participants above noted that arms were a focus simply because they don’t take their shirt off regularly in public. It’s clear that men see the upper body as a visually stimulating symbol of their hard work and dedication. Of no surprise then, the upper body was as much defined by what it should not look like as much as what it should look like. Specifically, many participants cited body fat as a significant concern. For instance, Brent noted that although he wanted to be “big” (i.e., muscular girth), he was cautious because there were degrees of bigness that were or were not socially acceptable:

There are significant types of big...[I want to be] the kind that doesn’t jiggle. So, I mean...you can just tell the difference between a person who has man boobs, I guess. I used to have massive man boobs—versus somebody who works out and has a big chest. It just looks different; like sagging versus nice and firm when you have a shirt on...it looks a lot different. (Brent)

Many other men casually indicated that they were actively seeking a body free of visible fat. When I asked them about their ideal bodies, the responses implicated fat as something negative:

Defined. Like a 6-pack and you don’t have too much fat around. (Andres)

***

If I don’t see my ribs, I’ll be worried about myself and I’ll think I’m too fat.

(Xavier)

***
When you’ve got another guy there who doesn’t work out and just kinda’ has a
beer belly and...it’s just like...compare the two...and most of the time, people are
going to pick the guy who works out and takes care of himself. (Adam)

***

Every time [I] eat an unhealthy meal, like...if I eat at McDonalds, the first thing
I’m doing is going to the bathroom and taking off my shirt and just checking. So
it’s always in the back of my mind. I always think one meal is gonna’ make me
look fat. (Brent)

***

People might not give you a chance if you are at the extreme end and if you’re
like...this sounds so bad...if you’re obese. Some people might not give you the
time of day. They might not be as inclined to strike up a conversation with you.
It’s almost a pre-prejudice thing. It’s like the first thing they see even before they
meet you. It’s something they can judge you off of. (Dale)

***

It think just..like, 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. Just like, if you’re chubby... (Chad)

***

If you’re trying to improve yourself and work out every day and didn’t have
flab...for me, it’s just almost like the idea of trying to get physically fit and, in that
definition of physically fit is not to have that flab. So...my goal is to get fit and
that’s why I don’t want flab. That would mean I’m not reaching my goal. (Ted)
I asked Ted if it was possible to be flabby and fit at the same time. After a long pause, he responded: “I think you can be…but it just doesn’t fit into my goal.” Fat was regularly cited throughout men’s discussions on the ideal male body. True to my experiences in male body culture, fat emerged as negative aesthetic, something that did not “belong” in this culture. While a detailed discussion will be reserved for the discussion in the following chapter, it is crucial to note that I am fat. Thus, as participants sat down with me, I imagine they edited their discourse to be socially “appropriate” and non-offensive to someone they likely perceived as fat. Of course, I can only speculate that participants perceived me this way; however, my body presentation aside, participants’ discussion of fat shows that they are open and frank in their understanding that it does not fit within male body culture.

Because fat is such a feared and disdained aesthetic, it should come as no surprise that participants spent an incredible amount of time finessing their upper body. When I asked Jared what part of his body he focused on the most, he noted:

> I’d say, like...upper body...midsection up because, one, it’s functional and, two, that’s what people look at the most. Like, if you have a really strong core, it’s going to make your life a lot easier with posture and being able to do things around your house. And having, like, a strong upper body to help you lift things around, but it’s also something you see in the mirror every day.

Gabe similarly noted that the upper body was a place where he directed his energy:

> I think a lot of people talk about abs but people think about having defined pecs just as much. They don’t talk about it, but they think about it…and I’ve never had those defined pectoral muscles…I have, like, a little bit of a...I think it’s called a pec disorder, where your sternum is a little concaved. So you can even actually
kinda’ see it in the picture….so it makes my pecs look not as defined. But in this, I thought my pecs…I’m starting to see muscle build up.

Maybe men really do think a lot about pecs; but Gabe is correct on one thing—they are all talking about abs. When I asked Otto what his current focus was in his workouts, he noted, without hesitation: “Abs. . . It seems like that’s the most important part to have to be fit. People don’t really…it seems like people value abs more than any other muscle.” Others readily agreed:

Probably my abs. It’s just one of those things. It’s definitely a self-image type thing…and the way other people look at you. I don’t think I’ll ever stop trying to get them as good as I can. Two days of bad eating can do quite a bit of ruin. It’s just one of those things I’ll always be working for. (Adam)

***

Abs. Just because that’s where all my extra skin’s at…and I would do anything to build that. You can’t even see my abs at all. You can see upper, but lower…you can’t see anything. (Brent)

***

I guess a perfect body…or at least the body that I want…is somewhat of a visible six-pack. To me, that shows discipline enough that you can work yourself down to that point . . . There’s also a level of attractiveness, too. I think…at least it seems like it, that girls kind of want that . . . I think the body also reflects the mind; when I see guys who have these six packs with these—not too big of muscles because there is a point where you can get too much—but there’s a nice happy medium that I want to achieve. (Derek)
The men above cited the finessed upper body as a chief goal among (presumably) all men in male body culture. It was upheld as one of the most difficult body parts to finesse, yet when a perfect standard was attained, it brought a certain sense of accomplishment or self-pride…or so everyone thought. No men in the study actually indicated they were pleased with their abs or upper body—or any part of their body, really. Instead, those who discussed it seemed to always be reaching for something more. While this point will be discussed in greater detail below, Nick’s discussion of his upper body warrants examination here:

_The image I want to have of myself in my head is probably completely unachievable… Giant chest, six-pack abs whether you’re flexing or not…ripped biceps, bicep veins… really muscular back, whether you’re flexing or not. Like, basically it looks like you’re constantly flexing, but you’re not. That sounds pathetic or shallow but…I mean, growing up, I…like girls I dated, they would say, ‘Such and such is a really cute guy,’ and I would compare myself to him. I’d always think, ‘Here’s what he has that I am lacking and what I need to improve upon.’_

Nick’s account—along with many others above—reveals that goals are an intricate structure of male body culture. It seems these goals are never truly attained; rather, they seem to ebb and flow as individuals constantly refine their workout regimen and, correspondingly, their concept of identity as it relates to their body. Regardless—one goal seems to bind all men together—aesthetic currency. As noted much earlier above, the disciplined body—especially certain parts of it—are regarded as having stronger (sexual/relational/social) marketplace value. That is, those parts, if not competitive against the status quo of the imagined “average” (or in some cases, “perfect”) male body, mean that participants’ overall “value” in that marketplace
diminished. Jackson was the only participant to actively discuss his back, but his motivation for improving that muscle group affirm the fit male body as a type of currency:

![Image](image_url)

**Figure 29. Looking Good From Behind**

*My back is good. . . I remember back in high school, in the locker room—everybody would be changing and people would be like...this guy would be, like, taking a picture of my back and showing me and I’d be like, ‘Oh! It begins!’ . . . I don’t wanna’ stop getting compliments. That’s part of the reason I still lift, actually. I don’t want people to stop thinking I look above average.*

Jackson was highly motivated to improve his back because it showed dedication to the smaller details; the back was not a regularly visible muscle group. Having a toned back showed others that he was “above average” and did not merely focus on the visible details. But this visibility was a regularly cited motivator for finessing the upper body, partially because of the relationship between visible fitness and marketplace value.
“Manscaping” and Body Maintenance. To help showcase their efforts, many men in the study actively participated in “manscaping,” that is, removal of chest and abdomen hair. Nick provided the following image, which he cited as the most important in his entire collection:

![Image of smooth stomach]

**Figure 30. Smooth**

*I think it’s a beautiful illustration of just the modern day depiction of males. I mean, you know...I mean, when is the last time you turned on, like, I don’t know, like, um a Calvin Klein ad or something and you saw some really hairy stereotypical masculine figure. You don’t. They’re always hairless... I just felt like I looked more desirable when I was just completely shaven... I always thought I looked muscular when I was hairless for whatever reason... I don’t know if that’s accurate or not. I just thought that I always looked my best.*

For Nick, body hair impeded his social desirability and level of attractiveness, even to himself. Oliver similarly commented:

*I’d like to not have so much body hair. I actually was seeing an electrologist for a while, but that got a little too expensive because I have a lot of body hair... Ideally, I’d like to not have any body hair on my torso... Definitely not on my*
back. Maybe a little bit of hair below the belly button. I’d like to have, in the pubic area, just, like, a little triangle . . . Definitely no hair on my ass . . . It would be ideal if I had no chest hair at all but I have a lot of chest hair so I don’t know if that’s really feasible just to get rid of . . . Definitely no back hair, though.

For these men, body improvement was closely related to showcasing that improvement. Body hair was an obstacle; it got in the way of them showing off their success.

Unfulfilled Dreams and Body Shame

Knowing that showcasing the body was such a significant focus and knowing that my population was, by most standards, representative of an ideal male body standard, I was certain that I would see a great deal of ego and confidence from the men in this study—I didn’t. In fact, of great surprise to me, men talked more about what they didn’t like about their bodies as opposed to what they did. Like Oliver above, who hated his body hair, others found specific places on their body that they identified as less than ideal, like Nick:

![Figure 31. Morning 100-something…](image)
Shirtless selfies are the most stereotypical...and this was just, like, right when I woke up in the morning and I’m in the bathroom just to wash my face and, like I said, the first thing I see when I look at myself is that little crease right there...that’s immediately what I notice...my right chest doesn’t look as strong and my nipples I think are, like, slightly off from inadequate chest workouts. By also what I immediately noticed...and right here is that ‘V’ where the abs are whatever. This side is much stronger than the other side.

While Nick’s body disparagement is certainly not any cause for alarm, it is interesting. The Western social script of masculinity does not often include such a level of introspective, emotionally-engaged, body shaming (see Bordo, 1999). Still, when Nick looked at his overall fitness progress, he did not see his progress—he saw his failure. When I asked Brock to look over all the images he produced from the study and tell me what he saw, he echoed Nick’s sentiments:

I think you would find a kid who isn’t happy with the way he looks...but knows that there are other people who are in the same boat just trying to improve themselves, both physically and mentally...The impression you would get of me would be that, really...I’ll admit...that I am pretty shallow.

Brock went on to reveal that he “truly [does] it to look better for girls.” His body, however, was not the sought-after commodity he perceived it needed to be to have significant marketplace value. As such, he was dissatisfied with the way that he looked. Others agreed—even those who were already in committed relationships, such as Brent, who noted he was “very self-conscious” after losing a fairly significant amount of weight:
I did not let my girlfriend see me without a shirt on for the first couple of months [they were together]. Over the summer, that was hard. The summers are what I struggle the most with because of going swimming and stuff. People notice that I won’t get in the pool because my shirt is on. People are always asking why I’m not swimming. I have to make up a lie because I’m still too self-conscious. Most of my closest friends…I’ve told them and they know. So it’s gotten much better. My girlfriend totally doesn’t look at me differently.

Since Brent admitted his girlfriend “never cared,” I asked him if perhaps others wouldn’t care as well if he went shirtless at the pool. He responded:

*No…I’m not there yet. In addition, I have stretch marks. That doesn’t bother me nearly as much as the extra skins…but I think if I was at a pool and I saw somebody like that, it would catch my attention…so I just assume it will catch other people’s attention, too. When you know somebody on a personal level, things that are maybe disgusting to some people aren’t.*

Despite his significant weight loss transformation, Brent still felt that his body did not meet the standard of social desirability. Gabe also indicated that he had negative thoughts about his body in its current state. Below is a photo he snapped of himself flexing, along with his thoughts on the body he sees:
Figure 32. Very Focused

I definitely have a hard time taking compliments... I mean that... there's probably plenty of other issues with that but... uh... you know, it's kind of... it's definitely strange. . . I'm not exactly, you know... I don't look exactly how I want to look right now so if somebody's going to... you know, my image isn't... it's like, you know, like, I can be better... but I don't feel as good about the way I am.

Gabe's admission caught me off guard. After all, by social standards, he is highly toned, thin but clearly defined, tan, well-groomed... in short, he symbolizes what many men indicate they are reaching for yet he still “doesn’t feel as good about the way [he] is.” Paul, another participant, described his thoughts on the ideal man—“Um... tan, toned, you know... yeah. They've got a six-pack, I suppose. Their chest and arms look like they work out. They don't have tweaky legs.” Paul essentially described Grant. Paul also essentially described himself, although he took no images of his body to display here. After looking at how his body (at least in my
mind) already embodied the standards he claimed to be reaching for, I asked if he measured up to his own standards. He responded: “No. I don’t measure up at this point . . . No, not yet. I think I can go a lot further.”

Derek corroborated. Even though he was in the “best shape of [his] life,” he still felt a significant degree of self-consciousness:

*I [avoided taking] shirtless selfies. First of all, I don’t really think I look good enough for shirtless [images] and I don’t think that I have enough muscle to be a ’big thing.’ . . . too much of a body in progress . . . I wanna’ feel accepted.

Is total acceptance—by self or others—ever actually realized? If you were to talk to the men who participated in this study, you would likely assume not. Despite their detailed fitness regimens and, at least by my account, ideal bodies, men indicated that they were still largely dissatisfied with their body. Consequently, men engaged in a significant level of self-objectification; that is, regarding their bodies as projects or objects without regard to their own humanity.

In many ways, men’s bodies were regarded as a machine, comprised of different parts. Men were always seeking to “upgrade” certain parts, with some being more salient than others. If the body is representative of a machine, then the electrical supply or life-source to this machine is the notion of hegemonic masculinity. While participants were, indeed, chasing after an ideal body it was not a body alone they were chasing after—it was an ideal male body. As the results above reveal, men’s bodies are distinct social entities, inscribed with both physical and social markers that connote their value in multiple social contexts. The body is a communicative instrument, through and through, and as men ready their body to be actively read and consumed by others, they focused on building the ideal machine for the masses to enjoy.
Conclusion

In their conversations with me, men regularly cited dominance and control as significant motivators for body improvement. When they detailed their workout regimen, most readily associated it to their desire to be “dominant” or “better than” others and have competitive value in some other arena, be it sexually, socially, professionally, or otherwise. This stated goal fits within the hegemonic structures of masculinity that I implicated in previous chapters; however, despite a clear goal to be more powerful, men revealed that they do not perceive that they occupy those positions. This chapter presented a series of results related to this study. In an effort to address the stated research questions, I have uncovered several major themes.

First, through exploring these men’s experiences within male body culture, I propose that male fitness and the context in which it occurs is indeed a cultural site worthy of critical exploration. There are unique membership “requirements,” which are unsaid yet remain as democratically-governed criteria through which participants are initiated into male body culture. While there are no official “membership police,” men seem to self-regulate and come to negotiate their role within male body culture. From this self-evaluation, men determine how they should act, including how they should operate and communicate in male body spaces.

Second, in male body culture and male fitness spaces, the body is an aesthetic artifact. True to my own experiences, bodies are actively consumed by others. Despite an assumed standard of heterosexuality and despite the fact that heterosexual men are not typically “supposed to” visibly consume other men’s bodies, body consumption is a regular, expected, and extremely powerful force within male body culture. Men looked to other men’s bodies to determine the social script of acceptable masculinity and also used these bodies to measure their
own body project. As such, men were able to visually flesh out what they wanted their bodies to look like, how they look now, and what they were supposed to look like.

Third, and perhaps of no surprise—men work out for sex. While it certainly is not a revolutionary notion, it certainly does raise an interesting discussion on the motivations for “fitness.” Despite social discourse that implicates fitness as an activity in pursuance of “health” and something to remedy America’s “obesity epidemic,” men in this study told me directly—this isn’t really about any of that. Their conversations with me revealed that they see their body as a type of currency—something that, if improved, could potentially yield great benefits. Those benefits, largely speaking, were sexual (or relational, at best).

Fourth, to yield those benefits, participants engaged in extremely rigorous methods of body discipline. The body became almost an external project, of sorts; something that participants contributed to, in hopes that it would yield benefits. No obstacles were too large to overcome—injury, time, exhaustion—all were simply part of the process. Their masculinity dictated that they simply overcome those obstacles; in short, they had to “suck it up.” After all, that was the manly thing to do and as their conversations reveal, this pursuit of the ideal body was just as much of a pursuit of an ideal masculinity.

Fifth, this ideal masculinity was very specific. Specifically, it was a hegemonic masculinity focused on dominance, control, competition, and in some cases, violence (or at least hints of it). The idea of “control” emerged regularly. Participants wanted to ensure that they remained in control in their masculinity; that is, they wanted to know that when it came to “measuring up,” they were at or near the top of the hierarchy, not only in male fitness spaces but also in their own self-concept. Their body project was just as much about dominating themselves as it was about dominating others.
Sixth, men’s motivation to work out was intricately social in its function. Put simply, they wanted to know that their bodies would be regarded well in the social sphere. Closely related, there was an aesthetic motivation; men wanted to know that their bodies looked good, to themselves but especially to others. As a consequence, men engaged in a lot of self-surveillance to ensure their bodies held an optimal competitive edge in light of a (real or assumed) social standard.

Seventh, and of no surprise, then, men had a variety of highly specific and detailed requirements for their body. Arms, legs, upper body—men knew what their body should look like and how it did (and did not) meet those standards. In addition to finessing their bodies in male fitness spaces, men ensured they maintained those bodies for aesthetic showcasing, specifically through acts like the removal of visible body hair. Still, despite well-developed bodies and extensive maintenance techniques, men still felt that their bodies did not measure up to the necessary standards.

The seven paragraphs outlined above implicate male body culture as a space appropriate for critical inquiry. Using photovoice and in-depth interviews, I attempted to answer the guiding research questions for this study. Below, I briefly address those research questions before moving into a deeper analysis of the methodological, theoretical, and social implications of this study.

**RQ1: Hegemonic Masculinity**

In response to RQ1 regarding hegemonic masculinity as a motivator, I observed hegemonic masculinity as a significant motivator in men’s pursuit of a more ideal body. While several participants cited “health,” 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, upper class reading of manhood—telltale features of hegemonic masculinity, that is the most revered and honored type of masculinity (Gesualdi, 2012). The findings of this study prove that male body culture is a unique space, whereby operations of power on the body are uniquely gendered. While this point will be discussed at length in the following chapter, it is important to note that notions of gender within men’s experiences of male fitness were highly performative in their function.

As Forbes (2002) notes, gender is not a given; rather, it is something that is done (see also West & Zimmerman, 1987). Although this directly contradicts many men’s accounts that this is simply “what men done” or that men are evolutionarily wired to act in certain ways, the findings reveal that men understand how to act the part of the ideal fit man; the characteristics of that man—from sexual promiscuity to an obsession with violence—are scripted heavily into male body culture but are also scripted into the general structure of hegemonic masculinity.

Butler (1990) notes, “gender reality is performative, which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed” (p. 278). Drawing on Butler (1990), it makes sense then that the performance of (hegemonic) masculinity is welcomed on the stage of male body culture. She contends that gender performance is corporeal in nature:

*The act that one does, the act that one performs, is, in a sense, an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. Hence, gender is an act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (p. 272).*
Reading male body culture through the lens of Butler, hegemonic masculinity is produced through repetitive acts or performances of that version of masculinity. The context of male body culture is especially important here, given that hegemonic masculinity (like other power structures) is upheld institutionally (see Gesualdi, 2012). As such, men’s performances of hegemonic masculinity are only successful insofar as they are positively regarded in the given institutional space. Ultimately, men’s experiences in male fitness spaces are theatrics of dominance; bodies are props signifying the preparation for this performance and indicate to others that men have successfully “auditioned for” a role on the stage.

In response to this guiding research question, hegemonic masculinity was inscribed throughout all men’s experiences within male body culture and there were a host of identifiable elements that implicate male body culture as one intricately associated to hegemonic masculinity. Participants’ disregard for injury and excessive body discipline as a masculine endeavor (see O’Brien & Hunt, 2005), association between violence and masculinity (see Katz, 2006), undergirding heteronormative assumptions (see Hall & LaFrance, 2012), and active pursuit of a more “masculine” body (see Grogan & Richards, 2002; Weinke, 1998) implicate male body culture as a space where hegemonic masculinity is actively engaged. Men desired to have a competitive edge among other men, after all—that’s what masculinity is all about.

While hegemonic masculinity did not specifically serve as an inhibitor of body improvement, it did inhibit men’s self-concept. Because the standard for the male body was intricately tied to hegemonic masculinity and because the standard of hegemonic masculinity is an ever-moving goalpost, men often felt that they did not measure up, causing a great deal of self-objectification, low self-esteem, and body shame. These results are not surprising given the large amount of scholarly research that has tied poor self-esteem to operations of hegemonic
masculinity within spaces where the male body is especially salient, as in male body culture (see Fredrickson, Roberts, Noll, Quinn, & Twenge, 1998; Hebl, King, & Lin, 2004; Martins, Tiggemann, & Kirkbrid, 2007; McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005).

**RQ2: Social Implications**

In response to RQ2 on the social implications of men’s drive for fitness, the above paragraphs reveal that as men simultaneously strive for ideal bodies and ideal masculinity, they often fall short of their goal. Indeed, many participants indicated they were largely dissatisfied with their performance, their body, or their social identity. While the associations between identity and male body culture will be explored at length in the following chapter, it is important to note the connection here as well. Because men saw their body as one of the (if not the most important) defining elements of their overall identity project, they were often left dissatisfied because of the constantly shifting socially-accepted trope of the ideal male body. This, in turn, led to great amounts of body shame, anxiety, surveillance, and excessive body discipline. Thus, a significant social implication that I did not anticipate was men’s body anxiety.

Numerous scholarly works have explored women’s experiences with body anxiety (Bartky, 1988; Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 1998; see also Dworkin & Wachs, 2009 for a review). While this certainly is a worthy exploration given the subjugation of women’s bodies in mass media and society, in general, it placed men in a position where they were regarded as overly powerful, to the point of being unable to be objectified (Bordo, 1999; Messner, 1989). Pulling on Bordo (1999), Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note, “Indeed, because the male body has long been the presumed norm against which female bodies are found lacking . . . it has been largely assumed that male bodies to not ‘lack.’” (p. 65). As the results above reveal, however, men are experiencing this lack; they lack the best arms, visible abs, perfect chests, or otherwise. In some
cases, despite all their hard work (i.e., weight loss), they are still in lack because their bodies betrayed them; excess skin is their lack, hiding their desired body project. Thus, in response to RQ2, a significant social implication of the drive for male fitness is the potential for increased body anxiety, self-objectification, and poor self-esteem; all of which have been associated to the drive for physical fitness in both men and women (Prichard & Tiggemann, 2005; Tiggemann, & Williamson, 2000).

Additionally, and closely related to RQ1, a significant social implication for the drive for men’s fitness (specifically as it occurs within male body culture) is the consequential upholding of the banner of hegemonic masculinity. While the pressing need to (1) have an ideal body that is competitively dominant over other men’s bodies, (2) engage in excessive self-discipline to achieve that body, and (3) (in some cases, fail to) use that body as a form of currency to gain sexual, economic, or social capital places a great deal of pressure on the men attempting those needs, it also further perpetuates the trope of hegemonic masculinity. As shown above, just as men are seeking a specific type of body, they are also simultaneously seeking a specific type of masculinity. Indeed, numerous scholars (see Messner, 1990; Pringle, 2005) have implicated sports and fitness spaces as a place where hegemonic masculinity is produced and upheld. True to those findings, male body culture emerged in this study as space that plays host to the institutionalized (re)production of hegemonic masculinities. While it is certainly a gross oversimplification to pin this production as gendered alone (after all, hegemonic masculinity is not merely about being a man, its about being a powered man; see Pringle, 2005), the continued perpetuation of the hegemonic masculine trope that is (re)birthed in male body culture warrants a more critical examination of its spaces.
In sum, the above findings reveal that male body culture is an appropriate site for critical inquiry. Using photovoice and a series of in-depth interviews, I attempted to interrogate the overarching structures and undergirding foundations of this space. As noted above, the depth and breadth of these results is great and there are rich methodological, theoretical, and social implications for these findings that extend far beyond a mere simple answering of the stated research questions. In the following chapter, I explore those implications in greater detail.
Chapter 6: Discussion

The depth and breadth of the results detailed in Chapter 5 are almost overwhelming. These results are wonderfully simplistic; yet, perhaps it is this simplicity that makes them all the more convoluted and worthy of exploration. While they are simple, the fact that they are so surface level and, in some cases, obvious, validates all the more their critical examination. In this chapter, I attempt to do just that. First, I begin by exploring these results within the confines of photovoice methodology, with a nod to the marked-unmarked dichotomy.

Photovoice: The (Un)marked as Informant

Nothing about this project has been traditional. While photovoice as a method is still fairly new and underutilized (especially in Communication Studies), the way it emerged and fit within the structure of this study was, to be frank, a bit underwhelming. The images did little, in and of themselves, aside from providing context to discourse (as opposed to the other way around). Granted, some are especially important, but it is fair to criticize that the study might have unfolded just as successfully without integrating photos. In general, researchers do not like to admit something failed—and I’m not sure this classified as a failure, per se. Still, there is a discussion to be had about the way that I altered the methodology for this study.

While I truthfully believe that my justification of the use of the method in the preceding chapters are well-structured, logically coherent, and anchored within consistent scholarly and philosophical literature, I acknowledged up front that I was forging ahead, knowingly using the method in a way that directly contradicted its original intent. To revisit, photovoice was originally used in an effort to give the voiceless a voice. Its emancipatory focus is woven throughout its use; ultimately, it seeks to provide a neutral platform—one unclouded by educational barriers, social orientation, or researcher meddling—for individuals to capture their
world in a meaningful way, ultimately revealing how dominant power structures subjugate marginalized identities. The end goal of photovoice, then—especially for critical-interpretivist researchers—is to use our positionality to highlight the voices of those whose voices are not commonly highlighted. Given the intricate focus on power and my lengthy justification of altering the method to see power in action as opposed to the consequences of power, I assumed that my results would be rich and help stretch the method in new ways. In sum, it seemed like a perfect formula.

It wasn’t. This is not a weakness of the method, per se; rather, it is an opportunity for critical discussion of its philosophical foundations and the potentials and/or consequences for applying it in contexts that directly contradict those foundations. Using photovoice in this study, I expected to capture a visual artifact of power in action. The results above reveal that male body culture is a site where power dynamics are actively at work. In some images, that power was captured; however, most of those images captured power as it emanated from others. Participants largely saw themselves as marginalized within male body culture even though their level of fitness and aesthetic presentation would paint them as dominant to the “average” male. Are these men, in fact, representative of a marginalized group? An overwhelmingly white, straight, middle-class, educated cohort with above-average bodies? Marginalized? Critical researchers would loudly and boldly declare “no,” and I agree.

I believe these results must be interpreted within the structure of markedness (Trubetzkoy, 1975; see also Brekhus, 1996), which proposes that naming or labeling a phenomenon constructs it as something with exceptional significance. Brekhus (1998) uses the example of specific dates in the United States calendar, highlighting that specific dates (i.e.,
Valentine’s Day, Memorial Day, Halloween, Friday the 13th, etc.) become more “foregrounded” than dates that remained unnamed or unaccented. Additionally, he notes:

The study of sexual categories looks at culturally named groups, such as ‘swingers’ and ‘sadomasochists,’ but not their unnamed counterparts, such as ‘marital loyalists,’ and ‘vanilla sex practitioners.’ 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. Although there are many deviance journals to analyze socially unusual behavior, there is no ‘Journal of Mundane Behavior’ to explicitly analyze conformity. (Brekhus, 1998, p. 36)

In this study, participants highlighted the social expectations that dictated cultural norms about the expectations of male bodies. In short, they concluded that there were social pressures to be fit, but these social pressures were just as much about what they should not be (i.e., too fat, too skinny, too short, etc.) as they were about what they should be (i.e., fit, muscular, buff, etc.). This then would constitute a binary model of markedness (see Brekhus, 1998, p. 37); one where one outcome is socially exceptional while the other is socially mundane:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unmarked</th>
<th>Marked</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MALE ABLE-BODIED RIGHT-HANDED</td>
<td>WOMEN DISABLED LEFT-HANDED</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 33.* Brekus’ unmarked/marked binary model with examples

Initially, I expected that men would fall within these binary categorizations. Because of the eligibility criteria, I assumed they were not marked—that is, their bodies were not fetishized
or exotified because of the ways in which they defy the social standards of the male body. I assumed they were unmarked—that is, they constituted the norm for male bodies; they fulfilled the social expectations for what male bodies should look like and thus were awarded the privilege of “visible invisibility” (i.e., they aesthetically satisfied the male body norm, so their bodies were free to be unmarked and unexceptional because of their dictated exceptionality). However, as participants provided a greater revelation of male body culture, they affirmed more of a trinary model of markedness. Brekhus (1998, p. 37) explains this model as one where there are two valences of markedness, whereas the unmarked dimension constitutes a middle ground where the unexamined or unexceptional lies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marked [negative valence]</th>
<th>Unmarked</th>
<th>Marked [positive valence]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SINNERS</td>
<td>DULL</td>
<td>THE GHETTO</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Figure 34. Brekhus’ unmarked/marked trinary model with examples*

Brekhus (1996) notes that the becoming unmarked is a process; it occurs through coloring the marked, that is, “figuratively painting an entire marked category so that it is represented by its most colorful, stereotypical images” (p. 512). Focusing exclusively on these heavily painted marked categories runs the risk of creating epistemological ghettos (Brekhus, 1996; Brekhus, 1998), where analysis focuses exclusively on those who are highly visible (i.e., marked). Since markedness as a phenomena is intricately related to stereotypical coloring, research then focuses on the deviants, the outcasts, and the socially profane—be their valence positive or negative.
I initially conceptualized male body culture through a binary lens; men were either fit or not. The standards participants were required to meet to participate in my study were designed to ensure that this study would involve the “inside scoop” from those in power; after all, with such a detailed workout regimen, these men had to occupy the unmarked space (the masculine norm). This binary model proved faulty, however, because I failed to take into account the valence of markedness. As a man who largely still sees himself in terms of labels like “fat,” I situated myself as marked and anticipated that men who occupied the “non-fat” (and also “non-skinny”) category would be the unmarked. I also anticipated that my unmarked participants would, through this process, recognize their power and privilege as standards of the norm in male body culture. Yet, while a few men demonstrated body pride, participants overwhelmingly indicated that they were “not there.” They had not reached their goals and still largely saw their bodies as inferior. In many ways, they put themselves closer to me, the marked “fat guy” than they did to the ideal male body norm. In my own personal opinion (not as a researcher), I would evaluate most, if not all, of the men I interviewed favorably in terms of how I perceived their body. In my dozens of page of notes from the interviews, I regularly noted how I felt about participants’ body presentation:

*He’s huge but in that skinny way. Well-defined arms—they almost look like he’s smuggling softballs. He’s just sitting in a chair but they are bulging—is he trying that? He’s genuinely nice. I would probably be put off if I saw him in public but I think that he’s really just a genuinely nice goofball sort of guy.* (A note about Jackson)

***
He’s just the run-of-the-mill ‘good-looking’ kid. You don’t look at him and think ‘muscles’, but great hair, great complexion, great sense of fashion, confident. In many ways, he is what I would want to look like assuming I was a 5’8” college kid. (A note about Andres)

***

Oliver is a guy I think I would look like if I just lost a little more weight. He’s very proportional; not skinny, not fat, not lanky or ripped—just normal all around. I think he’s got a good look going for him; stubble, confident, just a cool-looking guy. (A note about Oliver)

Each of the men above looked “ideal” to me. Most likely, this was because I knowingly placed myself “lower” than them (although I never called upon a hierarchical system of identity categorization); I recognized that despite significant progress, my body is still not where I want it to be, thus I look to those men as a balanced ideal standard. Their bodies are not like male models’ but they certainly are much better than mine. I am marked—I am fat. They symbolize the unmarked to me—they are allowed to just blend in. Their bodies are not a distraction, they are, for all intents and purposes, normal.

Brekhus’ trinary helps explain the distinction between markedness and the unmarked in male body culture. This study was justified on the premise that I would be examining the unmarked; and indeed, in my own frame of reference, the men I interviewed would be situated comfortably in that sphere. Their normal, if not ideal, bodies dictate that they are not marked, fetishized, nor commodified; their bodies are not a distraction. But many of them disagreed. In fact, almost every single participant noted that their body was not quite where they wanted it to
be. Perhaps this was because the identity was intricately related to participants’ identity. For some, this was more extreme, such as Derek:

*I think my self-confidence is more of a matter of building . . . It definitely has increased since I’ve started more exercising and eating healthier and such. It has increased but like I said, it’s not to the point where I think it can be or it needs to be in order to attract someone. So, I know that I shouldn’t be too hard on myself, but I’m also afraid of going too easy because too easy is what got me over 350 pounds. I just don’t want to go back. I’m really scared of relapsing and going back . . . I’m scared of destroying the progress that I’ve made and the comments that people make…’You look great!’…’You’re losing weight!’…’You look so much better!’*

Derek’s body far surpassed mine judging by aesthetics alone, but just as I felt I did not measure up to his body, he felt that his body did not measure up to others’ bodies. As noted in Chapter 5, Derek cited many examples of other men who had a more ideal body. He was not alone. Oliver similarly commented: “A lot of my friends don’t understand why I’m so insecure, but I just am. I’ve never had a lot of confidence.” I asked him what would give him that confidence. “I think being really attractive,” he commented. I almost could not believe it. I always thought that if I looked like Oliver or Derek, I would feel completely confident. Yet here they were telling me that if they looked like someone else, they would feel better about their bodies. Participants seemed to reveal a process of reaching for an ideal body but that “ideal” was an ever-moving goal post. As participants got closer to it, they adjusted their understanding of “ideal.” Elijah commented:
I think that everybody’s got that kinda’ ideal, like...six pack abs, that’s kinda’
what everybody likes...that’s what I would like to see, uh, and...I think...I think
that I reach further for those specific goals once I notice them in myself. Like, I
wasn’t really focused on my abs, like...I was more focused on my arms when I
first started working out . . . And once I started seeing my arms...get bigger...I
started, like, trying to...I took a step further . . . It’s something that’s, like, really
hard to do and, like, I put forth the effort and I’m starting to see results and I’m
seeing definition and the more I get closer to...what I want...I want it just that
much more.

Similarly, Jared noted to me that he had recently maxed out: “I just tested my weight
numbers...like how much I can lift for power lifting. . . I’m pleased with that but I want to go up
again.” These quotes, among others in the preceding chapters, reveal the always-never-quite-there structures of male body culture. As a fat man, I regarded my body discontent as a mere byproduct of the fact that I was still, by many definitions, overweight. When I got “skinny,” I
would be satisfied—or so I thought. These participants were skinny; they were fit, muscular,
they had defined, chiseled bodies. They are everything that I thought I would want but they were
far from satisfied.

Thus, I am not entirely sure the argument can be made that these “fit” men constitute
Brekhus’ unmarked, at least in the way that I originally framed it. As noted in Chapter 3, above, I
situated fit men as unmarked in that they were the standard. However, these men did not regard
themselves as the standard; in fact, most felt they strayed far from what they were “supposed to
be.” I recognize that unmarkedness is not a state of mind; still, if nothing else, this particular
context troubles/is troubled by the marked-unmarked dichotomy.
Calling upon Brekhus’ (1998) binary model—which still regards identities as intersectional, multidimensional, and complex—men in this study would seemingly be implicated as “average” (i.e., unmarked); in direct opposition to negative body standards such as fat, skinny, disabled, or otherwise. In my conversation with Jack, he noted how he sought “invisibility” and actually attained it. By his own definition, Jack used to be “fat”:

I don’t like how I look when I’m fat. It’s just not something I’m interested in . . . You know, sometimes you feel invisible and sometimes you wish you were invisible because people are looking at me because I’m fat. Or, she didn’t even look at me because I’m fat.

I asked Jack if he felt invisible currently: “I don’t feel invisible. I don’t want people laughing at me [but] I don’t think people laugh at me because of my body anymore.” Jack’s weight loss took him from a place of markedness (i.e., fat) and placed him in a position of unmarkedness (or “invisibility”). While Jack’s experiences validate a binary model of unmarkedness, his experience is just one of a much larger subset. Using the trinary model, however, men with this body are harder to implicate. From my position as a researcher, they appear to be either average (i.e, unmarked) or positively valenced as marked (i.e., muscular, fit, toned, defined, etc.). However, from their position, they would see themselves as potentially negatively valenced as marked or unmarked altogether, reaching for the positively valenced marked (i.e., those who they constituted their fitness heroes or inspiration or their own “personal” fitness goals).

Ultimately, this validates the multidimensional nature of male body culture and the necessity of careful consideration of positionality in photovoice research.

If we do view men in this study as unmarked, it seems we can only do so by using the trinary model, as these men are certainly caught between polarizing extremes of undesirability
and desirability. They knew well what they did and did not want their body to look like. In many ways, they wanted to simultaneously be marked and unmarked.

There was certainly a hierarchical desirability in terms of body aesthetics. Participants first wanted to ensure they were not negatively valenced, that is, they were not too fat, too skinny, or even in some cases *too muscular*. However, participants also regularly noted that they did not want to be unmarked either. Although it seemed to emerge as more preferable than negatively valenced markedness, participants’ workout regimens were rigorous and required daunting levels of discipline. Why?—simply so that they did not fall into the average. This goal was shrouded in rhetorical reframing such as, “being the best me I can be” and “I’m my own biggest critic,” but ultimately, these men’s goal was to stand out among other men; to use their body as a symbolic artifact to publicly peacock their masculinity, virility, and dominance. As participant after participant in Chapter 5 noted, perhaps one of the worst things anyone could be is *unmarked*; second only to negatively valenced markedness.

Using Brekhus’ (1998) concept of markedness as a backdrop, analysis of the results reveals that there are a host of *powerful* undercurrents that are worthy of exploration within male body culture. However, multiple considerations must be made. First is the fluid and socially constructed nature of male body culture itself. As Brekhus (1998) notes, contexts such as sexuality constitute clear implications for a marked/unmarked dichotomy. Homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality, pansexuality, and other non-normative sexualities stand as marked; heterosexuality remains unmarked and maintains a dominant position of power as the unquestioned standard of sexuality. People of color occupy the marked because of how they fail to meet the criteria of the unmarked (i.e., white skin). A series of clear-cut social structures help
delineate the marked from the unmarked in a host of contexts, yet male body culture is lacking those same structures.

While hegemonic masculinity is fairly easy to implicate along this spectrum (because of its raced, classed, sexualized composition), I made assumptions (albeit logical) about the nature of male body culture. As I scripted the context, I ascribed marked status to those who would readily draw attention for failing to adhere to the prescribed norm. I scripted this norm as “reasonably fit” and lumped all others into an unmarked position. Yet, just as my decision to sort men this way was based on my experiences within male body culture, other men used their experiences to articulate their identities within this same culture. To them, “reasonably fit” was a negative markedness; they were only satisfied being the best of the best and occupying a position of positively-valenced markedness. While masculinity and muscularity are intricately woven together, implicating men’s marked status on the basis of their corporeal expression alone is difficult.

The lack of rigid structurally definitive indicators of status/position within male body cultures complicate the use of “ideal” informants to reveal more about the nature of male body culture. The way I scripted these men and the way they scripted themselves in the context of male fitness were two different roles. While it ‘worked,’ I do believe that the results of my photovoice endeavor were not as successful as they could have been. Throughout this study, I found myself wishing that I had asked fat, differently abled, gay, black (to name only a few) or other marginalized men to be my population. Their stories might be more interesting because they reveal the struggle of reaching for power and/or being the target of its negative force(s). While I had hoped to interrogate “power itself;” I made the mistake of situating power within a binary—either you have it or you don’t. This naïve assumption, along with the modification of
photovoice’s original philosophical underpinnings, produced results that further validate the original structures of photovoice research.

The original intent of photovoice research was to empower communities by raising awareness of needs, problems, and inequity through photography (Wang, 1999). Situated within arts-based research, photovoice seeks to emancipate through self-directed agency. Arts-based research has incredible potential for giving voice to those with little to no power in society (Barone, 2000; Barone, 2012) and presents methodologically rich data allowing researchers to examine multiple angles of lived experiences through crystallization (Ellingson, 2009). While images in this study did provide a multidimensional examination of male body culture, the emancipatory potential was lost here; men did not need to be emancipated, save from their own prisons of self-limitation and body disparagement.

In a recent extension of photovoice used to examine the lives of sex workers, Desyllas (2014) situates photovoice within the theoretical constructs of Paulo Friere’s empowerment education for critical consciousness. Freire’s (1970) work has been highly influential in feminist research, specifically participatory action research and feminist pedagogy. The pillars of Freireian thinking implore marginalized people to critically examine their role in the greater social structures that hold them in captivity. In the introduction of his highly regarded *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Friere notes that the integration of visual imagery allows a platform for marginalized others to be “stimulated” and “emerge as conscious makers of their own culture” (p. viii). But the men in this study were, in many ways, the *stimulators*. As the standard (at least to those who fall ‘beneath’ them on the body hierarchy), their bodies were the captivity makers; and in many ways, their own bodies held *them* in captivity. These men were already contributing to the making and shaping of male body culture.
In short, this study validates the original underpinnings of photovoice research as an emancipatory methodology. While the justifications for the use of this method were logically coherent, photovoice cannot be separated from its philosophical shapings. While this study is certainly a valid extension of arts-based research and did, in fact, provide multiple angles of the crystal that is male body culture (see Ellingson, 2009), the potentials of photovoice did not emerge as greatly as they could have in this study had it used a marginalized (or at least more marginalized) participant cohort. Still, the results of this study—images included—are relevant, interesting, and lend themselves well to critical analysis. In the following paragraphs, I explore the theoretical and social implications of these results as they relate to methodology.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Although now regarded as a “quaint relic” of feminism’s “less sophisticated past” (see Heckman, 1997), Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) is a staple of feminist research. Perhaps less of a standalone theory and more of a culmination of prior work—(see Collins, 1990; Haraway, 2003; Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983; Sandoval, 2000; Smith, 1987)—FST was birthed to further explore the systematic, institutionalized, and governmentalized erasure of women. Echoing many of the interpretivist-oriented foundations of this study, FST is dedicated to exploring how situated knowledge is central to understanding, maintaining, and dismantling systems of power (see Collins, 1997). Ultimately, FST is about situating knowledge within the lived experiences of the marginalized. Although it was developed to further explore women’s experiences, FST has been extended to examine marginalized identities through an intersectional lens, with regard to race, sexuality, class, ability, and more (see Hesse-Biber, 2014 for a review).

While there certainly are numerous strains of FST (see Naples, 2003), its core tenets rest on the idea that all knowledge is situated and perspectival and that there are multiple standpoints
from which knowledge is produced (Heckman, 1997). Just as those in captivity have a fundamentally different understanding of chains, masters, laws, and punishment than their captors (see Griffin, 2008), so too do women have a fundamentally different understanding of the world than men. Extending this to another marginalized context—body culture—the *fat, unfit, those with a physical disability* (or other marginalized others within this context) likely have a different view of *fitness, health, muscularity*, and the *body*, than those who are either actively pursuing or have “arrived” at “perfect” status (if such an arrival ever occurs).

Feminist Standpoint Theory proposes that those in oppressed or marginalized groups develop an understanding of the world around them through the lens of their own (marginalized) experiences as well as through the lens of the oppressive group (Krane, 2001). Although I assumed that I would gain the best perspective into male body culture by using informants actively involved within it, I found myself regularly disappointed that I was not actually getting that *powered* perspective; instead, many participants seemed to almost place themselves in a marginalized category—an assertion I meet with great skepticism. Still, that skepticism is not the focus here; rather, I believe a return to Standpoint Theory helps better explain why the use of photovoice in this study did not yield the results I desired.

In Chapter 2, I provide a bit of a perspective on my role in this entire project. Situating this project within my interests, I implicate male body culture as something that has had a great deal of influence on my life, albeit for all the wrong reasons. I identify as fat (caveat: I also identity as a cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class male, thus I am not claiming marginalized status, merely suggesting that *fat* is at least one dimension of an intersectional identity that is highly stigmatized and therefore, as a sole criterion, a marginalized identity element); as such, my experiences of fatness/fitness within male body culture have been driven
by a desire to rid myself of that identifier to achieve “normal” status within male fitness spaces (and within masculinity, in general). True to the assumptions of Feminist Standpoint Theory, my perspective as a fat man gave me access to at least some of the aspects of the shared experience of fatness (or at least non-fitness) as well as a perspective of the dominant group. While my perspective of the dominant group (i.e., the fit) is certainly situational and perspectival, it is valid—especially in light of the stated interpretivist framework that guides this study.

Had I chosen to interview marginalized others (in this context, that being the fat, differently abled, gay, people of color, etc.), I believe I would have gained a better perspective of the power structures that run rampant through male body culture. I expected to see power in action, but as McIntosh (1989) notes, “whites are carefully taught not to recognize white privilege, as males are taught not to recognize male privilege” (p. 1). As such, those in power often fail to recognize that they occupy that position, as was the case in this study. Even in the case of my own experiences, I placed myself in a marginalized category (as fat), but given that I identify as a member of so many other dominant groups, can my perspective truly be a voice of marginalization?

Here, it is important to note the multidimensional, intersectional nature of identity. While this topic will be discussed in greater detail below, identity is not a fixed construct. I am not just a fat man; I am a cisgender, heterosexual, white, middle-class, able-bodied fat man. Queer, classed, raced, differently abled experiences of fatness would likely differ significantly. To address a resounding criticism of FST that argues it seeks to justify situated knowledge on the basis of essentialist, consistent experiences, I argue that these perspectives demand greater attention, not to create an impossibly universal experience of non-fitness, but rather to create a greater understanding of the multidimensional nature of both power and marginalization that
shapes and sustains male body culture. Recommendations for extending explorations of male body culture through this lens will be discussed in greater detail in the following chapter.

In this section, I have attempted to bridge the discussion of photovoice methodology and the practical applicability of relevant theory. Using themes from the results in Chapter 5, below, I highlight relevant theories of human communication to demonstrate both the potentials of critical exploration of male body culture as well as the practical applicability of these results. While a host of theories from Communication Studies could be applied, my goal is to merely provide a snapshot of Communication theory, specifically by interrogating both the interpersonal and intrapersonal elements of identity formation and expression as it stems from male body culture.

The Confessional Process: Social Penetration and Privacy

As evidenced in the preceding chapters, I engaged in an in-depth, critical, and, sometimes, uncomfortable conversation with men about their bodies. These conversations covered a range of topics, including body shame and body discrimination (both self- and other-directed), body standards for others, sexuality, sexual activity, religion, and a host of other deeply personal information. While this entire study has been an effort to better understand the communicative structures of male body culture, it is crucial to step back and closely examine the interview context as its own site of body discourse. In my conversations with participants, we were each directly influenced by our position within male body culture. All interviews were conducted in my office, as it was a private, comfortable space. But it’s also a personal space. My wall is covered with family pictures, some showing an entirely different Phil than the one they saw in front of them. I also did not shy away from my weight loss story; instead, I often used it to reveal my motivations for this study and to prompt conversation. Those advising this project
approved, noting that it is beneficial to provide my position and discursive point of view. While it proved to be an effective engagement technique, it also might have complicated the process.

I recognize that having a critical conversation about your body with a complete stranger is not something that is commonplace. As Altman and Taylor’s (1973) Social Penetration Theory (SPT) suggests, communication depth is contextualized within the depth of any interpersonal relationship. While participants might feel comfortable having deep conversations about their body with their roommate, significant other, or parent, my relationship with them is non-intimate. As SPT suggests, participants following traditional social norms are likely to be less-inclined to reveal more personal, intimate details about their life, including details about their body. Many have used an onion as a metaphor for SPT, noting that as relationships develop, those in that relationship become more willing to peel back the layers of intimacy, revealing more and communicating more personal details. In an effort to get participants to “peel back the layers” of their experiences within male body culture, I revealed mine upfront, in hopes that my honesty would inspire them to provide me with a realistic account of their experiences in this same culture.

This, along with the two-interview structure of this study, proved to be advantageous. I found that participants, broadly speaking, were willing to provide (seemingly) honest accounts of their experiences and, as interviews unfolded, participants peeled back the onion to reveal deeper layers of intimacy. For instance, Nick had no trouble revealing to me that working out was one of the “few healthy outlets” in his life because he was “generally pretty fucked up.” Nick mentioned his “unhealthy habits” in our first interview, but it was not until our second conversation that he told me what those habits were—in his case, excessive drinking and drug use. Similarly, Oliver commented briefly on his body insecurities in our first interview but it was
not until our second meeting that he told me how “debilitating” those insecurities were.

Generally, I found that as interviews unfolded and participants understood the scope of my study, they were willing to reveal more intimate details about their experiences in male body spaces.

Of course, there were outliers. Although this study provided no payment to participants, they did receive credit in the form of fulfilling a research participation requirement in their Communication Studies courses. As such, some of them clearly only participated to receive that participation requirement and had no interest in the study beyond that. Put simply, to them it was homework. Consider, for instance, the following conversation I had with Luke:

Phil: How was it going out and taking pictures?

Luke: I don’t know…It just made me think more about what exactly I thought of health and working out.

Phil: What did it make you think?

Luke: I don’t know…I kind of figured that, like…different people have different thoughts on fitness. Some people could like being skinny and some people could like being muscular.

Phil: Ok, did you have a general theme that you tried to capture?

Luke: (long pause)…Not really. I just kind of went with things that I saw that made me think of fitness. . .

Perhaps the transcription disguises the painful encounter we had, but as my fieldnotes reveal, Luke was an incredibly difficult and refused to provide any intimate details:

Luke will not look at me in the eyes. He keeps looking around the room and I’m not sure if this is his normal personality or if he simply just doesn’t want to be here but one thing is for sure…he doesn’t want to give me anything super
detailed. Luke! Answer me! Open up! Say something! His answers are so indirect and vague….he pauses almost an uncomfortable about for each question. He keeps noting this is about “fitness” and “health” but I can’t help but think he’s merely repeating the words I used when I sent the call for participants. He is basically saying the same answer over and over for all questions. He also keeps looking at his watch.

To be fair, Luke was not the only participant who failed to provide a great depth of information. While I certainly do not want to make assumptions about participants’ motivations for participating in this study, my experiences with participants like Luke validate, if nothing else, that body talk is intimate talk and motivation to reveal such intimate information must be self-directed. No matter how much of my story I share, men have to be willing to share theirs, too. Most did. Whether this validates the benefit of reciprocal disclosure (like telling participants my weight loss story) or simply validates that men, broadly speaking, want to talk about their bodies, it is critical to closely examine the process of body negotiation with another.

Petronio’s (1991) Communication Privacy Management (CPM) Theory states quite simply that we, as communicators, make active decisions about the depth of information we disclose to others and how we harbor information that we perceive as private or personal. CPM theory is largely focused on exploring the privacy regulation practices that individuals engage in during communicative encounters with relational others. Positioned within the dialectical tension of competing privacy- and openness-needs, CPM proposes that the revelation of private information is dependent on individuals’ analysis of risks and rewards. In short, the decision to reveal private information must be perceived as a worthwhile endeavor (see Petronio, 2002). According to CPM Theory, individuals “own” their private information and make strategic
decisions about who they share that information with. Once that information is shared with another, both parties engage in a type of negotiation regarding the co-ownership of that information.

In many ways, participants in this study were “co-owning” their bodies with me. As I revealed my weight loss history and peeled back the layers of intimacy, there was an understood pseudo-negotiation about the type of privacy rules that governed the rest of our conversation(s). In many cases, my story prompted theirs and together we collaboratively arrived at a conclusion about the nature of male bodies and our role within it. While the “co-ownership” I shared with participants regarding my private weight loss journey prompted greater self-disclosure, I must also question if it shaped our conversational parameters in problematic ways.

Specifically, by sharing my story and inviting participants to share ownership of that situation with me, I was effectively implicating us as the same; our goals were to perfect our bodies and the mechanisms we chose to ensure that perfection were embedded within male body culture. Although I never stated this specifically, my analysis has led me to question if participants altered their communication with me as a face-negotiation strategy. For instance, when discussing the idea of fat bodies, participants tended to be a bit more tentative in their description of ideal male bodies. I felt as if they almost recoiled. For instance, when Adam and I discussed the advantage his body gave him, he noted:

*It’s a lot easier when you’ve got another guy there who doesn’t work out and just…kinda’...(long pause)...has a beer belly and....it’s just, like....compare the two...and most of the time, people are going to pick the guy who works out and takes care of himself.*
Similarly, Jack, who had also lost a significant weight—quite a bit more than me—noted that he actively structured his life around a fear of returning to fatness. I pressed him: “*Why? I mean, fat people exist. They’re everywhere. Why don’t you want to return to that?*” He paused for a long while, thinking. Finally, he noted: “*There are health benefits…But I just don’t like how I look when I’m fat. It’s just not something I’m interested in.*” After several interviews in one day, I returned to add concluding thoughts to my interview notes. Below is an excerpt:

*Today was quite humorous. So many people kept saying things like ‘This sounds so bad…’ when they talk about fatness. Why does it sound bad? Because I’m fat? It’s ok, but this is something that further proves why we need to explore this context. There are undercurrents of fat-shaming that trickle all throughout this space. Also, I can’t help but wonder if these results would be different if I were skinny/skinner or if a woman was conducting them. My fatness appears to be getting in the way—ironic, given that it has for my entire life.*

Although I am certainly making presumptions about the ways men co-owned the idea of the male body with me, I must recognize as a qualitative researcher that my own identity as a fat/fit man influenced how I communicated with my participants. I can only assume that their body—especially in regard to how it (i.e., a fit body) is positioned *against* fatness—also dictated how they communicated and what they shared with me. Thus, this co-ownership is complicated by the identity functions of the body. As noted throughout the previous chapters, the body an external expression of a very specific internal identity. In the following paragraphs, I explain my results in light of relevant communication theories of identity, noting specifically how identity functions within/from male body culture.
Identity Theories

As the preceding chapters reveal, it is not hard to implicate male fitness spaces as their own culture. As such, it is not a stretch to then presume that members of that culture derive their identity, at least in part, from membership within that culture. Indeed, one of the primary questions that drives human experience is *who am I?* (see Turner, 1982) When I asked Jack to summarize his experiences fitness culture (specifically by looking at the collection of photos he produced), he noted:

*I would think that someone who is just trying to gather information about me through these photos would think that I associate a lot of my self-worth with working out…and I do.*

As noted in the preceding chapter, many men are like Jack—their overall identity project is built, at least in part, upon their experiences within male body culture. Tajfel and Turner (1986) proposed Social Identity Theory (SIT) to help explain the connection between group status and intrapersonal identity. To be clear, a group is merely a collection of individuals who believe that they are a part of the same social category. This collection of individuals shares some degree of emotional attachment with others and ultimately reach social consensus regarding their group identity. These groups are often autonomous, self-guiding bodies—much like male body culture. SIT proposes that individuals strive to maintain a positive self-image and self-concept, and that the positive (or negative) value connotations of membership status within certain social groups informs this self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Turner, 1982).

Ultimately, then, people are comprised of a personal identity (that is, the basis that they are a unique individual) and a social identity (that is, the basis that they fit within a specific culture) (Harwood, Giles, & Palomares, 2005).
Tajfel and Turner (1986) propose that as individuals strive to ensure they attain or maintain a positive social identity, they do so by comparing their ingroup (that is, the group or culture they are actively a part of) to relevant outgroups. When the ingroup is perceived to have a positive advantage (or at least a positively-valenced different distinctive function) over the relevant outgroups, individuals have a positive social identity. However, when the cons of being part of a group outweigh the pros, individuals experience unsatisfactory social identity and may actively strive to leave the existing group and enter and more positive social group or re-frame their group’s identity.

In the case of this study, male body culture was definitely an ingroup, through and through. It was “in” to be a fit male. But beyond that, men recognized male body culture as something of an elite entity; a club that not everyone could be a part of. While many noted that these spaces were welcoming to all who wanted to be involved, many others affirmed that even they felt inadequate or negatively judged in those spaces. The benefits of being a part of the ingroup were obvious, and in many ways, were the only reason(s) individuals remained an active part of a culture with such strict membership requirements. Girls, money, power, social advantage—it all came with the territory. Thus, as men judged their ingroup against other outgroups, they were empowered by their social positionality and experienced a positive social identity. Nearly every participant expressed that this was a “lifestyle” for them—meaning they weren’t going anywhere. Membership in male body culture was intricately personal; many men noted that it was woven throughout all aspects of their identity.

This validates the power that trickles throughout male body spaces. As SIT proposes, individuals are only motivated to leave social groups when they perceive that that the group at hand unsatisfactorily compares to a relevant outgroup. Male body culture is positively distinct. In
its current state, there are no other worthy contenders vying for men’s body dues. It is an assumed democracy, governed by its own constituents, but as men in the study note, there are powers at bay that dictate a host of problematic micro-level expressions, including self- and other-surveillance, body objectification, excessive body discipline, and perpetuating the hegemonic masculinity trope.

Knowing that hegemonic masculinity, as is, is a top contender for men’s identity construction, the focus must then shift from communication within male body culture as a byproduct of identity and toward a view of communication as an element of that identity, one that guarantees the long-term sustainability of male body culture. Here, Hecht’s (1993) Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) emerges as a mechanism for understanding the multidimensional nature of identity within male body spaces.

CTI regards identity as “inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003, p. 230). Several core pillars serve as foundations of CTI, namely communicative functions, identity enactment, relational development, and communal identity negotiation. One of the major benefits of CTI is its regard for the intersectional, multidimensional, and sometimes competing nature of identity. CTI proposes four main and interlocking frames of identity.

First, individuals’ self-concept and self-image comprises the personal frame (see Golden, Niles, & Hecht, 2002). In the enacted frame, identity is comprised of communicative disclosures and negotiations of identity (Hecht et al., 2003). As identities are co-constructed and negotiated with close relational others, identity comprises the relational frame (Golden et al., 2002; Hecht et al., 2003). Finally, as identity merges into “something held in the collective or public memory of a group that, in turn, bonds the group together,” it becomes a community-based endeavor and
occupies the *communal frame* (Hecht et al., 2003, p. 237). It is important to note that identity is never isolated into these frames exclusively, save for ease of analysis; rather, these frames collaboratively and/or competitively collaborate to structure identity. Again, according to CTI, identity is not a byproduct of communication, identity *is* communication itself.

While a lengthy manuscript could be written on the extensions of CTI in this study alone, this dissertation will not provide that analysis as CTI is only one possible extension of the results—not the guiding theory. Still, to further validate this study as one worthy of research in the discipline of Communication Studies, it is important to use relevant theories of Communication, like CTI, to situate my results and findings. But remember, CTI proposes that identity is multidimensional; it does not simply exist in four separate frames. As such, recent Communication research drawing on CTI examines identity through identity gaps—instances where one identity frames collaboratively trouble each other (see Nuru, 2014; Wagner, Kunkel, & Compton, in press). This literature has focused on *three* dialectical gaps: (1) Personal-enacted, which involves a “perceived difference between and individuals’ self-view and his or her self presented in communication” (Jung, 2011, p. 316); (2) Personal-relational, which involves a disparity between individuals’ view of themselves in terms of how others see them; and (3) Enacted-relational, which involves an “incongruity between how an individual enacts their identity and how others understand and ascribe their identity” (Nuru, 2014, p. 290).

Throughout this study, it would be easy to implicate participants’ identity along the spectrum of these identity gaps. For instance, pulling on the personal-enacted gap, where the way individuals perceive themselves vs. how they communicate themselves (in terms of identity) misaligns, I return to the example of Chad, who told me his motivations circled around “health” and “being the best” he could be:
I guess, for me...my motivation, like, that comes from that I want to make sure I can have a future better than I did growing up. All that stuff matters. It’s not just like...looks. That’s good if it’s what you want. For me, to be where I want to be, success-wise, I need to be at the top, mentally and physically.

However, later in our interviews, Chad spoke of his “addiction” to chewing tobacco; quickly revealing there was a tension between how he saw himself (as healthy) and how he communicated. He even directly stated, “Obviously, it’s not for the healthy/fitness types...”— which is confusing, given that he identified as one of those throughout his first interview. Chad also first noted that it’s not just “looks.” However, later in the second interview, the first image he discussed was of supermodel Kate Upton. He pointed to the image, noting: “I mean, like, that’s how you...like why you get in shape...why you do all of this stuff...major drivers for me, and most people I know are probably women.” Although Cody is just one example, using CTI and the personal-enacted identity gap to interrogate masculinities within male body culture reveals that the way participants perceive themselves and the way they communicate their identity are sometimes in direct contrast to one another.

In CTI’s personal-relational identity gap, there is a disconnect between how individuals understand themselves vs. how others perceive them (Jung & Hecht, 2004). While I could provide numerous examples here, perhaps the best route would be to take a meta-perspective. As noted above, participants and I were co-owning bodies in our interviews. I have noted throughout this manuscript my honest and frank thoughts about participants and how they aligned (or did not align) with their communicative presentation of themselves. For instance, in my conversations with Brent, he continuously noted how his weight loss left him feeling even more self-conscious. When I asked about his post-weight loss body, he noted:
It bothers me every day...every single day. [My extra skin] probably bothers me more than when I was overweight, to be honest with you because when you put in all that work...it’s like...there’s nothing else I can do. Everybody who looks at me says it’s not bad, it’s not bad at all, or they wouldn’t have noticed if I didn’t say anything, but for me...I notice it like crazy. I’m always pulling up my waistband because when I sit down it bothers me.

Brent’s revelation shocked me. As he was reading over the informed consent statement of for the study, I took the opportunity to take a few notes on my initial thoughts (something I regularly do when I meet with interview participants). My notes on Brent begin as follows:

Brent is in workout gear—sweats and a t-shirt. It seems like he just got done working out. Incredibly nice kid; barely makes eye contact, soft spoken, deep voice. He is extremely muscular, at least in his arms and upper body. He is tan, weird given it’s freezing outside. Nice kid. Nice body. Perhaps a bit ego-centric...or just quiet.

Brent came off as perhaps a bit self-consumed but merely because I had assumed that he recognized he was attractive and fit—he certainly had a body that I aspired to have. But as our conversation above notes, Brent was incredibly self-conscious. Thus, his identity and the identity I perceived were two different entities. Additionally, Brent also noted how he felt incredibly self-conscious about his extra skin and post-weight loss body, yet others kept telling him, “it’s not bad.” As such, there was a disconnect between how Brent felt about his self-image and how others perceived that same self-image. Whether it was on the micro-level (as with his friends convincing him his body was “just fine”) or on the meta-level (as with my observations), Brent’s
example was just one affirmation of the ways in which CTI’s personal-relational identity gap manifested.

In CTI’s enacted-relational identity gap, the ways individuals enact or perform their identity and the ways others understand that identity are misaligned (Nuru, 2014). Here again, a meta-perspective lends itself well to the exploration of this identity. Participants enacted (that is performed) their identity through photovoice; they used photography to capture what the intersections of masculinity and fitness looked like to them. Participants’ enactment of masculinity often differed from how I understood that same enactment. Take for instance the lengthy discussion on participants’ images of weapons and violence in Chapter 5. As noted there, I equated men’s obsession with weaponry as an indicator of their propensity towards violence— but many men disagreed with me. For instance, Chuck submitted an image of many guns lying on a table. I asked him point blank: “Is masculinity violent?” He commented: “I think it’s portrayed that way.” I then asked him if I could reasonably deduce that he was violent, then. He responded:

I don’t think so. I mean…I used to play some violent sports but I think, at the time, it just helped because I was having some personal things but…no…I don’t consider guns violent. They’re…I think there’s violence and then that’s like to stop violence, pretty much.

So why did he submit that image? He clarified: “[the guns] have real sharp lines” and he saw a parallel between the definition of the handguns and men’s sculpted bodies. The way I made meaning of Chuck’s admitted fascination with guns and the ways in which he associated his masculine identity to those guns differed greatly from one another; In sum, his performance and my understanding of that performance did not align.
My goal in providing the above discussion is not to provide a mini-analysis of SIT or CTI in this study; rather, it is to prove that male body culture is worthy of exploration, especially from the perspective of Communication Studies. Here, I do not take a simplistic reduction of Communication Studies to mere talking, alone. Instead, I regard the body as a communicative instrument; I see the body as discourse. In many ways, it is a message, and one that is constantly being revised in an act of accommodation. Still, beyond regarding the body as discourse, the themes that have emerged in this study also relate to a host of other theories of Communication. As stated in Chapter 3, my goal is not to mindlessly plug theory into my examination; rather, through the results of this study, relevant communication theories of positionality (Feminist Standpoint Theory), interpersonal communication (Social Penetration Theory; Communication Privacy Management Theory), and identity (Social Identity Theory; Communication Theory of Identity) emerge naturally from the data. To be clear—these theories are only a small subset of the relevant theories of human communication that could be used to more clearly illuminate these results. The widespread theoretical applicability of these findings should not be interpreted as a weakness; rather, the breadth of applicability implicates male body culture as a space ripe with potentials for communicative explorations and future research (a point that will be explored in greater length below). In the following paragraph, I move beyond social scientific theory and situate these results within deeper critical readings of male body culture.

**Docile Bodies, Fit for Dominance**

As noted in Chapter 3, male body culture, despite its simplicity, has great potential for extending the work of critical theory. For Foucault, in particular, the body and power were intricately related. He identified the body as a pawn of docility; something that was to be managed, adapted, improved, and ultimately subjected to dominant social structures that
guaranteed it would continue ensuring its utility and (re)productive value. Foucault (1977) regards the body-power dynamic through mechanized terms:

In becoming the target for new mechanisms of power, the body is offered up to new forms of knowledge. It is the body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge. (p. 155)

In sum, “the body” is discursively constructed. As such, analyses of body politics need to focus on “its disciplining, the optimization of its capabilities, the extortion of its forces, the parallel increase of its usefulness and its docility, [and] its integration into systems of deficient and economic control” (Foucault, 1980, p. 139)—the perfect justification and warrant for this study.

As noted in Chapter 3 above, bodies are policed through a series of social standards that determine their un/acceptability. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) note, “the ‘fit’ body marks a moral and disciplined self that demonstrates a sufficient participation in the regimes of bodywork necessary to support consumer capitalism” (p. 39). Yet, Godfrey, Lilley, and Brewis (2012) note that discipline “does not just act upon but materializes through the fleshly body. It creates…an ‘aptitude,’ a ‘capacity’” (p. 543). As noted in Foucault’s (1977) thoughts above, there is nothing “rational” about the body. Instead, it is only understood in terms of its social constellation and composition. As the body is “manipulated by authority,” it gains identity. Foucault (1979) provides the following example:

Let us take the figure of the soldier as it was still seen in the early seventeenth century. To begin with, the soldier was someone who could be recognized from
afar; he bore certain signs: the natural signs of his strength and courage, the
marks, too, of his pride; his body was the blazon of his strength and valour; and
although it is true that he had to learn the profession of arms little by little—
generally in actual fighting—movements like marching and attitudes like the
bearing of the head belonged for the most part to a bodily rhetoric of honour. . .
By the late eighteenth century, the soldier has become something that can be
made; out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be
constructed; posture is gradually corrected; a calculated constraint runs slowly
through each part of the body, mastering it, making it pliable, ready at all times,
turning silently into the automatism of habit; in short, one has got rid of the
‘peasant’ and given him ‘the air of the soldier’ (Foucault, 1979, p. 135).

While the above quote highlights military bodies, the parallel holds. Indeed, men in this
study identified a host of strategies that they engaged in to militarize their bodies; readying it for
battle, metaphorical as that battle may be. Even Foucault acknowledged throughout his works
that the body is discursively constructed across a wide array of organizational contexts. As with
soldiers who gain identity through this bodily rhetoric of honor, men who actively participate in
male body culture actively rid (or attempt to rid) themselves of average or fat in pursuit of the fit
(and, consequently, ideal) man. Herein lies a corollary to Kristeva’s (1982) abjection, whereby
the body is ridded of the unwanted in a redemptive act of returning to the clean and/or desired
state. Given the precedent of body as a utilitarian machine, we must take a critical examination at
this process to better understand the ways in which the “ideal” or “clean” body is constructed.
In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1979) notes that there are a series of guiding demands that collaboratively guide the construction of body discipline to construct the most efficient machine. For Foucault:

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)

There is an assumed hierarchy here; individuals (men) are not sufficient in and of themselves; rather they are portioned into ranked units and defined by their comparative dis/advantage over others in the same unit. This comparative technique is interesting in its own right, but as Godfrey, Lilley, and Brewis (2012) note, this process leads to an “art of distribution and the instigation of separation and identification” (p. 549). They comment that these forces:

work to foster processes of ‘separation’ from civilian life, ‘identification’ with the military organization and its masculine culture, and ‘preparation’ for the realities of the demands of this form of labour. (pp. 548-549)

As men in this study noted, they are very much disenfranchised with “civilian life” (that is the life they came from) and very much identified with the military organization (that is, male body culture). The “incorporation” (see Armitage, 2003) of the male body into male body culture is a strategic practice; one marked by initiation rituals, instruction, mass training, and body transformation—all of which emerged throughout participants’ experiences in male fitness spaces. In parallel with Godfrey et al.’s (2012) transformation from civilian to soldier, men in male body culture embark on a transformation from *civilian* masculinity to an elite membership space where they fully grasp the demand required of them.
This desire to achieve the fit (and consequently *ideal male*) body led participants in this study to engage in a rigorous process of surveillance. As noted in Chapter 5, 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. In terms of prison systems (see Bentham, 1995), prisoners are in an always-visible position of vulnerability, subject to always being surveilled by guards and other prison officials. Thus, because these individuals are never certain whether or not they are being subject to surveillance, they engage in self-directed self-surveillance—and, consequently, self-discipline—in an effort to maintain the status quo or adhere to the perceived social norm. In sum, the operations of power that surround the body discipline that very body in regard to the productions of power and knowledge that surround it (Foucault 1979). This same self-surveillance manifested in men’s experiences within male body culture; never fully knowing just who was watching them or for what intent, men felt an immense pressure to constantly embody the purest form of masculinity acceptable in those spaces. Often, that acceptability was directly related to men’s body presentation.

A central tenet of the Panopticon is the idea that there are a *few* who see the *many* (see Mathiesen, 1997). Foucault (1977) commented on the decline of public executions and other public displays of spectacle, arguing that this decline further validated a panoptic perspective. Yet, in a consumerist culture *and* in an age of widespread digital media, this may be an incomplete account. Indeed, as media perpetuate body ideals, now *many* see the *few*. As such, Mathiesen (1997) proposes the Synopticon in parallel with the panoptic perspective to understand how the ideal of the *few* comes to influence dominant discourse. In regard to bodies, synopticism translates into the consumption of “ideal” or “perfect” bodies. As seen in the
previous chapter, men quickly identify those they actively surveil, upholding them as heroes. In and of itself, this act seems harmless, yet upholding these individuals and/or body standards requires the same technology of self-surveillance as panopticism. To explain further, Lyon (2006) comments that “surveillance—which at its social and etymological core is about watching—is easily accepted because all sorts of watching have become commonplace within a ‘viewer society’ encouraged by the culture of TV and cinema” (p. 36). Using the September 11, 2001 bombings on the World Trade Center, he notes that there are two processes related to surveillance that prove their interconnectedness:

One is that the gaze of the many, fixed on the few, may foster some rather specific interpretations of the world. In the case of 9/11, the TV gaze permitted the development of a context-free narrative about American victims of totally unexpected foreign violence. The other is that this narrative, once accepted, becomes the means of legitimizing other kinds of official ‘watching’ (for ‘terrorists’ in this case) of the many by the few. However, this latter watching is not merely the occasional foray into specific segments of suspects’ lives, but a systematic watching that ‘screens’ and sorts the watched into categories in order to determine who gets what kind of treatment. (p. 36)

While body culture may lack its 9/11 moment, the argument can be made that in an age of mass-spread body panic (see Dworkin & Wachs, 2009 for a review) there is very much a ground-zero for body surveillance. For men, (male) fitness spaces are a public memorial where men recognize and succumb to the pressure of surveillance. Whether these processes are panoptic, with men feeling a real or assumed gaze that consequently dictates self-surveillance, or synoptic, whereby men consume others’ bodies—the bodies of the few—and thus make meaning
of their own corporeal identity in light of that standard, the process is the same. This process of surveillance is a critically defining element of male body culture, as identities within this culture are only understood as a function or consequence of this surveillance—both upon the self and others. Just as 9/11 imagery yields surveillance footage of the heroes (i.e., firefighters battling the blazes, good Samaritans rescuing others from the rubble) and the terrorists (i.e., the hijackers who commandeered airplanes to fly into national infrastructures), so, too, does surveillance footage of male body culture yield footage of the heroes (i.e., those with the ideal body, those who serve as body motivation) and terrorists (in many cases, the self—someone who doesn’t quite measure up, but in other cases, the abject body that is fat, differently abled, gay, or marginalized in some other fashion).

So just how do men come to understand their identity within male body culture given the hero-terrorist dichotomy established above? Through the (re)production of the corporeal machine. In many ways, men are driven to amend the abject (Kristeva, 1982). Building upon the Cartesian duality, Patterson and Elliot (2002) note, “we ‘are’ bodies and we ‘have’ bodies such that they do not exist simply ‘in themselves’ but become the subject of enterprise, interest, and reflection. To this end, our bodies represent unfinished projects, works-in-progress of central importance in our lives” (p. 3, see also Crossley, 2001).

This ‘body project’ unfolded throughout participants’ varying stages of body improvement. Throughout our conversations, many revealed that the disciplinary practices they engaged in to finesse their bodies were just as much about what they did not want to look like as they were about what they did want to look like. Closely related, men also engaged in body discipline in pursuit of feelings—feeling powerful, dominant, sexually aggressive, intimidating, and more. Sure, many men excused their excessive body discipline as a mechanism of “health.”
Notwithstanding how “health” as a motivator has been called into question above, there still exists a relationship between “health” and “beauty” in the mainstream, as noted in Foucault’s (1975, 1994) discussions of the medicalization of health and wellness. If Chapter 5 does not validate this association, think merely to the “Health and Beauty” sections of most department stores; the resounding implication is that you cannot have one without the other. Men seek to avoid the abject body, one marked by both its mortality and aesthetic flaw. In their minds, these two are intricately woven together. Thus men’s body project is both an endeavor to remedy social fears (about bodies that do not align to the ideal standard) and mortal fear (about non-optimal bodies disintegrating before their time). Fear appeals seem to run rampant within male body culture, both on an institutional and intrapersonal level.

What are men afraid of? Being too fat. Being too skinny. Also being too muscular. And also not being muscular enough. Throughout my conversations with participants, there emerged a very small standard for the ideal male bodies. As such, men actively attempted to avoid specific embodiments that would make them noticeable outliers. They wanted to be “proper”—aesthetically pleasing and competitive in the male body market. This proper body “is a condition for our ability to be articulate subjects in the social world; however, the orderliness and stability of this body are always under threat, and always illusory” (Covino, 2004, p. 35). Kristeva (1982) notes: “The more or less beautiful image in which I behold or recognize myself rests upon an abjection that sunders it as soon as repression, the constant watchman, is relaxed” (p. 13). As men compare their bodies to others in male fitness spaces, they come to understand it both in terms of how it measures up but also how it remains competitive over others. The fit body becomes a symbol of men’s discipline, stands as a visual representation of their triumph over the
abject body, and ultimately validates their material utility and social value. In a sculpted army of fit men, this fit body emerges as a type of body norm.

This “body norm” is the foundation for a type of body community. Further validating male body culture as a unique cultural space, results from this study reveal that there are two “norms.” Participants did not want to be “just normal” (i.e., unmarked). They did not want to simply blend in with other male bodies. Instead, they wanted to be “normal” in terms of the dominant body “norm” that defined male fitness spaces (i.e., positively marked). By ridding any markers of negatively-valenced markedness (such as fat) and by ridding the normal, undisciplined body (which has not yet been finessed), participants engaged in acts of abjection. Covino (2004) notes that, “the process of abjection (ridding ourselves of the unwanted) is an act of orientation to a welcoming community, populated by clean and proper bodies” (p. 13). Male body culture is a community in process, whereby men’s redemptive acts of body modification equip them to be citizens in an elite community. There were clear membership benefits for being a part of this community and once initiated, men were welcomed into the community, commissioned to help democratically govern it and preserve its revered status.

While the above paragraphs implicate male body culture as a biopolitical space rife with potential for explorations of power and hegemony, they have taken a decidedly institutionalized view of male body 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. Covino (2004) notes, as men amend their body, they seek to transform “abject realities into tidy materializations of conventional, individualistic, bourgeois desire and belief” (p. 65). Put simply, men try to modify
their bodies so that they fit within their perceived notions of the most materially successful and socially desirable standard of all male bodies.

Perhaps this rests upon Foucault’s notion of biopower. Woven throughout his later works, including a series of lectures, Foucault wrote that biopower is “namely the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power” (Foucault, 2009, p. 1). He later commented, “[w]here discipline is the technology deployed to make individuals behave, to be efficient and productive workers, biopolitics is deployed to manage population” (Foucault, 2003, p. 3). Thus, biopedagogies emerge as a way to morally regulate the *bios* of life—“that is, how to eat, how to move and how to live” (Rail & Lafrance, 2009, p. 76). As a consequence, acts of surveillance (like those mentioned above) emerge, and lead participants in a journey of introspective analysis. As a consequence, Foucault (1985) notes:

> The individual delimits that part of himself that will form the object of his moral practice, defines his position relative to the precept he will follow, and decides on a certain mode of being that will serve as his moral goal. And this requires him to act upon himself, to monitor, test, improve, and transform himself. (p. 28)

The acts that men engage in to “improve” or “transform” themselves are confessional by nature. As Foucault (1978) notes, confession is “a ritual which unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or virtual presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires confession” (p. 61). In a purely linguistic sense of the term, I was this *authority*. I was literally the person that they confessed their body woes to and the one who gave open ear to their stories of failing to measure up to the dominant standard. I sat in an optimal position; I obviously was interested enough to hear their
story and my vulnerability prompted theirs (true to the underpinnings of Social Penetration Theory; see Altman & Taylor, 1973).

For those of us with fat bodies, we have already confessed; that is, our bodies make our grievances known without any spoken revelation of these grievances (Murray, 2009). Foucault (1978), however, asserts that, whereas identities were once understood in light of others, confessional practices now emerge as a mechanism for pronouncing the “truth of ourselves” (p. 63). By sharing my “true” self (although no permanently static true self exists), I believe I prompted other toward a confessional practice. To further elaborate, Foucault (1978) notes:

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; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature ‘demands’ only to surface . . .

Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence . . . production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power. (p. 60)

However, the disciplinary practices at work within male body culture surpass a purely linguistic understanding of confession. Even men’s highly discipline workout regimens emerged as a corporeal confession of their woes; the hours they spent in the gym were punitive for their past body grievances; their excessive eating control was punishment for failure to always eat perfect. 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. Such is the function of the disciplinary power of norms and pathologies” (p. 84). In line with Foucault’s (1978) assertions 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 a public acknowledgment of their transgressions against the hegemonic male body standard.

Ultimately this was a moral act. As Terry and Urla (1995) note:

With early roots in Aristotelian comparative studies, the idea that moral character is rooted in the body has structured a wide variety of modern medical and scientific studies, and shapes the current conditions under which popular fictions circulate about the bodies of all kinds of people who are deemed to be in some way behaviorally aberrant or socially disruptive. (p. 1)

The structure of confession, then, leaves individuals with no choice. Murray (2009) contends, “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’” (p. 89). To not be normal (that is fit), individuals are forced to confess their commitment to moral failure. Given this intricate relationship between morality, identity, and the body, more research must be conducted to better understand social understandings of the body.

While the above analysis pulls heavily on Foucault and other critical theorists, the intent of this dissertation is not to provide a Foucauldian analysis; instead, I hope to reveal how male body culture lends itself well to a host of theoretical and methodological investigations. From surveillance studies to post-positivist accounts of privacy management, this context is ripe for investigation. In the paragraphs below, I provide an analysis of the weaknesses of this study and give directions for future research.

**Looking Forward**

While I believe this investigation is theoretically anchored, methodologically accountable, and a valuable extension of Communication Studies research, it is not without
several weaknesses. First, as noted in great length above, the use of participants who I assumed occupied positions of power worked but not as well as it could have. I whole-heartedly believe that photovoice methodology has great potential in future investigations of male body culture but would alter those investigations to provide accounts of marginalized others. This study has certainly affirmed the great emancipatory potential of photovoice—potential that was not actualized in this study.

On a methodological note, this study involved interviews with a sample of convenience. While that sample was logically justified given the structures of male body culture, I had to regard that participants clearly understood the benefits for participating. As a reminder, participants in this study received full research credit for participating. As such, I worried that they might treat it like homework. While some took it incredibly seriously, sometimes going above and beyond the requirements, some refused to follow through with all phases of the study. Even of those that did, none returned my invitation to engage in member-checking of the data. Despite sending out the results portion of this manuscript with detailed information where their participation emerged and invitations to come meet with me one-on-one to talk about my analysis, none obliged. While I received a great amount of data, I must recognize that many likely saw this as “homework,” and the results were not as rich as if I had asked marginalized others (who have an identity stake in it) to be my informants.

Closely related, this study relied on participants that were fairly homogenous. Given the stated desire to explore power within male body culture, and given the raced, sexed, classed, structures of male body culture, that homogeneity was justifiable for this study. Yet, true to the admission above, this homogeneity significantly detracted from the full potential of the study.
Future investigations would benefit from exploring intersectional marginalized identities within male body culture.

Furthermore, on the notion of identity, future investigations might find great potential in applying relevant theories of human communication to the context of male body culture. As noted in this chapter, many of those theories apply. It is my hope that this study, along with other work, will justify the context of *male body culture* as a unique cultural site, and will be regarded by others as a space with great potential for Communication Studies research.

It seems unfair to give a resounding call for more literature that uses photovoice methodology to examine male body culture and marginalized identity elements within it and not be willing to be vulnerable enough to engage in that practice myself. In Chapter 2, I implicate myself as an active participant in this entire project; it stems from my own experiences. It was designed because of my own personal observations as a participant in male body culture. It was *me-search*, through and through. Along the way, as somewhat of a comparison tool and somewhat of an endeavor in my own curiosity, I followed the study as well. In the final chapter of this dissertation project, I return to where it all started—with me.
Chapter 7: “Weighing In” on Male Body Culture

From a traditional research lens, I understand that this endeavor will mean little to outside readers. For me, this was a journey of self-discovery; a way to situate myself theoretically within my own study. Like the men in my study, I took a series of images over a period of several weeks that documented what my male body meant to me, what fitness meant to me, what I meant to me. In the following final pages, I provide those images along with my thoughts. It is my hope that this vulnerability will help spawn a series of likeminded scholarship which takes a more critical examination of body culture, perhaps even from the inside out.

**Phil: A Journey from Fatness to ________________**

My identity is intricately related to my fatness—all of my fatness. I was fat at 370 pounds and I still identify as fat at 233—or 238 if it’s a heavy writing week. Before I started on my weight loss journey—and yes, to me it is a journey; all fitness is; it has a start but no finish; it’s not a race…it’s a journey—I had come to regard fatness as just another extension of me. My journey began young. I was always a “chubby” kid and that weight quickly became a significant part of my overall identity. Looking at how I measured up to my cousins, my classmates, and other boys my age, I knew I was a little “husky” (or so said Sears as I shopped for pants).

*Figure 35. You’d Be Perfect If You Dropped Fifty Pounds!*
Early in my life, I faced a challenge that trickles through my identity schema to this day. While I rarely mention my sexual abuse and only spoke of it to others aside from my parents and my partner only three years ago, that moment was a turning point for me in many ways.

That moment inscribed itself on my identity; it inscribed itself on my body. While the details bear no repeating here, my identity—especially my body identity—simply cannot be understood without negotiating it in light of other men’s bodies. This critically defining moment of my life taught me the hard way that my body was never my own; it led me to be believe that my body was always something for others. While I am not making a crass parallel between sexual abuse and male body identity, I do believe the sexual undercurrents that flow through both practices are intricately related, if to no one else—to me. As I attempted to understand what had happened to me, I turned to food to cope.

Food was always a happy place for me. My great grandfather, who I love dearly, owned a little ice cream shack on the edge of our rural town. From 9 years old, I worked almost 20 hours each week at the family restaurant. It signified a closeness and a safety to me; soon, food did too.
And darn it all, but the science works: food has calories, the more you consume the bigger you get. Thus started an upward trajectory of weight gain. It changed everything.

Soon, my weight became a noticeable distraction. “You don’t need those chips.” “You already had dinner, you can eat tomorrow.” “Just try Diet soda, you might like it.” My family meant well; truthfully, I’m glad they tried to help control my weight. It’s what I wanted, but I couldn’t control it myself. Soon, others joined in to “help.” As you can imagine, that help often spawned hurt. As more people helped, more people were talking about my body. And as more people were talking about my body, the more others felt comfortable chiming in, sometimes with less-than-helpful words.

I grew up in an extremely toxic, hyper-conservative, fundamentalist sect of the Evangelical Christian church. “Just turn to God, He’ll work it all out.” “God will never give you more than you can handle.” “Cast your cares on Him, for He cares for you.” Although I have not abandoned my faith, I have left these grossly inappropriate clichés used to corral those needing support. I bought it, and immersed myself in the church to help find a “purpose in the pain.” I grew close to some, including the preacher. I was a pianist for the church, so he kept me close because I met a need. Still, even he got a little too comfortable in the pulpit and my body was regularly inserted into the messages; a reminder of the moral sins that plague our material flesh. The comments were backhanded—nothing that bears repeating at length; still, as I sat in the pews of the 140-person congregation, things like, “You didn’t know a big boy could play piano like that, did ya’?”, “Yeah, we were gonna’ bring him to sing with us this weekend, but they didn’t have a buffet,” or “That stage has a weight limit” quickly turn from publicly humorous to personally painful. But remember—“Cast your cares on Him, for He cares for you.” I just swallowed the bitter pill and moved on.
I couldn’t talk about my fatness; it was shameful. I couldn’t complain about the hurt that came when others’ talked about it in a degrading way; it was to be expected and, after all, “Vengeance is mine, thus saith the Lord!” At that point, I also couldn’t lose the weight, so what does a fat person do? I internalized it. Clearly fatness was part of my identity, so I owned it. I became the typical fat guy. I went out of my way to get a laugh from anyone who would lend their ears. I used self-deprecating humor to let others know—Yes, I know I’m fat. Yes, I know you think I’m fat. And yes, I want you to know that I know that you think I’m fat. My whole identity became focused on ensuring others that I knew that I understood my condition. My body was abject, a corporeal reminder that this is what happens when you let yourself go. Even though, as a scholar, I recognize that social discourse on fatness in recent years has led to increased medicalization of fatness, I fell prey to confessing my fatness long before I ever even learned how to pronounced “Foucault.” I have always felt that it was my duty to let others know that I was sick; not in a contagious way but in a way that still required me to reveal my ills. I can
vividly remember running as an overweight kid on the basketball courts during gym class in middle and high school. As I saw others staring at me, I remember shouting across the gym, “I know I have boobs! At least tip me if you’re going to gawk.” (I got in trouble for saying “boobs” at my hyper-conservative private Christian school). But what else was I supposed to do? If I didn’t let others know I knew, it was as if I was walking around with some plague; and let’s face it—there’s a social duty to reveal its “deadly” and “dangerous” symptoms.

![Figure 38. Too Young To Die. Too Fat To Live.](image)

Years passed. I continued to gain weight. Although you might be led to believe otherwise, life goes on…even when you’re fat. I was the self-proclaimed “life of the party” in college—the stereotypical fat guy that went to great lengths, just to get a laugh. Living in an all-male dorm, there were lots of bodies on display. How did mine fit in? To ease my own discomfort, find my place, and show (in my most manly way possible) that I “didn’t care” about what others thought of me, I fell into the same script I used for years—feel awkward at the pool? Make a man boob joke. Feel awkward walking from the shower to your room? Do an awkward dance that makes your stomach jiggle. Be the funny fat guy—it wasn’t the most ideal solution for me, but one thing was for sure—it was certainly better than being just the fat guy.
Jokes on the outside, miserable on the inside—I was the stereotypical fat guy. I really was miserable day in and day out, not because I hated who I was. Honestly—I liked who I was. I was happy and content in and of myself. At my heaviest, life was actually pretty great. I had a wonderful loving partner (that I attracted with my fat body, I might add), I was fulfilling my dreams and worked hard to be competitive in graduate school. I overcame a traumatic childhood experience—I liked Phil, he was remarkable. But I also hated him, especially when I walked down sidewalks, entered public places, or had to be in front of a crowd. Even as I look back over pictures taken during those years of my life (2007-2013), my smile faded. I stopped being the funny fat guy—it wasn’t funny anymore. I stopped trying to get others to like me, it never truly worked, save if they were looking for a person to direct their best fat jokes at. I stopped.
Still, life went on. I married the love of my life and a few years later, my daughter was born. She was beautiful. 7 pounds, 9 ounces, a beautiful head of brown hair. Responsibility hit me like a crippling wave. As I looked at her, I realized—whether through factual or fictional persuasion—that I was not being responsible with my body. Despite being heavily immersed in a research agenda focused on body shaming, I succumbed to the very thing I pointed out as an thinly veiled attempt at body control and fat shaming. Yes, I suddenly felt a need to get my “health” (i.e., fatness) under control.
After having avoided the scale for some time, I finally stepped on and saw that number. The one that I always think about when I step on the scale each morning. The one that now keeps my plates light and my running shoes worn. 363 pounds. I went to the doctor. With an “illness” this severe, I knew I needed professional help. I am (yet am not) ashamed. I did not lose weight “the right way.” I followed an extreme regimen. Using human chorionic gonadotrophic (HCG) hormone therapy, I ate only 500 calories a day and injected myself twice a day with high power hormones designed to trick my body into getting nutrients from fat stores.

Figure 42. Misery/Happiness In A Bottle

If people asked, I gave round about answers. *Just trying to change my habits. Just good ol’ fashioned diet and exercise. Just trying to be healthy.* First, I had to lose weight if I wanted to avoid judgment. But then, I had to be careful *how* I lost weight to avoid that same judgment. The few that found out confirmed—everyone wants an M.D. when it comes to telling fat people how to live their life. “You should just try minimizing your calories if you want to lose a few pounds,” got replaced with, “Just be careful. 500 calories isn’t safe, you know,” and “You can do it, I’ll
support you if you want to lose weight” became “I mean, you don’t need to do something so extreme.” As a fat guy—everyone let me know I needed to change. As a guy trying to rid himself of fatness, I also needed to change—for me. Or so I thought.

So I started. I did it for me. One round. Two Rounds. Three rounds. Each time, six solid weeks eating only 500 calories a day and injecting what was to be my saving grace. It worked. 360. 320. 280. 230. I never thought I would see that number! My heart skipped beats. I couldn’t stop looking in the mirror. The selfies never seemed to stop. But wait… Is my double chin coming back? I shouldn’t have eaten that pizza—can you see that top stomach roll coming back? I mean, I like being skinny but all this extra skin… yuck. I’ll probably have to get surgery to take care of these man boobs. Wasn’t this supposed to “take care of it?”

At my lowest, I remember seeing 228 pounds on the scale. I currently rest around 235 pounds. I go through excessive maintenance strategies, including a very strict diet, regular exercise, and an overall conscious effort to ensure I never return. Just this week, I weighted in at over 240 pounds; the anxiety it produced was beyond any stress that came with writing this project. My weight—all of it—before and after—influences everything I do. It structures my day. Dictates my spare time. Occupies every spare moment of my consciousness. And truthfully, I don’t even buy the “obesity epidemic.” Yet, all the while loudly proclaiming that there is no science to justify fat-shaming and that you can be “fat and healthy!” (you can), I still succumb to the very thinking that I detest.

Why? I don’t know. But I do know that it validates body culture—male, female, or otherwise—as a significant element in our overall identity composition. I know I’m not alone; if I was, this dissertation would not have been possible because there would not have been the
volumes of literature there are about these phenomena. The *body* is personal. The body is *political*.  

*Figure 43. Happy (right?)*  

These brief few paragraphs have only provided a snapshot; a quick blitz through my life and my association to male bodies, including my own. I believe that addressing the problematic nature of body culture begins with the personal; at least it does for me. I have attempted to be frank, vulnerable, and honest—laying my life out as an art piece for critical examination. I conclude with Foucault (1983):

> What strikes me is the fact that in our society, art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life. That art is something which is specialized or which is done by experts who are artists. But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? Why should the lamp or the house be an art object, but not our life. (p. 236)
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Appendix A: Email Call For Participants

Hello!

Researchers in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Kansas are conducting research on masculinity and the drive for physical fitness. We are currently seeking male participants for interviews and a participatory photography project. Participation in this project involves two short (25-30 minute) interviews and a week-long photography assignment. To participate in the study, you must satisfy the following conditions:

- Identify as male
- Workout at least 3 times per week (you may interpret “workout”)
- Have worked out consistently (at least 2 times a week) for the past year
- Currently be seeking to gain muscle mass or lean out

You will receive 15 research points in COMS 130/131/132 for participating in this study.

If you are interested, or know someone who may be interested, please contact the Phillip Wagner via email at pewagner@ku.edu or phone at (570) 556-0789.
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

Informed Consent Statement

**Project:** Examining Men and the Drive for Muscularity  
**Researcher:** Philip E. Wagner, Department of Communication Studies  
**Contact Information:** pewagner@ku.edu

**INTRODUCTION**  
The Department of Communication at the University of Kansas supports the practice of protection for human subjects participating in research. The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the present study. You may refuse to sign this form and not participate in this study. You should be aware that even if you agree to participate, you are free to withdraw at any time. If you do withdraw from this study, it will not affect your relationship with this unit, the services it may provide to you, or the University of Kansas.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**  
The purpose of this study is to explore the intersections of gender and physical fitness. Using qualitative research methods, this study will explore the ways in which a drive for physical fitness is associated to other gendered phenomena and the benefits/consequences of engaging in physical fitness practices.

**PROCEDURES**  
You will be asked to participate in two short interviews (about 25-30 minutes each). Additionally, you will be asked to participate in a week-long photography activity. This project will occur in three phases:

**Phase 1:** Interview 1 will involve a brief discussion about your personal physical fitness habits. During this interview, you will also receive instructions about a week-long photography activity.

**Phase 2:** During this week-long photography activity, you will be asked to capture at least 5 images every day that pertain to your physical fitness or body improvement. Although more information will be provided to you during the first interview, this assignment involves minimal instruction, other than for you to capture meaningful images that reflect your fitness journey. You will upload these images to an online server to a private folder provided to you. The researcher will then sort these images.

**Phase 3:** Interview 2 will involve a brief discussion of the major observed themes that manifest from the images captured during the photography activity.

All interviews will be recorded using an audio-recording device. You may still participate in the study if you do not wish to have your interview recorded. These audio recordings will be transcribed onto paper by the researcher. All recordings and transcriptions will be protected on a password-guarded compute in a locked office. Your name will be replaced with a pseudonym in all transcripts and any subsequent publications. These transcriptions and recordings will be permanently destroyed in January of 2020.

**RISKS**  
There will be no more risk than incurred during conversations about this topic during everyday life. There is a slight risk that participants will be identifiable. The audio recordings and the photographic images increase the risk of being identified. The researchers will blur/alter images in a way that protects your identity.
BENEFITS
By participating in this study, you are helping benefit the field of Communication Studies by contributing to the volume of knowledge on health communication and body image. We believe this researcher is especially valuable, as it helps contribute to a greater social conversation on body image and gender.

PAYMENT TO PARTICIPANTS
There is no monetary compensation for this study. Participants who complete all phases of this study will receive 15 points of research credit for the COMS 130 research requirement. Please email alex22@ku.edu for questions about the COMS 130 research requirement.

PARTICIPANT CONFIDENTIALITY
Your name will not be associated in any publication or presentation with the information collected about you or with the research findings from this study. Instead, the researcher(s) will use a study number or a pseudonym rather than your name. Your identifiable information will not be shared unless (a) it is required by law or university policy, or (b) you give written permission.

Additionally, all images that contain discernable elements (such as facial features) will be blurred to help protect your identity.

All data from this study will be kept until January 2020, at which time it will be destroyed. Permission granted on this date to use and disclose your information remains in effect indefinitely. By signing this form you give permission for the use and disclosure of your information for purposes of this study at any time in the future.

INSTITUTIONAL DISCLAIMER STATEMENT
In the event of injury, the Kansas Tort Claims Act provides for compensation if it can be demonstrated that the injury was caused by the negligent or wrongful act or omission of a state employee acting within the scope of his/her employment.

REFUSAL TO SIGN CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You are not required to sign this Consent and Authorization form and you may refuse to do so without affecting your right to any services you are receiving or may receive from the University of Kansas or to participate in any programs or events of the University of Kansas. However, if you refuse to sign, you cannot participate in this study.

CANCELLING THIS CONSENT AND AUTHORIZATION
You may withdraw your consent to participate in this study at any time. You also have the right to cancel your permission to use and disclose further information collected about you, in writing, at any time, by sending your written request to: Phillip Wagner 1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Bailey 102 Lawrence, KS 66045.

If you cancel permission to use your information, the researchers will stop collecting additional information about you. However, the research team may use and disclose information that was gathered before they received your cancellation, as described above.

QUESTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION
Questions about procedures should be directed to the researcher(s) listed at the end of this consent form.
PARTICIPANT CERTIFICATION:
I have read this Consent and Authorization form. I have had the opportunity to ask, and I have received answers to, any questions I had regarding the study. I understand that if I have any additional questions about my rights as a research participant, I may call (785) 864-7429 or (785) 864-7385, write the Human Subjects Committee Lawrence Campus (HSCL), University of Kansas, 2385 Irving Hill Road, Lawrence, Kansas 66045-7568, or email irb@ku.edu.

I agree to take part in this study as a research participant. By my signature I affirm that I am at least 18 years old and that I have received a copy of this Consent and Authorization form.

_______________________________
Type/Print Participant's Name

_______________________________
Date

_______________________________
Participant's Signature

ResearcHER Contact Information:
Phillip E. Wagner
Principal Investigator
Communication Studies
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Bailey 102
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045
570-556-0789
pewagner@ku.edu

Adrienne Kunkel, Ph.D.
Faculty Supervisor
Communication Studies
1440 Jayhawk Blvd.
Bailey 102
University of Kansas
Lawrence, KS 66045
785-864-9884
adkunkel@ku.edu
Appendix C: Interview Protocol #1

(Pre-Photo Elicitation)

Script: Hello! My name is Phil Wagner and, as you know, I am conducting a study on masculinity and the drive for physical fitness. In this first interview, I am going to ask you a few questions about the importance of physical fitness in your life. Then, we’ll talk about the next phase of the study. Let’s begin by talking about your personal fitness habits.

(Personal Fitness Habits)
Can you tell me about the role of physical fitness in your life?

How many times per week do you work out?

How long have you consistently been working out?

What does a typical workout look like for you?

(Body Image)
How does your workouts influence your body image? Do you feel differently on days you do/do not workout?

Think back to before you started working out. How do you feel about your body now as opposed to then?

What happens if you skip a workout or aren’t able to workout for an extended period of time?

If you had to only pick one part of your body to improve, which part would it be? Why?

(Gender and the Body)
Can you describe the ideal male body?

Can you describe the ideal female body?

How important is it to have the ideal male body? What can you do with the ideal male body that you can’t with an un-ideal body?

Where do you think your standards about the ideal male body come from?
Script: Great! Thanks for your great answers! Now, I’d like to tell you about the next part of this project. As you likely know, I would like you to document visually your physical fitness journey. First, I have to ask—do you have a smart phone, tablet, digital camera, or other technology capable of taking pictures and uploading them to an online dropbox?

(continue if participant says “yes”; provide participant with a digital camera if “no”)

Script: Great! So what I want you to do is to document a full 7-day week of your journey of physical fitness. This includes days you workout and days you do not. I do not have any instructions on the content of the images because I want you to document what is meaningful to you. The only request I have is that you take at least 5 images each day (35 images total). You will upload these images (separately or in small chunks) to an online server (www.dropbox.com). I will create a private folder for your images. At the end of your seven days, I will look over your images and attempt to sort them into groups. I will then send you an email to request a second, brief interview where we discuss the images. Does this make sense? Do you have any questions?

(answer questions)

Script: Great! What I want to do now is have a practice session. So briefly, using your camera, I want you to throw everything out the window we just talked about and I want you to think about the word “KU.” Using your camera, I want you to take at least two pictures of things in this room that you think exemplify the term “KU.”

(participants will likely take images of Jayhawks, KU textbooks, KU stickers, or other university-affiliated paraphernalia).

Script: Great! Now this is exactly what I want you to do this week. I want you to take images that exemplify the term “male fitness” or “male body.” Think critically about two elements—masculinity and fitness. Take appropriate pictures that you feel embody the meaning of these terms. Because I’m interested in how you experience masculinity and fitness you will likely not be taking pictures of other individuals. However, if you take pictures that have other people in them, I would like you to use this form (see attached documents) to get their consent. I recognize that some photos might be difficult to capture and gain consent. Just make sure that if the image you take features identifiable elements of another individual (such as photo A), you gain proper consent. If the picture only features non-identifiable features (such as photo B), it is still best to gain consent, if possible. Please submit these consent sheets when you attend the second interview; or you may scan these consent documents and upload them to the secure dropbox. Additionally, I anticipate that you will likely work out at the on-campus facilities or outside. I have collaborated with the student recreational services on campus for this project and you make take pictures in these facilities—simply let a staff member know you are part of this study. If you work out at another facility, please be sure to ask their permission before taking pictures. A representative at the facility you are working out in should provide a written statement of consent.
Photo A: A photo requiring consent

YOU

INDIVIDUAL IN PICTURE
(requires written consent)

Photo B: A photo not requiring consent (but strongly recommended)

YOU

If you have questions, remember that you can always email me using the contact information provided to you.
Appendix D: Interview Protocol #2

(Post-Photo Elicitation)

Script: Hello! Thank you for coming back to this second interview! I had the opportunity to look through your images and I am really excited to talk to you! I have a few questions, but I really want to hear about how your picture taking went.

Questions
How did the picture taking go?

Did you develop a process for taking images? Or did you just take whatever popped into your head?

How was it documenting this week of your fitness journey?

Did you see any major themes in the images that you took? Tell me about those themes.

(discuss thematic units of images and inquire about the themes in each, paying careful attention to participants’ perceptions of the themes and images; use SHOWeD)

Do you have any questions for me?

Any last comments?

Script: Wow! Thanks so much for sharing all of that with me. These are some great images and it is so interesting to see what your physical fitness journey actually looks like. I’m providing you with my card so that you can contact me if you have any lingering questions. You can anticipate an email from me within 6 months. I plan to hold a special presentation evening in late summer to share my findings with anyone interested. You can also schedule a time to meet with me before then to discuss the way these interviews/photos will be used. Thank you so much for participating!
Appendix E: Photo Release Form

Authorization for Release of Photograph and Video

I, ____________________________, by signing this release, authorize Phillip E. Wagner, researcher in the Department of Communication at the University of Kansas, to use my image and likeness, including photographs and video images for the purpose of research in a study on gender and body image.

I understand that the images and videos described above may be included in, copied and distributed by means of various print or electronic media. I understand that my name will not be included with my images. I also understand that my identifiable features (i.e., facial features) will be blurred to help protect my identity.

I understand that this authorization can be revoked at any time to the extent that the use or disclosure has not already occurred prior to my request for revocation. In order to revoke the authorization, I must notify the researcher directly in writing: Phillip E. Wagner, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd., Bailey 102 Lawrence, KS 66045.

If I cancel this authorization after publication of the materials outlined above, I understand that my cancellation request may not be honored. If I revoke this authorization, the researcher will not engage in any new uses or disclosures of the images or videos.

The University, Department of Communication, and the researcher, will not condition treatment, payment, enrollment, or eligibility for services or benefits on the execution of this authorization. I understand that the images and videos may be subject to re-disclosure by the person or entity receiving such information and thus will no longer be protected by federal privacy regulations.

This authorization is given without promise of compensation. The photos and videos specified above become the property of the University of Kansas and I release the University any right, title, and/or interest of any kind that I may have in the information or images produced.

I have read this document and understand its contents.

Printed Name: ____________________________ Date: _________________________

Email Address: ____________________________ (for provided copy of this form)

Signature: ________________________________
Appendix F: Letter of Support from KU Recreational Facilities

October 20, 2014

KU Recreation Services consents to allow Phil Wagner’s study participants to document their visual journey of their fitness endeavors via taking photos for one week at the Ambler Student Recreation Fitness Center.

We would ask that participants inform staff as they enter that they are part of Phil Wagner’s study, so that staff will not stop them from taking photos. If by chance they are approached by KU Recreation Services staff while taking photos, please have them state that they are part of Phil Wagner's study and have received approval from Jill Urkoski.

Thanks!

Jill Urkoski
Associate Director Programs/Staff Development
KU Recreation Services
Appendix G: Institutional Review Board Research Approval

December 17, 2014

Phillip Wagner
pewagner@ku.edu

Dear Phillip Wagner:

On 12/17/2014, the IRB reviewed the following submission:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Review:</th>
<th>Initial Study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title of Study:</td>
<td>Masculinity: Examining the intersections of masculinity and physical fitness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Investigator:</td>
<td>Phillip Wagner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRB ID:</td>
<td>STUDY00002021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant ID:</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documents Reviewed:</td>
<td>• Signed Consent, • Supplemental Photo Consent, • HSCL Initial Application, • Letter of Support, • Email Call for Participants, • Interview Guide 1, • Interview Guide 2,</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The IRB approved the submission from 12/17/2014 to 12/16/2015.

1. Before 12/16/2015 submit a Continuing Review request and required attachments to request continuing approval or closure.
2. Any significant change to the protocol requires a modification approval prior to altering the project.
3. Notify HSCL about any new investigators not named in original application. Note that new investigators must take the online tutorial at https://rgs.drupal.ku.edu/human_subjects_compliance_training.
4. Any injury to a subject because of the research procedure must be reported immediately.
5. When signed consent documents are required, the primary investigator must retain the signed consent documents for at least three years past completion of the research activity.

If continuing review approval is not granted before the expiration date of 12/16/2015 approval of this protocol expires on that date.

Please note university data security and handling requirements for your project: https://documents.ku.edu/policies/IT/DataClassificationandHandlingProceduresGuide.htm

You must use the final, watermarked version of the consent form, available under the “Documents” tab in eCompliance.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Dyson Elms, MPA
IRB Administrator, KU Lawrence Campus