

## **Are you man enough?**

A qualitative analysis of masculine representations in US fitness supplement brands' social media advertising

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## ABSTRACT

*This thesis addresses the ways that masculinity is represented in US fitness supplement brands' social media advertising. Previous research has shown that advertising is a field in which social norms are both dictated and reflected and that masculine representations in advertising are often stereotypical. The purpose of this research is twofold: a content analysis attempts to capture the masculine representations of two fitness supplement brands in their social media advertising and two focus groups were conducted in order to discuss men's perceptions with regards to the constructions of masculinity. A qualitative thematic analysis of 150 posts from brands Dymatize and Muscle Pharm's Instagram pages was conducted in order to answer the research question 'How do US fitness supplement brands Dymatize and MusclePharm use and simultaneously shape the concept of masculinity in their social media advertising? In order to capture men's experiences on the subject, a perception study was included in this research which consisted in conducting two homogeneous focus groups with four men in each group aged 19-26 years old who expressed their views on masculinities generally, and more specifically on fitness supplement brands' representation of masculinity in advertising. A thematic analysis of the focus group data aimed to answer the subquestion 'How do young international males perceive the marketing of fitness supplement brands on Instagram?'. The results of this research indicate that brands Dymatize and Muscle Pharm generally contribute to the widely accepted stereotypical representation of masculinity in a hypermasculine manner. Moreover, the results revealed that men often feel pressured to look and act a certain way in Western society, however the participants observed a shift in the definition of what it means to 'be a man' towards an increasingly multidimensional model.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Masculinities, hegemonic masculinity, hypermasculine markers, toxic masculinity, consumption*

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## 1. Introduction

The global fitness supplement market is growing considerably, especially the whey protein market, which was valued at 6.5 billion US dollars in 2018 and is estimated to grow at a Common Annual Growth Rate of 7.5% in the next few years (Wise Guy Consultants, 2019). This growth can partially be explained by the popularization of fitness culture (Johansson, 2016) and by the global increase in health consciousness due to rising levels of obesity: as a response, people are sometimes eager to consume healthier, lower calorie products (Wise Guy Consultants, 2019). Moreover, fitness supplement products have been increasingly marketed to appeal to non-athletes, recreational consumers who express concerns regarding their physical health but are not necessarily actively doing sports (Namie & Warne, 2013). An increase in people's fitness activities has also been observed globally in the last few years; gyms have become increasingly popular with people trying to improve their bodies (Crossley, 2006). The growth in gym memberships can partially be explained by the fear of health-related issues, however there are more factors that have contributed to the growth of the fitness industry as well as the increase in the consumption of fitness supplements. The rise of consumer culture has changed the way people see their bodies generally and the advertising industry is promoting beauty standards that have pushed people to work on their physical appearance (Shilling, 2012). In the current neoliberal climate, body dissatisfaction is an issue as advertisers are selling images of idealized bodies to men and women (Smith, Wright, Ross & Warmington, 2008).

Both men and women are exposed to images from the media displaying bodies that are often unrealistically thin for women, perfectly symmetrical and that live up to a toned muscular standard for men (Smith et al, 2008). Those images are certainly not representative of all body types and can have serious implications for the viewers of these images, who as a result often engage in social comparison; previous research has shown that some people have low self-esteem and/or a negative body image due to the exposure to such images (Tuncay Zayer & Coleman, 2015). In Western consumerist society, people are increasingly seeing their bodies as projects that need to be constantly worked on and improved (Shilling, 2012). Images of idealized bodies in advertising contribute to the pressure felt by some to look a certain way. Women especially have long been objectified in the media, often being portrayed as passive, sexual objects for the visual pleasure of men (Sabiston & Chandler, 2009). Female objectification has been scrutinized by both scholars and feminist movements, which has led to some changes in advertising as marketers have been under pressure to adapt to the changing social climate (Taylor, Johnston & Whitehead, 2016). Some mainstream brands have attempted to include a more comprehensive representation of femininity, such as Dove's 'Real Beauty' campaign that aimed to challenge traditional feminine beauty standards (Millard, 2009). Along with other factors, changes in the perception and representation of femininity have also generated changes surrounding the concept of masculinity; masculine representations in the media have altered too, which has affected men and the way they perceive their own bodies (Beasley,

2013). It must be noted that this thesis will discuss gender in a binary way because it is generally the approach that is used by mainstream brands, specifically by the two brands studied in this research, *Dymatize* and *Muscle Pharm*.

Academic research on the representation of male bodies in advertising has shown that men, too, are affected by idealized representations of bodies (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). The representation of idealized male bodies in advertising has encouraged many men in the Western world to seek a muscular ideal by incorporating fitness into their routine (Crossley, 2006). The world of fitness is not exclusive to men only, however being fit, lean and muscular has traditionally characterized the physical masculine ideal (Adreasson & Johansson, 2020).

As the fitness supplement market is growing extensively, it is relevant to study the ways that fitness supplement brands market to men on social media. The rise of social media has changed the face of marketing and provided brands with new advertising and targeting opportunities (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). New business models have emerged with the rising popularity of social media that involve customer interaction more than ever before, such as crowdsourcing for example. As the social media activity of consumers increases, they are constantly exposed to ads online (Lamberton & Stephen, 2016). In the era of Web 2.0, social media marketing is relevant to study not only from brands' perspectives, but also consumers'. Marketing communication has become a dialogue as opposed to a monologue in which social media acts like the bridge between consumers and marketers in what Erragcha and Romfhaner (2014) call 'participatory marketing'. Fitness-related brands have made use of the opportunities offered by social media marketing, as young people are increasingly turning to social media in order to inform themselves on health-related topics.

Fitness products are usually sold to consumers on social media as a gateway to the ideal muscular body. For men, it often means living up to the masculine muscular standard that is promoted by some (fitness) brands. It is pertinent to understand how these brands make sense of, as well as mold the concept of masculinity in order to gain an understanding of the social construct surrounding manhood. A relatively recent increase in the exposure to male bodies (specifically the muscular, fit male body) in the media has had an important influence on men's body image (Grogan, 2016). According to Kane (2009), there is a lack of existing academic discussion surrounding male body image; it is therefore relevant to study men's perspectives on male body representations in advertising. Furthermore, in the current climate in which movements such as #MeToo<sup>1</sup> have increasingly drawn attention to gender issues in the Western world, gender representations in the media are essential to study in order to make sense of societal issues such as gender inequalities and sexism. The rise of feminist movements has drawn attention to such issues and has initiated a dialogue about toxic masculinity (Salter, 2019). Parent, Gobble and Rochlen (2019) define toxic masculinity as the endorsement of strict traditional gender roles, characterized by the need to

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<sup>1</sup>#MeToo is a social media movement against sexual assault that became popular in October 2017, aiming to empower women and specifically sexual assault victims through solidarity (<https://metoomvmt.org/>)

compete and misogynistic and homophobic beliefs. The authors argue that social media have become a platform for the spread of toxic masculinity, which in turn affects certain men's behavior (towards both women and other men) and gender dynamics more generally. Social media advertising targeting men is therefore relevant to study in order to understand underlying gender dynamics in society.

This research addresses the gap in the existing literature on fitness supplement brands and masculine representations by answering the question 'How do US fitness supplement brands *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* use and simultaneously shape the concept of masculinity in their social media advertising?'. A large body of literature on masculinities exists, as well as literature on masculine representations in advertising; however, there is a lack of literature focusing on masculine representations in fitness supplement brands' advertising. This current study has a twofold focus: it aims to identify the strategies used by fitness supplement brands to target men through a thematic analysis of two brands' social media advertising, and moreover the perceptions of men on the topic are studied in two focus groups. Identifying and analysing the strategies used by fitness supplement brands targeting men could potentially contribute to the incomplete conversation on masculinities related to advertising, and more specifically fitness supplement brands' advertising. Additionally, men's perceptions of the marketing of these brands are studied in order to have a broader understanding surrounding brand-consumer interactions and men's experiences related to male body representations in the media. A subquestion aims to address men's perception and how they experience exposure to male body representation, specifically by fitness supplement brands: 'How do young international males perceive the marketing of fitness supplement brands on Instagram?'

In order to answer the research question and the sub question, a theoretical framework is presented in Chapter 2 which attempts to conceptualize masculinities, with a focus on hegemonic masculinity as it is a conceptual framework that has been widely used in masculinity studies (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, a section about the sociology of the body provides sociological context as to how people see and treat their bodies in contemporary Western society, followed by a history of fitness culture, in which the popularization of fitness culture is discussed. The theoretical framework is followed by a description of the research design in Chapter 3, in which the processes for conducting the two analyses of this research are described: the qualitative thematic analysis of Instagram adverts of brands *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*, and the thematic analysis of two focus groups transcripts. Furthermore, the results and themes that emerged from the analyses will be presented in Chapter 4 and discussed in relation with the theory presented in the theoretical framework, followed by a conclusion including the limitations of this research in Chapter 5.

## **2. Theoretical framework**

In order to continue with the analysis of fitness supplement brands' marketing to men, it is essential to gain an understanding of the topics involved in the research. For this purpose, a framework of existing theories and literature on masculinities, body sociology and fitness culture is presented in this chapter. In section 2.1, masculinities are discussed as a fluid, multi-dimensional concept with a focus on hegemonic masculinity and Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) reconceptualization, followed by a section on the sociology of the body and consumption in section 2.2. In order to understand masculinity in fitness supplement brands' advertising, masculine representations in advertising and hypermasculinity markers are discussed in Section 2.4. Furthermore, a history of the evolution of fitness culture is provided in section 2.3 that provides context for the emergence of the fit body ideal and the popularization of fitness supplements.

### **2.1 Hegemonic masculinity**

This research attempts to discover how fitness supplement brands use and/or shape masculinity in their marketing; in order to understand the abstract concept of masculinities, we must look at the notion of hegemony and specifically hegemonic masculinity. Hegemony refers to dominance from one social group over others; the ways in which a dominant class comes to power and maintains its power must be examined when studying hegemony (Donaldson, 1993). Hegemony is defined by Gramsci (1971) as a dominant economic class exercising control in society (Hearn, 2004). Hegemony involves political factors and institutions such as the state and the law. It is not a static concept, but it is very much circumstantial. According to Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985), hegemony "refers to an historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held." (p. 594): hegemony thus refers to the distribution of power in a specific social, political or economic context. Donaldson states that (1993) "Hegemony involves persuasion of the greater part of the population, particularly through the media" (p.645). It is therefore important to recognize the crucial role of the media in creating and imposing models of hegemony. Hegemony serves the interests of the ruling class; in the case of masculinities, a model of hegemonic masculinity is offered as a type of positioning of gender practice that is taken on by the most of the dominant class (Hearn, 2004).

Connell (1990) argues that hegemonic masculinity is a form that is culturally powerful and that its dominance "stabilizes the gender order as a whole" (p. 147). It is difficult to give a concise definition of hegemonic masculinity as it is not set in stone and it is always subject to change depending on the political and economic climate (Hearn, 2004). According to Connell (1990), models of hegemonic masculinity are constructed on the basis of exemplars who are recognized as heroes, which leads to one type of masculinity becoming dominant over other types. Hegemonic masculinity is a concept that is difficult to coin; there is not one set definition of what it is to be



hegemonic masculine. Connell (1990) argues that gender “is not fixed in advance of social interaction, but is constructed in interaction” (p. 35). Therefore, defining hegemonic masculinity requires studying the gendered societal processes such as mass media, the gendered division of labour and the power of the state (Connell, 1990). Historically, hegemonic masculinity referred to the most commonly enacted way of being a man, and placed all other men relatively to it. Additionally, hegemonic masculinity shaped gender relations by placing women’s role inferiorly to men’s (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Donaldson (1993) defines hegemonic masculinity as the “culturally idealised form of masculine character” (pp.646-647). However, according to him, it is not performed by all men, although it does serve the interests of most. Hegemonic masculinity places men in a position of power in contrast with women (and other types of masculinity that are not considered ‘hegemonic’, such as homosexuality). Male dominance does not mean that all men are powerful; it means that power is an important feature of men’s social interactions and experiences (Hearn, 2004). Hegemonic masculinity carries the notion of a widely accepted approach to gender and involves the consent of groups that are subordinated (although hegemony is generally imposed by force by those dominant social/economic group), which is called complicit masculinity (Connell, 1990).

Hegemonic masculinity is a concept that has widely been used as a framework for research on masculinities since the mid-1980s to the early 2000s (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), however it is complex and contradictory, and it is not sufficient to illustrate the gender system and gender dynamics (Donaldson, 1993). Hegemonic masculinity has been criticized by many scholars; Hearn (2004) argues that hegemonic masculinity offers a restricted view on masculinity and that the concept does not capture the complexity of gender. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) suggest a reconceptualization of hegemonic masculinity, which is discussed in the next section.

### *2.1.1 Hegemonic masculinity revisited*

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) strongly believe that conceptualizations of hegemonic masculinities so far have neglected the plurality of masculinities and the social factors that can alter the face of hegemony. The authors offer a revised version of hegemonic masculinity that takes into consideration the changing social and economic factors in society, which they argue have largely been neglected in masculinity studies. This model is especially relevant for this particular research as we live in a climate where gender roles are progressively being redefined in the West; therefore, it is important that we take a flexible approach to hegemonic masculinity as it is subject to change.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the need for a revised definition of hegemonic masculinity originates from a body of feminist theories of patriarchy and the debates that they initiated about men’s position in changing the patriarchy. Additionally, literature in social psychology and sociology had acknowledged the shifting nature of masculinity and its social role even prior to feminist movements. A large amount of literature on the male role was written during

the 1970s, placing gender roles and norms at the source of (some) men's repressive behavior towards women and homosexual men.

Social research and empirical studies of local gender hierarchies that examined local cultures of masculinity in schools (Willis's (1977) research on education and class), workplaces (Cockburn's (1983) study of gendered occupations) and communities (Herdt's (1981) study on homosexuality in New Guinea communities) have also participated in the dialogue surrounding a redefined hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Additionally, psychoanalysis affected the ongoing discourse on hegemonic masculinity in demonstrating the complexity of adult personality and the subconscious mind, the variations in the concept of gender identity, and discussing themes related to male power and contradiction with traditional masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), the reconceptualization of hegemonic masculinity must consider the potential changes in gender relations and the possible abolishment of power imbalances, and not merely focus on replicating hierarchy. Demetriou (2001) agrees with the fact that masculine power must be viewed as hybrid and introduces the term 'hegemonic masculine block', which suggest that the dominant form of masculinity that is able to reproduce patriarchy requires a constant "negotiation, translation, hybridization, and reconfiguration." (p.355). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) offer a revised model of gender hierarchy that takes into account areas that are subject to change. These areas are discussed in this section: firstly, the undeniable agency of women in the construction of masculinities; secondly, the acknowledgement of the geography of masculinities and the interaction between local, regional and global levels of hegemonic masculinity constructs; finally, the social embodiment of hegemonic masculinity through gendered social practices.

### *Gender hierarchy*

Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that it is imperative that research on the interactions among different masculinities acknowledges the influence of less powerful social groups, taking into account factors such as ethnic marginalization, physical disability or sexuality as they all interact with masculinity. The interaction between these multiple dimensions is referred to as intersectionality (McCall, 2008) and it cannot be ignored in masculinity studies. Ethnicity, sexuality and other segments of identity are crucial in the development of social relations and identity (McCall, 2008); therefore we cannot speak of masculinities by only taking into account gender and stripping it from other variables that might interact. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) highlight that hegemonic masculinity enhances the power and social privilege that come along with being the most commonly accepted type of masculinity. Additionally, one dominant type of masculinity can marginalize a group in this very group (men) in what Demetriou (2001) calls 'internal hegemony', such as the hegemony of heterosexual men over homosexual men.

Homosexual men's experience with adverse behavior from some straight men has been a source for discussing the hierarchy of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In her critic of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1992) names sexual orientation as a major example of different masculinities and argues that hegemonic masculinity relies on a model that regards men as a uniform, unvarying group. According to her, this model is conflicting with the multiple existing masculinities (such as sexuality) and therefore it is relevant to discuss the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual men and the different ways in which they experience hegemonic masculinity, as we will see that Western models of hegemonic masculinity are usually represented heterosexually.

Connell (1992) brings attention to the relation between heterosexual and homosexual men in studying Western dynamics of hegemonic masculinity. It has been commonly accepted that homosexuality goes counter to hegemonic masculinity in society and it is a widely accepted stereotype that homosexual men are 'effeminate', drifting away from masculinity towards more feminine values and interests. Connell (1992) states that it is a common assumption that "antagonism toward homosexual men may be used to define masculinity" (p.736) and therefore it is an accepted belief that men must be heterosexual in order to be masculine. As stated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), gender is relational, and masculinity is defined in opposition to femininity, which explains some men's rejection of 'effeminate' masculinities, which is a stereotype attributed to homosexuality. Donaldson (1993) agrees with the belief that homosexuality is considered counter hegemonic and argues that it is commonly associated with effeminate values and that homosexual intercourse itself is seen as subversive, the notion of which makes some heterosexual men uncomfortable. According to the author, conforming to the standards dictated by hegemonic masculinity results in some men displaying homophobic behavior and rewards them for it through social support and reassurance in their own masculinity (Donaldson, 1993). The accepted belief in Western society that homosexuality is not masculine has sparked homophobia and the oppression of many homosexual men. Anderson (2008) argues that homophobia goes beyond stigmatizing homosexual men and simultaneously dictates the attitudes of straight men, as they are taught to adopt 'traditional' heterosexual behavior and repress all behavior that could be considered homosexual (such as having interests that are considered typically feminine). Connell (1990) calls the display of such repressive and sometimes homophobic behavior 'social boundaries' that are meant to define 'real' masculinity. Connell (1990) argues that homophobia goes beyond being an 'attitude': according to her, homophobia is anchored in institution. She provides the examples of job discrimination against homosexual individuals and the criminalization of homosexual practices as practices of institutionalized homophobia.

Connell (1992) argues that men face oppression in Western culture, nonetheless they are not always excluded from masculinity. Instead, the author (1992) argues that they face challenges with regards to their sexual orientation and their social value as men, as well as concerning their relationships with straight men and women. This is why, according to her, it is essential to consider

the experiences of gay men in order to fully understand contemporary gender dynamics and potential changes. Reeser (2020) stresses the importance of studying masculinity without separating masculinity and homosexuality but instead to view them as overlapping identities. Masculinity should thus, evidently, not be considered as a heterosexual type merely; however, in the context of this research, the participants in this study are all heterosexual men. Therefore, the results are only representative (to some extent) this one segment of the masculine population.

Gender hierarchy concerns hegemonic masculinity in relation with other masculinities (internal hegemony) and the dynamics between masculinity and femininity (external hegemony). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), gender is relational, thus models of masculinity are always socially defined in accordance with models of femininities. Hegemonic masculinity was initially formulated in relation with hegemonic femininity, however this relationship has lost some of its relevance because new models of femininity have emerged as women's role have shifted in time. Focusing on the acceptance of patriarchal rules, hegemonic femininity (also called emphasized femininity), is still applicable in contemporary mass culture to some extent. However, the model ignores the new developments of female identity and practices, especially in the younger generation of women, which are increasingly recognized by younger generations of men. Therefore, more attention must be given to the 'new' practices of women in order to research hegemonic masculinity. According to Donaldson (1993), the belief that hegemonic masculinity is relational to women is not incorrect, but it is incomplete. As an example, he states that competitiveness is a central value in hegemonic masculinity, however it is institutionalized in business and therefore does not necessarily emerge from the relationships between men and women (Donaldson, 1993). Hegemonic masculinity, according to Donaldson (1993) refers not only to the control of men over women, but also of men over other men. Therefore, multiple factors must be taken into account when studying hegemonic masculinity and the ways it shapes social relations and male subject formation. However, solely focusing on men's practices does not give a comprehensive understanding of gender relations as it neglects women's agency in the construction of gender among men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The focus of this research is on masculine representations in the media, however, data from the focus groups will provide evidence that women have an important role in shaping masculinities.

### *The Geography of Masculinities*

For Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), transnational gender systems interact with the formation of masculinities and therefore an understanding of the geography of masculinities is necessary in order to reformulate hegemonic masculinity. According to the authors, hegemonic masculinities can be examined in terms of local, regional and global levels that interact and all contribute to the formation of broader transnational gender systems. The local level refers to hegemonic masculinities that emerged from family interactions, organization and communities; the regional refers to the level of nation-state; and the global refers to the masculinities that are shaped in

areas such as global politics and international media and business. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) examine the interaction between local and regional masculinities; masculine practices at the regional level are heavily influenced by those at the local level. To illustrate the interaction between local and regional hegemonic masculinities, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) give the example of sports in Western society. Practising sports locally shapes regional hegemonic masculine models, and vice versa (gender systems may emphasize practicing local sports as hegemonic masculine); this in turn influences other local environments. The authors stress the importance of the role of regional-level and local-level hegemonic masculinity in shaping a wider model of masculinity, simultaneously influencing cultural practices both locally and globally. Acknowledging the dynamics between the three levels means that we must acknowledge that local masculine practices are subject to changes due to different local circumstances and regional circumstances (such as economic restructuring and migration) and that hegemonic masculinity on a broader level must be treated as a changing entity. The influence of the global level is often overestimated in studies of globalization, while the power of the regional level is often underestimated (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). It is important to consider these areas (local, regional and global) in order to study the marketing of fitness supplement brands and more generally the broader power of the media in dictating gender norms. Masculinities are subject to change depending on cultural factors, as will be shown in the results according to the focus group participants' testimonies.

### *Social Embodiment*

The way that male bodies are represented and used are directly related to hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In social practice, bodies are both objects and agents. Sports among young men, for one, have become a measure of masculinity in Western culture, along with heterosexuality. Other social practices have become the norm for masculine identities, such as eating meat and driving dangerously. Such simple social practices that are not gendered in nature have become internalized in hegemonic masculinity and simultaneously shape the concept of masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The sociology of the body as an object of consumption is discussed in the next section, which attempts to help understand the masculine representations in advertising.

## **2.2 The body and consumption**

The most recurring and praised male body type that can be found in contemporary Western media is the fit, muscular body (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). This is the masculine body ideal that is at the center of this research and can be found in fitness supplement brands' advertising. In order to understand how the muscular body became the male body ideal, we must take a look at the broad concept of the body and how it relates to the social environment. The body is more than just a

physical entity; according to Carolan (2005), the body is also an indicator of social status and consumer patterns (Carolan, 2005).

Veblen (1989) introduced the term ‘conspicuous consumption’, the notion that people consume in order to show others their social status, and linked consumption with the notion of control of the material world surrounding us. However, conspicuous consumption has changed over time; consumption has become increasingly available for (almost) all classes and people are no longer satisfied by only consuming goods (Carolan, 2005). People want to become the embodiment of consumption, by treating their bodies as a project over which they have control. Studying the marketing of fitness supplement brands directly touches upon the relationship between one’s body and consumption in contemporary Western society, in that consumers of fitness supplements invest money into ‘improving’ their bodies. Therefore, it is relevant to set up a historical framework aiming at understanding the body in relation with consumption in the Western world generally, before moving on to the discussion of the different consumerist types of masculinity.

According to Carolan (2005), both the body and the environment in which it exists are symbolic places where cultural norms and values are contested. The author makes an analogy between the way individuals treat and control their body and how they treat the environment they are in. One way to look at this is to look at the history of diet; in the Middle Ages, access to abundant food was a sign of wealth and power, therefore being overweight was considered an indication of one’s high social status. By the 18th century, the way people consumed food changed as a ‘civilizing’ of appetite emerged; focus was not solely on the quantity of the food consumed, but the quality of it (Carolan, 2005). In the mid-19th century, connections between food and health were made as nutritional science began to emerge and taking care of one’s body through nutrition became an important part of everyday life. However, nutrition was not always only associated with health; during World War 1, the body also carried political and national values: being overweight was considered unpatriotic as excess fat of American citizens was compared with the scarce rations that soldiers had access to. Being ‘thin’ as opposed to fat had become the norm and it was the body standard that was encouraged for both men and women in the Western world. The entertainment industry also affected the ideal body standard for both as motion studios increasingly relocated to Southern California, where the climate allowed them to film all year long; the sunny weather called for body exposure and the body ideal was firm and tanned (Carolan, 2005). Moreover, Craddock (2016) argues that tanned skin has been promoted as a beauty ideal since the 1920s as a symbol of good health. This body ideal is still prominent in the US and Western Europe, which is why it is relevant for this research focused on US fitness supplement brands. The tanned, firm body standard was easily transmitted to the world through the entertainment industry; Carolan (2005) argues that images of the body did not need language and translation, and therefore knew no borders, at least concerning the developed countries that had access to American entertainment television.

Nowadays, the body has become a project with aesthetic purposes and many opportunities exist to ‘work’ on it, whether it be dieting, plastic surgery or exercising (Shilling, 2012). Pursuing an

idealized body shape comes with the promise of social acceptance, love, success and many more positive social outcomes (Carolan, 2005). The physical appearance of one's body has become a reflection of one's worth: a fit, 'controlled' body shows self-control and discipline, as well as control over the environment in which it thrives. The body is a meaningful cultural symbol that discloses information about one's status and consumer behavior. The ideal body does not only show the work put in it, but also the money invested (the costs of healthy food and gym membership for example) as well as the time invested (going to the gym or getting a manicure takes up time). Jones (2008) argues that we live in a 'makeover culture' in which making modifications on one's body is encouraged as people are led to believe it is a way to be the best version of themselves. We live in an era in which appearances are put forward through technology and social media; after all, what better way to prove one's self-improvement than with pictures of one's body, showing the effort and progress that were made? Social media is a platform on which bodily transformation is praised; many pictures can be found comparing people before and after their transformation, whether they have undergone cosmetic surgery or obtained fitness results (Jones, 2008). In the next section, the ways that the advertising industry encourages certain beauty standards and promotes specific body types are discussed, mainly focusing on masculine representations.

### **2.3 Masculinity in advertising**

As discussed in section 2.1, hegemonic masculinity creates models of masculinity that usually do not always correspond with the lives of real life men, although normalized in society (Donaldson, 1993). These models are representative of ideals, fantasies and aspirations and provide a point of reference for gender dynamics (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). A symbolic interactionist approach to the influence of advertising on people suggests that media images shape individuals' symbolic meanings of reality, in that they use images from the media to shape their own construct of reality (Trevino, Lengel & Daft, 1987). These symbolic meanings, in turn, shape individual behaviors. Symbolic Interactionism theory views people's interactions and interpretations as shaping society, attributing advertising an important role in people's meaning-making process of reality. Sherry (1987) suggests that advertising is carries cultural symbolism and "contributes to the structuring of our experience" (p.455), implying that the media provide images that hold symbolic meaning about societal power relations. Due to the repeated exposure to images in which male and female bodies are displayed in a certain way, mass media and advertising are important factors in people's socialization of gender (Vokey et al, 2013). Symbolic interactionism is a theory that could potentially explain the formation and preservation of gender roles in society, as images that portray gender in a stereotypical way will encourage people to perceive gender stereotypically. Similarly, a symbolic interactionist approach to hegemonic masculinity in advertising helps understand how hegemony is maintained in advertising.

Advertising has become a platform on which ideals of hegemonic masculinity are represented (Vokey, Tefft & Tysiaczny, 2013) and changes in advertising and beyond have led men to look upon themselves and become more conscious of their physical bodies (Patterson & Elliott, 2002). Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argue that there is an existing body of feminist literature focusing on the portrayal of the female body in lifestyle magazines and in the beauty market in general, contrasting with the lack of studies on the grooming market for men. The authors regard this lack of discourse on the male beauty industry as ‘unsurprising’ as there seems to be a common understanding that men are less likely to invest time, effort and money into their appearance than women. Nevertheless, many men are reevaluating their physical appearance and their position as consumers of cosmetic products is changing, along with the concept of what it means to be a man. Heterosexual men have long been expected to be indifferent about their appearance; however, social and political changes have redefined masculinities and it has become more acceptable for men to invest in their looks. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) pinpoint urbanisation and industrialisation as forces that have encouraged changes in the conceptualization of masculinities; as stated in section 2.2, industrialization has resulted in few men becoming muscular due to their employment, and therefore men started engaging in fitness culture in order to increase their muscle mass (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Images of muscular male bodies became more prominent in the media, placing strength and muscularity at the center of masculinity. In order to study the marketing of fitness supplement brands to men, it is essential to gain an understanding of the masculine standards transmitted through advertising and their origins. Men’s lifestyle magazines were an important turning point in male representations in the media and gave life to different types of consumerist male identities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005); this disruptive genre is discussed in the next section.

### *2.3.1 Men’s lifestyle magazines*

Male lifestyle magazines is a genre that emerged in the Western world relatively recently, becoming popular in the late 1980s (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). This new genre differed from other magazines which were more focused on men’s interests and hobbies and more informational in format, in that it encouraged consumerist behavior and directed focus on physical appearance. Men’s lifestyle magazines have been central to redefining masculinity, as they are a platform for male dialogue on the roles that men take on and what is expected from them, while providing readers with representations of masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In a similar format to women’s magazines’, male magazines increasingly addressed their readers’ worries and insecurities (Law & Labre, 2002). Magazines also provide men with ‘solutions’ in case they feel unsure about the altering gender roles in postmodern consumerist society that may be confusing to them (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Advertisers started to include more male body representations in men’s lifestyle magazines. Being exposed to other male bodies has made men look at their own bodies in



new ways; according to Andreasson and Johansson (2020), it has become increasingly socially acceptable for men to consume grooming products and to take care of their bodies. Men started gazing upon themselves and the eroticizing of bodies in advertising was no longer reserved for female bodies. Rohlinger (2002) argues that bodily objectification in advertising used to be mainly associated with representations of women; however, men's lifestyle magazines have observed an increase in erotic images of male bodies as they were increasingly nude. Andreasson and Johansson (2020) talk of a "convergence of male and female physicality" (p. 148) in advertising. It was in the consumerist interest of lifestyle magazines to sell constructions of male identities such as the 'metrosexual' and 'the lad' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which are discussed in the next section.

### 2.3.2 *The metrosexual and the lad*

Masculinity is not not a static concept; on the contrary, it is flexible and adapts to social trends and pressure in society to perform 'manhood' in certain ways (Corprew et al, 2014). It was discussed in section 2.1 that hegemonic masculinity is a widely accepted model of masculinity to which men are placed relatively (Donaldson, 1993); in reality, there are many models that masculinity can take on. Historically, different consumerist subtypes of masculinity have emerged, namely the metrosexual and the lad (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). In order to research the marketing of fitness supplement brands to men, it is necessary to study male consumers and their historical profiles.

Metrosexuality is a subtype of masculinity that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). The metrosexual, or 'new man', has interests that were traditionally considered 'feminine', namely fashion and emphasis on appearance. As pressure for men to be the family provider decreased, the traditional family structure started changing and more men (and women) started spending their economic capital on themselves. Single men's purchase power increased, and it became more and more acceptable for men to invest in grooming products and fashion items (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Ricciardelli and Clow (2013) argue that men purchasing beauty products and expressing themselves through fashion has given them opportunities to demonstrate their individuality. The metrosexual is believed to be accepting of his feminine side and the appearance of this subtype of masculinity has challenged traditional understandings of masculinity, in the sense that masculinity was not limited to the conventional understanding of what it was to be a man anymore (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Instead, the metrosexual made it acceptable for some men to express their masculinities in different, less traditional ways. Not everyone was in favor of the emergence of a more ambiguous masculinity; the metrosexual was criticized by some for being too effeminate. A new genre emerged that opposed the metrosexual: the lad.

The lad is a subtype of masculinity that emerged in the 1990s in the United Kingdom but rapidly spread to the US. This consumerist form of masculinity emphasizes hypermasculine interests, hedonistic consumption and promiscuous behavior (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Laddism encourages

immaturity, disregards any sense of responsibility and short term pleasure is valued over long term achievement. According to Gill (2003), laddism can be interpreted as a response to the rise of feminist movements and as a pretext to reinstate male dominance and privilege. Ricciardelli and Clow (2013) argue that this subtype of masculinity implies male dominance and heterosexuality, which can be linked to the strong influence of hegemonic masculinity on lad masculinity.

Generally, male lifestyle magazines started encouraging consumerism by portraying it as a way for men to change their embodied selves in order to reach the ideal they should aspire to be. Those magazines have changed male purchase behavior as men are now active in consuming as a means to construct their identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

### *2.3.3 Hypermasculinity in advertising*

Even though gender roles are changing, masculinity and femininity are often still portrayed stereotypically in advertising (Parent & Cooper, 2019). While female bodies are often portrayed as submissive, objectified entities, male bodies are also objectified through nudity and suggestive poses, represented by brands using strong and hypermuscular standards to which male consumers often compare themselves (Tuncay, Zayer and Coleman, 2015). According to Vokey et al. (2013), brands create these masculine standards partially through the display of hypermasculine behavior. Hypermasculine markers are relevant to examine as they are prominent in advertising that targets men. In this present research, fitness supplement brands are studied in their marketing to men and therefore awareness of hypermasculine markers is essential. Hypermasculine markers are often present in the field of advertising, reinforcing values that are traditionally perceived as masculine such as strength, toughness, violence and calloused attitudes towards sex and women (Vokey et al., 2013). Calloused attitudes towards women implies a lack of empathy for the female experience during sexual intercourse; the dimension of violence refers to the belief that violence is acceptable as masculine behavior; the dimension of danger is the idea that survival in dangerous situations is masculine in essence; and toughness is explained as the only form of emotional self-control that is acceptable for men (Vokey et al., 2013). However, 'typical' masculine values go beyond the ones identified by Vokey et al; Patricia Sexton suggested that "male norms stress values such as courage, inner direction, certain forms of aggression, autonomy, mastery, technological skill, group solidarity, adventure and considerable amounts of toughness" (Donaldson, 1993, p. 644).

Parent and Cooper (2019) affirm that the presence of hypermasculine markers in advertising can have negative consequences in terms of men's behavior, particularly towards women, and could negatively impact men's self-esteem. Wienke (1998) suggests that men's self esteem depends on the ways they position their own bodies in comparison with muscularity ideals, as muscularity is viewed as a measurement of masculinity. As a response, some men redefine the stereotypical meaning of muscularity in ways that correspond with their own muscularities (Wienke, 1998). Social comparison theory potentially explains this phenomenon as it suggests that individuals determine their social

value by engaging in comparison with others (Vogel, Rose, Roberts & Eckles, 2014). Vogel et al. (2014) apply social comparison theory to social media and argue that they are a platform on which people engage in both upward and downward social comparison. Upward social comparison is when individuals compare themselves with others who have characteristics perceived as 'superior' (in accordance with universal beauty standards, Western standards for this particular research), while downward comparison refers to individuals comparing themselves with others who are deemed 'inferior', which in turn gives them a feeling of achievement. Advertising is a field in which consumers often engage in upward social comparison, as they are presented with ideals of beauty that they must 'attain'. Advertisers try to sell products to consumers who hope to move towards the presented beauty ideals through consumption (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Social media is a place where both kinds of social comparison occur, however the display of 'perfect' bodies often leads to users engaging in upward social comparison, potentially leading to feelings of inadequacy (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009). Law and Labre (2002) add that social comparison theory indicates that a dissimilarity between muscularity ideals and some men's actual muscularity could result in some men's behavior intended to increase muscularity.

Parent and Cooper (2019) further discuss the concept of hypermasculinity and link it to the 'precarious manhood paradigm' as a view on the construction of manhood. They argue that manhood is a social construct that many men and women view as a social status that needs to be earned by adopting certain normative behavior, as opposed to an innate trait. Consequently, men can be under societal pressure to engage in behavior that is socially regarded as masculine in order to validate manhood. Bandura's social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) implies that people look at mass media and advertising in order to learn behavior that is socially accepted (Vokey et al, 2013). People have a tendency to develop social behavior by imitating their peers and the field of advertising is filled with attitudes and culturally 'appropriate' patterns of behavior for consumers to take on (Vokey et al, 2013). Following this line of thought, if hypermasculine attitudes dominant in advertising, consequently some male consumers could potentially tend to engage in hypermasculine behavior (Parent & Cooper, 2019), endorsing toxic masculine practices (Parent et al, 2019).

## **2.4 The fitness era**

It was discussed so far that advertisers often portray masculinity in hypermasculine ways, promoting the contemporary masculine body ideal: the 'V-shaped body', with well-developed chest and arm muscles, broad shoulders and a narrow waste (Law & Labre, 2002). The general topic of fitness is relevant to fitness supplement brands and their advertising, which are the main focus of this research; this section is dedicated to the ways that the male beauty ideal has influenced and has been by influenced by fitness culture in Western society. According to Vokey et al. (2013), mass media shape consumers' perception of reality with images that both mirror and mold cultural and social

patterns. Images of idealized bodies found in advertising reflect consumerist patterns by putting the body at the center of consumption, and encourage men and women to pursue this ideal by taking care of their bodies by investing money, time and/or effort into making changes to it (Carolan, 2005). For many, this means spending time and money into improving their appearance, through the consumption of (cosmetic) products, undergoing cosmetic procedures such as getting Botox injections (Carolan, 2005) or becoming part of fitness culture (Johansson, 2016). A rise in the number of gym memberships in the US over the last couple of years (Weller, 2019) demonstrates that going to the gym has become routine for many as people are eager to obtain a fit body.

According to Laperashvili (2013), sports have always been part of society. Our bodies used to be utilized for survival mostly, when hunting, which was a typically an activity for the fit men, was still a necessity. Even though humans still largely used their bodies actively during physical labour, sports progressively became recreational. From the Middle Ages until the late 19th century, exercise was frowned upon by the elites as it was associated with hard work, contrasting with the lack of physical exertion that was viewed as an indication of social elitism (Carolan, 2005). The technological revolution saw a decrease in manual labour and thus physical activity, accompanied by an increase in recreational sports (Laperashvili, 2013). Crossley (2006) associates fitness culture with late modern society lifestyle changes that brought about general changes in people's bodies; an increase in health-related issues and obesity has contributed to motivate people to start going to the gym as they are no longer exercising by doing manual labour. Additionally, the increased attention given to health and body was linked with industrialization and a need for physically strong men (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). Andreasson and Johansson (2020) root the origins of the muscular male body in history: being strong and muscular has long been associated with masculinity because it used to be related to violence, warfare and manual labour. Western society has always expected some men to be physically strong, which could explain men's desire to gain muscle and get fit.

Dworkin and Wachs (2009) argue that there are sociological factors that cannot be neglected for the emergence of the fit body, stating that the body has always been an indication of social status. Changes in capitalist society such as processes of mediatization of society and the development of a global business enterprise contributed to the emergence of the fitness industry (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). Another factor for the rise of fitness culture was the popularization of bodybuilding icons like Eugene Sandow, who introduced principles of bodybuilding into physical culture in the 19th century. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, achievements of strength were combined with aesthetic ideals of masculine beauty and posing in order to highlight muscularity became as important as proving one's strength. Andreasson and Johansson (2014) argue that the entertainment industry has contributed to fitness culture in promoting muscular bodies in movies. Dworkin and Wachs (2009) make a distinction between men and women's objectives concerning body goals: women generally desire to be smaller and watch their diet carefully, while men tend to want to grow in size and gain muscle. The masculine muscular standard partially emerged with the portrayal of muscular men in entertainment media, displaying characters such as

The Rock, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and Sylvester Stallone (Law & Labre, 2002). Those models did not correspond with the ‘average’ man; however they served as an ideal that some men wanted to attain.

In the 1950s, exercising in order to obtain a muscular body became accessible for most people (Carolan, 2005). David (2013) speaks of “Postcolonial Muscle” (p. 18), stating that muscular male bodies were strongly associated with national pride across the world. Furthermore, Andreasson and Johansson (2014) identify a shift in fitness movements from the early 20th century that was related to national sentiments, to modern fitness culture which has become an individualized activity. According to David (2013), a toned and muscular body as a standard of masculine beauty is a relatively contemporary phenomenon that emerged in Europe, expanded in North America and was brought to Asia and Africa by colonial powers and taken on in South America and Australasia. In the mid 20th century, exercise took on a political meaning in the US for men as it was commonly believed that only fit bodies would be able to handle the hostile atmosphere of the Cold War; as Carolan (2005) states: “A nation of soft bodies was a nation that was soft on communism” (p.96).

From the 1970s, an increase in the number of commercial and privately owned fitness centers was observed (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014). The general interest in fitness-related practices such as bodybuilding and aerobics peaked in the 1980s. As the social landscape was changing, the shifting class roles offered individuals the possibility of changing, and perhaps bettering one’s self. The promise of change was accompanied by the desire to improve the physical body. In the 1980s, working out was still widely associated with the white middle-class; however, it was popularized in the 1990s and became increasingly available to all. At the end of the 20th century, exercise became an increasingly popular hobby and at the beginning of the 21st century, healthy living became part of a popular lifestyle. Many started consciously working on improving their body’s health by exercising and/or eating healthy foods, partaking in what has been called ‘fitness culture’.

Andreasson and Johansson (2014) talk about a “standardization and homogenization of this global [fitness] culture” (p 106). The authors link this homogenization with the body ideals that are constructed through fitness culture; the ‘global body ideal’ that is promoted through advertising and consumer culture is toned, free of fat and requires hard work. A fit body represents values such as power, control and discipline; a muscular body embodies discipline because it requires constant maintenance as well as consumption power (Carolan, 2005). Dworkin and Wachs (2009) affirm that the symbolic meaning of the fit body has been heavily exploited by brands who have taken it upon themselves to sell a physical ideal to men with the promise that it can be reached by the consumption of products.

Fitness supplement brands were no exception; protein especially is the most used dietary fitness supplement nowadays and the production and marketing of protein supplements have observed a great increase in the late 20th century (Applegate & Grivetti, 1997). The first protein powder was developed in the 1950s by a bodybuilder named Irvin Johnson (Hefernan, 2018). Many

brands followed and protein supplements were endorsed by famous bodybuilders; by the 1980s, protein supplements became mainstream in the fitness industry. Today, the market is worth more than 6.5 billion US dollars and rapidly growing at the expected rate of 7.5% in the coming years (Wise Guy Consultants, 2019). Fitness supplement brands have seized the opportunities brought by the increasingly popular fitness sector and the popularization of the fit body. The fitness supplement market has experienced a massive growth in the last few years, specifically the whey protein market, which was valued at 6.5 billion US dollars in 2018 and is estimated to grow at a Common Annual Growth Rate of 7.5% in the next few years (Wise Guy Consultants, 2019). The sports nutrition market is becoming increasingly successful because consumers are led to believe by brands that fitness supplements are the gateway to achieving the ideal body that is depicted in the media (“Muscle money”, 2017). However, the rise of the fitness supplement market comes with ethical concerns: the quality of some products is contested by nutrition experts and it is often seen as unethical to market fitness supplements because some consumers use them as substitutes for a healthy, balanced diet (“Muscle money”, 2017). The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA), a British self-regulatory organization in advertising, has called out fitness supplement brands multiple times for being dishonest and advertising their products falsely (Tiller, 2020). Two fitness supplements brands are studied in the present research, in terms of masculine representations in the brands’ social media advertising. In the next chapter, a description of the research design and methodology is provided.

### 3. Methodology

In order to answer the research question ‘How do US. fitness supplement brands *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* use and simultaneously shape the concept of masculinity in their social media advertising?’, a qualitative study was conducted in two parts. In the first step of this research, a sample of 150 social media posts was analyzed in order to code manifest data found in the posts into themes that revealed the latent meaning behind this data. In the second part of the research, the experiences of young men who are consumers of fitness supplements were captured by conducting focus groups, the data of which was analysed by means of a qualitative thematic analysis. The choice of combining content analysis and focus groups is justified by the fact that the researcher aspires to study different dimensions of a phenomenon: thematic content analysis was conducted in order to study the use of imagery and language in posts featuring fitness supplements, whereas focus groups with the male target audience of fitness supplement brands helped obtain an understanding of their interpretation of the fitness supplement brands’ marketing. The two dimensions of this study gave the researcher an understanding of two separate phenomena. Firstly, the thematic analysis of Instagram posts discussed in section 4.1.1 helped understand how fitness-related brands operate in the marketing of their products targeting men. Secondly, conducting focus groups, the process of which is described in section 4.1.2, has informed the researcher on how men perceive the advertising of fitness supplement brands.

Qualitative research aims describe a phenomenon by moving from data to interpretations about both implicit and explicit constructions in the dataset (Schreier, 2013). It can be used to make sense of the social meanings that are implicitly stated in the material, capturing “structures and processes in routines and practices” (Schreier, 2013, p. 5). Qualitative research is used in this present study in order to discover the patterns behind two brands’ Instagram posts and what they reveal about gender dynamics in society. Moreover, qualitative analysis is also used to capture the subjective experiences of a particular group of individuals (Schreier, 2013); in this case, the individual experiences of young men regarding the marketing of fitness supplements.

#### 3.1 Social media posts

##### *Sampling*

The brands that were selected for this research are *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*, two American fitness supplement brands that have ranked high in popularity in multiple recent global rankings of popular sports nutrition brands (“17 Best Protein Powder”, 2019; Gutman, Rodgers, Harrevelt, Stewart, Thole Derks & Hartmans A., 2020; Rivera, 2020; “Top 10 Best Protein...”, 2020; “Top Best Whey Protein”, 2018; Shiffer & Samuel, 2020). Brands from the US were chosen because of its consumerist society that offers a great market for fitness supplement products (Lagrange, Whitsett & Burriss, 2015). The US sports nutrition market is the largest in the world, representing

60% of the global sports nutrition market in 2015 and growing at a 7% annual rate (Lagrange, Whitsett & Burris, 2015). The US are relevant to study in terms of fitness industry, as the development of fitness culture and dieting methods used to develop muscularity originated there in the late 19th century, and was initially a Western phenomenon (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014).

In order to look at *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s marketing, it was decided to look at their social media advertising. Social media has become important in mass communication in modern society (Bohra & Alan Maria Jose, 2019). Instagram especially has gained popularity amongst young people and is currently the fifth most used social media platform globally. It has become a platform on which trends are spread (through hashtags notably) that its users adopt (Bohra & Alan Maria Jose, 2019) and is ideal for brands to market themselves. Instagram has revolutionized the way that some brands market their products, enabling new advertising opportunities such as social influencers and endorsements. Additionally, Instagram and other social media have changed the face of advertising by bringing new opportunities for communication and information exchange between brands and customers. After evaluating that *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* have a strong presence on Instagram, it was chosen as the most valuable platform to analyze the marketing of both brands.

#### *Data collection*

A sample of 150 posts was selected and analyzed (75 per brand) on the respective brands' Instagram pages. The posts derived from an active process of looking on *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram accounts for posts that fit the sample criteria, which are the following: every post must feature a representation of one or more male models and it must be no longer than four years old (February 2016). The narrow timeframe of four years allowed the researcher to make conclusions that are relevant for the current social climate, while providing the ability to choose from a wide range of posts, as some more recent posts lacked elements that match the sampling criteria (such as the visual representation of a male model). Every post that was selected was screenshotted and pasted in a document which was uploaded in Atlas.ti in order to conduct a thematic analysis. The elements that will be paid attention to in the analysis were the textual content (text on the pictures and captions) and visual content (what is shown in the pictures).

#### *Data processing (thematic analysis)*

Thematic analysis is a popular method of qualitative data analysis used to retrieve meaning from a data set (Braun & Clarke, 2012). The systematic nature of qualitative thematic analysis obliges the researcher to remain reflective upon the data collection as well as its interpretation, through every step of the research, offering great flexibility. Data can be analysed in both inductive and deductive ways when using thematic analysis, which proves useful for this research as it does not limit the researcher to use one method only. In this study, the data of both Instagram posts, and focus groups was interpreted both inductively and deductively in the sense that the interpretations relied (to



some extent) on the theoretical framework that was dressed prior to the analysis, however they were not limited to it.

Thematic analysis is used to examine and report the assumptions that lie behind what is explicitly stated in data in order to reveal the latent meaning of it. According to Braun and Clarke (2012), thematic analysis can take many forms that suit a broad diversity of research questions and topics. The different starting points of thematic analysis include inductive analysis, which is a bottom-up approach to conducting research by developing theories solely based on the data, and deductive analysis, a top-down approach in which the researcher interprets the data by using a of concepts and theories in order to analyse it. Thematic analysis usually combines both approaches as it is difficult to be strictly inductive or deductive. Braun and Clarke (2012) affirm that a researcher can never remain entirely unbiased; according to the authors, it is impossible to remain completely objective while interpreting data and it is inevitable that the researcher will interpret the data in subjective ways. The researcher must thus take into account intersubjectivity, or "the sharing of subjective states by two or more individuals." (Scheff, Phillips, & Kincaid, 2015, p.41) and remain transparent when interpreting the data. One of the main qualities that make a good thematic analysis is the consistency of the framework: the researcher must have a clear comprehensive approach of his/her position in the research process as an observer of a phenomenon and provide clear justifications for the choices that are made. Lastly and importantly, these choices must be consistently applied throughout the research process. In this research, these choices refer to distinguishing the order of the steps and respecting this order by working in an ordered, systematic manner; and interpreting the data in both inductive and deductive ways while remaining as objective and transparent as possible. A thematic analysis of Instagram posts of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* was conducted following Braun and Clarke (2012)'s steps which will now be described.

The first step that was completed in the thematic analysis was looking at the selected social media posts multiple times in order to become familiar with the data. The images and texts were read actively and initial notes were taken describing the data. During this phase, the researcher had already started reflecting on which elements of the data were relevant to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During the next phase, initial codes were created by systematically analysing the data. This required taking another in-depth look at the data and identifying what could be relevant to the research question. Once these elements were identified, they were noted by the researcher in Atlas ti. In this phase, the codes that were generated already started capturing the patterns of the dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the third phase of the analysis, the initial codes that were created were grouped into themes. The themes emerged from an active reading process. They captured important elements of the data in relation to the research question and represented the patterns identified so far. A thematic map was built that outlined the main themes that were derived in this phase (see Appendix A). The fourth phase of the analysis consisted of reviewing the potential themes that were formulated so far. A close look at the themes revealed whether some themes were actually

just preliminary codes and not broader themes that encapsulated them. Codes are a mere initial description of the data, while themes derive from interpretation of the data. Some themes turned out to be just codes after reviewing them, they were thus either removed or reformulated into themes; the ones that remained were analysed in terms of relevance related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2012). In the next stage, the remaining themes were named and defined by characterizing what was distinctive about each theme.

The final step of the thematic analysis was to report the results in a coherent manner that relates to and eventually answers the research question. The results will be presented in Chapter 4 in a discussion that relates to the theoretical framework.

### **3.2 Focus groups**

Two focus groups were conducted in order to capture men's experiences concerning fitness supplement advertising and more generally surrounding fitness culture and societal expectations around masculinity. Focus groups were deemed the most appropriate method because they are an efficient way to gather information from interaction between participants (Kitzinger, 1995). According to Kitzinger (1995), the method differs from interviews in the sense that people are encouraged to communicate with one another, instead of merely answering the researcher's questions. An abundance of context and information can be given surrounding the participants' perceptions (Kitzinger, 1995), as participants have the liberty to communicate with others and share personal anecdotes. Additionally, participants themselves might bring up certain topics that were not anticipated. Focus groups are advantageous because they make it easier for people who are reluctant to be interviewed, to participate and express themselves with the help of interaction with others (Kitzinger, 1995). This method is ideal to explore certain sensitive topics, as shared experiences help participants to open up; having an open conversation with multiple peers might encourage participants to share their perceptions on fitness supplement advertising and expectation around male beauty standards.

#### *Sampling*

Two focus groups took place in order to retrieve a wide array of data from different perspectives on the topic of fitness supplements. According to Kitzinger (1995), it is common to combine focus groups with different data collection techniques, such as qualitative thematic analysis, and a few groups are usually sufficient. The two groups were homogenous and contained four participants each, a number that is estimated to generate enough interaction between the participants, but small enough to make them feel comfortable enough to share personal anecdotes and opinions (Kitzinger, 1995). Purposive sampling was deemed appropriate while selecting participants for the focus groups, as talking about body image can be a sensitive topic. The choice to interview acquaintances is justified by the fact that knowing the researcher is likely to ease the conversation

(Thompson & Hirschman, 1995). Furthermore, purposive sampling was chosen for practical reasons; according to Tongco (2007), it is wise for the researcher to first decide on the information that is needed for his/her research, and only afterwards proceed to look for specific people who are likely to contribute (Tongco, 2007).

Homogeneity of the focus groups facilitates the conversation as the participants share similar frames of references (Corfman, 1995) and it is also beneficial in terms of representativeness of the results, in the sense that the findings represent a certain social group (to some extent). The following criteria were established when recruiting participants in order to ensure the homogeneity of the groups: the participants are heterosexual men between 19 and 26 years old, they all go to the gym between 2 and 5 times a week and they once were or currently are consumers of fitness supplements (not necessarily of the brands selected for this research). This age range was chosen because the popularization of fitness centers is a relatively recent phenomenon (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014); it can be assumed that the majority of the population going to the gym is young. Moreover, social media and Instagram especially are mainly popular amongst young people; over two thirds of total Instagram users are aged 34 years and younger (Bohra & Alan Maria Jose, 2019). Lastly and perhaps most importantly, younger populations are considered to be the driving force towards societal changes (Bohra & Alan Maria Jose, 2019). A relatively young sample was selected (according to the availability of the respondents) as studying a young population will likely be relevant to studying the broader social environment concerning trends about gender.

With regards to sexuality, heterosexuality was a requirement to participate in the focus group in order to ensure homogeneity; if the participants were to have different sexual orientations, it could possibly interact with their views on masculinities and a new dimension would be added to the research as sexual orientation would need to be considered. Furthermore, research has demonstrated that homosexual men have a different relationship with fitness culture than heterosexual men, to the extent that a 'gay gym culture' has emerged as separate subculture (Alvarez, 2010). A questionnaire enquiring about demographics was sent to the participants prior to the focus groups, in which they indicated their sexual orientation openly, without predefined options. The participants were given pseudonyms in order to maintain confidentiality. The participants' demographics can be found below in Table 4.1.

	Age	Sexual Orientation	Cultural background	Educational background	Profession	Country of residence
Ed	19	Heterosexual	Dutch/Kenyan	Bachelor student	Part-time waiter/ teaching assistant	The Netherlands
Mike	26	Heterosexual	Heterosexual	Bachelor's degree/ masters student	Business development manager	The Netherlands
Greg	24	Heterosexual	UK	Masters student	Student/ part time work at a hotel	The Netherlands
Pedro	22	Heterosexual	American/Belgian	Masters graduate	Ski instructor	Belgium/Switzerland
Jay	24	Heterosexual	American/Chilean	Masters graduate	Sales and marketing	US
Joe	25	Heterosexual	German	Masters graduate	Growth hacker	The Netherlands
Somchai	26	Heterosexual	Thai	Masters graduate	Unemployed	The Netherlands
Gustav	21	Heterosexual	Indian/German	Bachelor student	Student	The Netherlands

Table 3.1: Participant data focus groups<sup>2</sup>

The participants are acquaintances from the researcher who have agreed to participate. Men from international backgrounds who have completed higher education at Erasmus University Rotterdam, either a Bachelor's or Master's study programme.

#### *Data collection*

The two focus groups were initially planned to take place on the Erasmus University Rotterdam campus, however the current situation concerning COVID-19 does not allow for social gatherings in the Netherlands. Therefore, the focus groups took place online and the participants met on the online platform Zoom, a digital tool for online meetings and conferences, at a time and date agreed upon beforehand.

At the beginning of the sessions, the researcher provided a brief explanation of the topic with instructions as to how to behave and encouraged participants to talk to each other as much as possible (Kitzinger, 1995). The full topic of the research was not revealed to the participants in order to avoid the results to be biased. The only information that was given was that the research concerned masculine representations in the media, which allowed the participants to have an open mind and give honest, spontaneous answers. A semi-structured interview guide was formulated beforehand, which can be found in Appendix B. The guide includes a set of questions that were intended to facilitate interaction between the researcher and the participants. Stimulus material was shown to the participants, who reacted to it and discussed it with each (see Appendix B). The

<sup>2</sup> The category 'profession' was indicated by the participants as presented in the table.

researcher's role was to moderate the conversation and ensure that the discussion did not drift away from the topic; but, most importantly, the researcher took on the role of observer in the discussion.

### *Data processing*

The focus groups were recorded from beginning to finish. The audio files of the recordings were then transcribed verbatim using the online transcribing tool Temi. The transcripts of both focus groups were coded and grouped into themes in Atlas ti, following Braun and Clarke (2012)'s steps for conducting a qualitative thematic analysis, as described in '*Data processing (thematic analysis)*' in section 4.1.1.

According to Kitzinger (1995), analysing focus groups data does not differ from any other qualitative data. The only feature of analysing focus group data that differs from a qualitative content analysis is the need to specify the impact of the group dynamics and interpret the data in ways that do not leave out the element of interaction between participants (Kitzinger, 1995). This was done when interpreting the focus group data by taking into account nonverbal cues by the participants. The participants' reactions such as their smiles, laughs and surprised looks were observed on the video chat and taken into account when analyzing the data. The results of the thematic analysis of the focus group data illustrate the discussion between participants in its entirety, considering participants' laughs and grunts of disapproval.

## 4. Results and discussion

In this chapter, the themes that emerged from the thematic analyses of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram posts and focus group are described and discussed in relation to the theoretical framework presented in Chapter 2. The emerging themes were structured into four different broader categories. The first category, discussed in section 4.1, touches upon the typically masculine representations that can be found in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s advertising and the values associated with masculinity by the focus group participants. This category contains the following themes: *Hypermasculinity*, *Determination*, *Confidence* and *Duty*. The second category discussed in section 4.2 is made up of themes that relate to the physical representations of the male body that were found in the Instagram posts as well as those discussed in the focus groups; the themes that emerged in this category are *The objectified male body* and *The natural man*. The third category in section 4.3 includes themes that were found to be strategies used by the brands *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* in their social media advertising; namely *Patriotism*, *Scientific reasoning*, *Self-improvement* and *Teamwork*. The strategies are discussed and related to the focus group participants' views. The fourth category discussed in section 4.4 concerns the broader conceptualization of masculinities by the focus group participants. The related themes are the *Influences that shape masculinities*, *Intergender relationships* and *The changing face of masculinities*.

### 4.1. Typically masculine values

In this section, the themes related to values that are traditionally masculine will be discussed. The themes emerged from a qualitative thematic analysis of the Instagram posts of both brands and the 'masculine' principles they promote, as well as the values associated with masculinity by the participants in the focus groups. This section concerns the principles that men are typically expected to live by in Western society.

#### 4.1.1 Hypermasculinity

The analyses of the *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* Instagram posts revealed that masculinity is often portrayed in a unidimensional, exaggerated way in the marketing of both brands on social media. The hypermasculine representation of masculinity relates to the brand identities: both brands target men (and women, to a lesser extent) that are part of fitness culture, which has historically been linked with masculinity and is still largely masculine (although it is increasingly gender-neutral) (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). Vokey et al. (2013) refer to the exaggerated representation of masculinity in advertising as hypermasculine markers that portray masculinity stereotypically, which they summarize with the help of four categories: strength, toughness, violence and calloused attitudes towards sex and women. Hypermasculine representations are achieved in the media through means

of masculinity markers and/or stereotypical gendered practices, such as eating meat or lifting weights to name a few (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The thematic analysis of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram posts has shown that the brands emphasize being active as a masculine value. Encouraging an active lifestyle, of course, is correlated with the fact that the brands promote fitness-related products; therefore, it is unsurprising that action is a recurring topic in their advertising. However, it is assumed that the brands mainly target male consumers due to the lack of female representations in their Instagram pages. Living an active lifestyle is promoted as a masculine value in the advertising of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* as the male models are portrayed in training positions in 30% [N=46] of the dataset, such as in *Figure 1.1*, and the captions often stress the importance of being active and energetic as opposed to being passive, as shown in *Figure 1.2*.



*Figure 1. MusclePharm, December 2019*



**musclepharm**  Half way through the week and if you decided to get up, get out, and be active, that's already a win! Enjoy this upper pull workout by MusclePharm Athlete [@daveyfisher](#). We promise you won't regret it.  
[#WeLiveThis](#) [#MPNation](#)  
[#MusclePharm](#) [#Fitness](#) [#Training](#)

45w

*Figure 1.2. MusclePharm, May 2019*

This notion that men must be active differs from the common representation in advertising of women as passive beings (Matthes et al., 2016); in *Figure 1.3*, two men are shown standing up while the only woman present is kneeling. This can be associated with power and dominance and does not come as a surprise as it was shown that women are usually represented as decorative in advertising, while men are generally represented as dominant and independent (Matthes et al., 2016). The two men's postures show confidence, they are proudly flexing their muscles while standing up as opposed to the woman who is posing in a similar way, but kneeling down; her subordinate position could indicate that she is more dependent than the men, who are able to stand up on their own. *Figure 1.3* also may indicate that women tend to be infantilized in advertising, a pattern that was found by Goffman (1979) in his study of gender advertisements. The woman is situated lower than the two men who are next to her, making her less important in size and therefore subordinate in a child-like way. The woman is slightly distanced from the scene by kneeling down, implying inferiority and passiveness (Goffman, 1979).





Figure 1.3. Dymatize, February 2017

For *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*, being active means being strong and energetic, and it often involves being outdoors. 11% [N=17] of the pictures from the selected dataset of both brands' Instagram posts were taken outdoors, in natural settings. Some pictures are taken in mountainous areas, as shown in *Figure 1.3*, which is a setting related to adventure as it is often associated with effort (climbing/hiking) and survival (camping for example). Vokey et al. (2013) argue that survival in dangerous situations is typically masculine; depicting scenes outdoors in adventurous sceneries evokes the possible danger and unpredictability of nature.

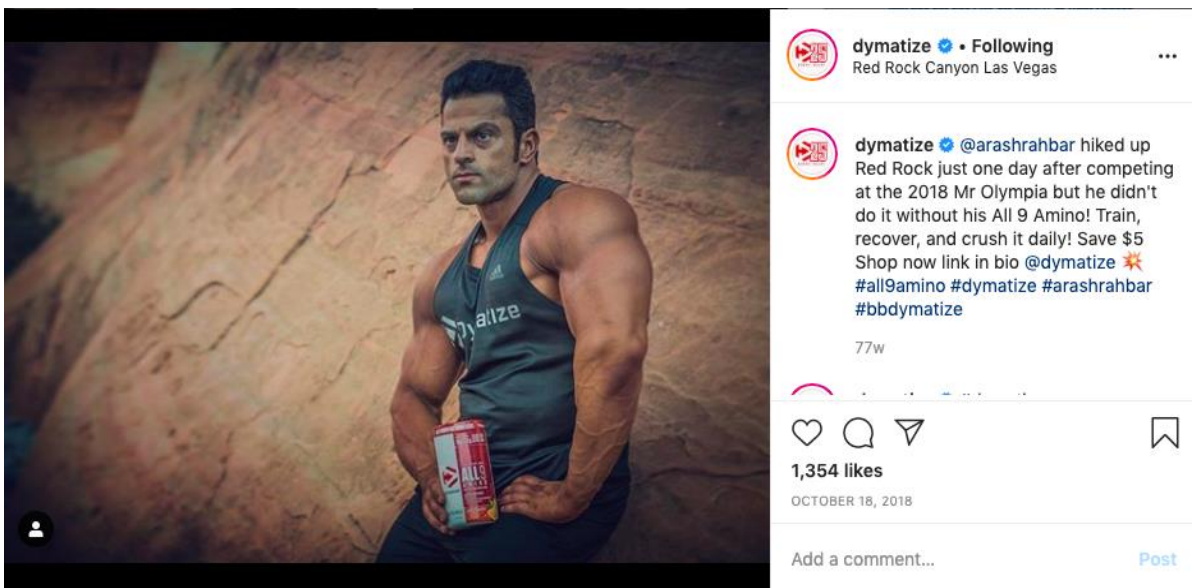


Figure 1.4. Dymatize, October 2018

The caption of this post is praising the model's accomplishment of climbing a mountain; the element of altitude and elevation could be interpreted as an analogy for progress, related to the fitness journey in this case.

Being adventurous and getting out of one's comfort zone is encouraged by *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s social media advertising, which promote a daring lifestyle through images of men posing in natural settings such as in *Figure 1.4*, or riding a fast motorcycle as shown in *Figure 1.7*. Danger and risk-taking behavior are commonly associated with manliness in society, as stated by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) who argue that certain social practices, such as driving dangerously, have become gendered and internalized in hegemonic masculinity.

The element of risk-taking is present in other forms, for example by praising professions that are constructed as dangerous by calling policemen "Hometown Heroes" as shown in *Figure 1.5*.



*Figure 1.5. MusclePharm, June 2016*

So far, the results of the research indicate that living an active and dangerous lifestyle is related to manhood in these posts, as constructed by the brands. The idea of living a fast lifestyle was also a recurring topic found in both the advertising of fitness supplement brands and focus group participants' fitness journeys. Being 'productive' is often stressed in the brands' advertising (which is in line with the brands' identities) and the participants often emphasized the importance of obtaining fast fitness results when discussing their own fitness goals. The captions of some adverts praise taking action in the present moment and not letting anything slow one down as shown in *Figure 1.6*.

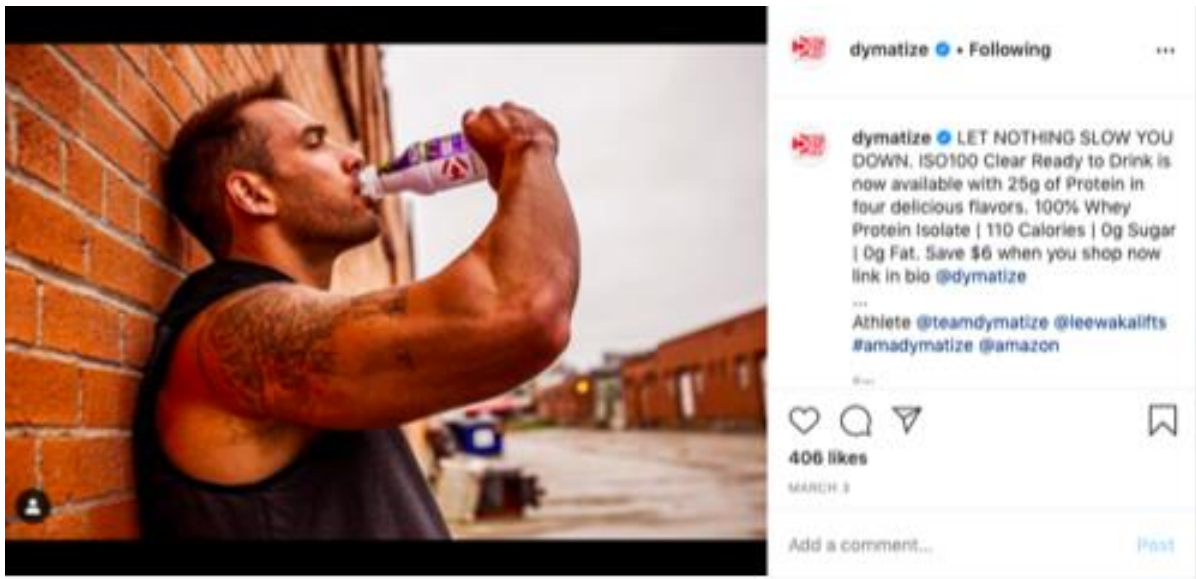


Figure 1.6. Dymatize, March 2020

We have seen that *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* use specific values, such as risk-taking, to portray masculinity in an exaggerated manner. When discussing media representations of masculinity, the participants in the focus groups seemed to agree that the media often represents masculinity in a unidimensional manner, as stated by Joe:

[The media] take it to like the basic idea of masculinity, which is like physical strength and, any other types.. they just throw them out, sort of like anything else, that would make them make mixed masculinity, is like, disregarded in this picture.

It was commonly agreed upon in the focus groups that masculinity is often portrayed in a hypermasculine manner. Joe stated that the way masculinity is represented in *Figure 1.7* was “stupid”: “Well but... I feel like it's a very basic way to well, like basic masculinity. Like, you know, they take masculinity to its most stupid form. And then they blow it up and that's that.”



Figure 1.7. Dymatize, March 2019.

The participants seemed to reject hypermasculinity and to have negative associations with the unidimensional representation of masculinity in advertising, calling it “stereotypical” (Somchai) and “basic” (Joe). It must be noted that the focus group participants’ level of education might interact with their views on hypermasculinity, which will be discussed in the limitations of this research in section 5.1. Generally, they agreed that masculinity is not a static concept, as shown by Pedro’s statement that “different men will take different aspects of masculinity, as they change over time.”. As Corprew et al. (2014) argue, masculinity is flexible and changeable over time. Masculinity as a hybrid concept is further discussed in section 4.4.3.

Pedro mentioned the notion of ‘toxic masculinity’ and stated that toxic masculine behavior tended to be viewed negatively in Western society nowadays. He associated toxic masculinity with jealousy in a (heterosexual) relationship and stated that toxic masculine behavior “does not benefit anyone and people see through it [toxic masculine behavior] now”. His statement implies that toxic masculinity is increasingly viewed as negative in contemporary Western society, as more attention has been brought to it. This indicates a shift in masculinity; Pedro implied that toxic masculine behavior used to be more commonly accepted in society, while it is negatively regarded nowadays.

Toxic masculine behavior requires toughness as emotional self-control, one dimension of hypermasculine markers found by Vokey et al (2013). The thematic analysis of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm’s* Instagram pages revealed that the brands often portray masculinity as tough. The models represented on most pictures appear though as opposed to weak and sensitive. They are portrayed as strong because of their tough bodies and intimidating as opposed to approachable as only 14% [N=21] posts depict smiling models. The element of aggression is recurring as 32%

[N=48] models appear in aggressive positions, with their fists clenched and/or using fighting equipment as shown in *Figure 1.8*.



*Figure 1.8. MusclePharm, March 2018*

*Figure 1.8* also shows that *MusclePharm* uses the element of aggression in the advertising of the brand's products with violent names: "Assault", "Wreckage" and "Combat". Violence is another one of the dimensions in hypermasculine markers found by Vokey et al., (2013). The representation of masculinity linked with aggression reinforces the belief that violence is acceptable as masculine behavior.

When discussing masculinities in the focus groups, the participants generally stressed that society expects men to be strong, independent and insensitive. Mental as well as physical strength was mentioned by participants when they were asked about masculinities. It seems the men interviewed believe that they are expected to be resilient and must be able to endure difficulties independently. Independence was also stressed by two of the participants. Ed stressed that it is usually expected for men to solve their own problems and that asking for help is looked down upon, especially in certain cultures; he associated being needy with a lack of masculinity by reacting to the posts shown in *Figure 1.9*:

Because I mean usually for guys you don't want to be like, I mean from my African cultural side, like it's not normal or a normal thing like for guys to be asking for help. Usually like, if there's a problem like the dude is meant to solve it. Like that's just how it is. But like in this picture it's showing like you can be dependent but not dependent in like, the needy way. Like, dependent like Oh you guys are both helping each other to go up.

Ed's comment indicates that cultural factors affect the construction of masculinities and that the values associated with masculinity vary depending on cultural background.



Figure 1.9. MusclePharm, January 2020

Ed suggests that there is a distinction between being needy, which he views negatively, and cooperating with one another in order to reach your goals. The element of *Teamwork* is discussed further in section 4.3.4. Ed states: “But like you guys are both working out together and you're both trying to reach your goals, but you're both different from each other.” Ed states that it is commonly viewed as negative for a man to ask for help as it can be perceived as ‘needy’, even though he disagrees with this view himself: “ I feel like that's not a very smart way to do it, but a lot of guys still do it regardless.” Ed is acknowledging that it is not regarded as masculine to ask for help, however he distances himself from the ‘norm’; he reinforces the argument that hegemonic masculine practices are not necessarily taken on by the majority of men (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Despite arguing that men are expected to be independent, the participants mention an increasing acceptance of men as emotional beings by society, which is further discussed in section 4.4.3.

#### 4.1.3. Determination

On top of being adventurous, tough and independent, men must also be determined to reach their (fitness) goals, according to *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s social media advertising.. A recurring typically masculine value stressed in the Instagram posts and mentioned by the participants include the determination to reach one's goals. It seems to be an essential need for men to have

fitness goals and objectives as constructed by *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*, perhaps providing them with a sense of purpose.

The journey towards reaching these goals requires effort. 92% [N=138] of the posts emphasize the hard work that must be put in behind working out and obtaining results. 39% [N=59] of the models display a focused gaze, which can be considered evidence that they are fully immersed in the exercise that they are performing, they are not smiling nor posing; this shows that they take fitness seriously. A few pictures feature models whose facial expression looks like they are in pain (0,05 %, N=7), showing the effort that is required to perform the exercise. Withstanding pain is a stereotypically masculine attribute, as men are often viewed as less willing to report pain (Keogh, 2015). Depicting models battling through the pain, such as in *Figure 1.10*, shows their determination.



*Figure 1.10. Dymatize, May 2017*

The values of intensity, challenge and work are put forward in the captions as shown in *Figure 1.11*, reminding the reader that a fitness journey is not supposed to be easy and requires effort, which is further illustrated in *Figure 1.12*. Some physical markers such as body sweat (17% of the dataset, N=26) and veins popping out (23% of the dataset, N=35) show the effort made by the model in the picture, as shown in *Figure 1.13*.



Figure 1.11. Dymatize, August 2019



Figure 1.12. Dymatize, August 2018





Figure 1.13. Dymatize, October 2017

#### 4.1.4. Confidence

The masculine representations found in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram advertising indicate that men are expected to be tough and strong; having a strong body is advertised with the promise of self-confidence. Accordingly, the focus groups participants associated masculinity with self-confidence. According to the interviewees, a man should be confident in who he is, and he should be assertive enough to not let others walk over him. Gustav voices this by commenting on a picture of a man he judges to be a stereotypical masculine representation: "He wouldn't get walked over, he doesn't look like someone would walk all over him." Gustav and the other focus group participants indicated that they thought the depiction of the male model (see *Figure 1.13*) was an intimidating one, by pointing out the model's intense focused gaze and his extremely muscular body. Pedro reinforces the idea that confidence is a key value of masculinity by stating: "But like, if you're comfortable with yourself and confident in who you are, it doesn't matter who or what you are like, that's still to me masculine."

Additionally, it was mentioned during the focus group that it is important for a man to be his own unique person, to stand out, as opposed to following the crowd. Individuality, of course, is not restricted to masculinity, but it seemed to be an important value for the men interviewed. The element of individuality is also present in the analysis of the Instagram posts as well; this can be shown in a quote used on a post from *Dymatize*'s Instagram, on *Figure 1.14*.

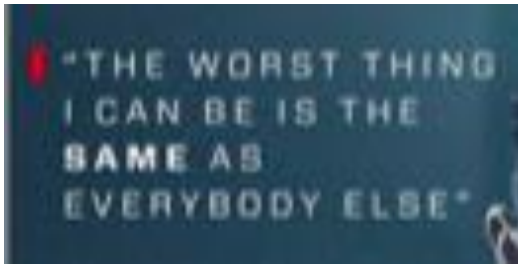


Figure 1.14. *Dymatize*, May 2017

Stressing the importance of being a unique individual as opposed to conforming to societal standards could be associated with a shifting masculinity that considers multiple segments of one's personality, in line with Connell and Messerschmidt (2005)'s argument that we cannot address masculinities by only taking into account gender and stripping it from other variables that interact. However, there is a contradiction between a brand putting forward a stereotypical version of masculinity in its advertising, and using a quote promoting individuality (*Figure 1.14*). It seems *Dymatize* wants to inspire men to be 'themselves', while selling a rather unidimensional model of masculinity. The wider context of the consumerist society we live in cannot be ignored, in which people consume goods in order to express their individuality (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Therefore, the use of this quote could also simply be viewed as a marketing strategy; using words that are inspiring and appeal to consumer's individuality could be an approach to reinforce the feeling that the product is targeted to their own individual needs.

The element of massed-produced individuality is also present through the depiction of models with tattoos (which have become a popular phenomenon, taking away from their individuality); 29% [N=44] of the models of the selected dataset have tattoos, which can be associated with individuality and expression of the self (Halnon & Cohen, 2006). Moreover, tattoos relate to masculinity: Seiter and Hatch (2005) argue that there is a "long-standing association between tattooing and masculinity" (p.1115) in the US.

#### 4.1.5. Responsibility

The values of masculinity as depicted in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram advertising and discussed by the focus group participants suggest that toughness, determination and self-confidence are character traits of a typical man. The results of this research indicate that there is some social pressure for men to embody these values; being a man comes with great responsibility. The element of responsibility was a recurring concept in the focus groups when discussing masculinities; according to the focus group participants, men still feel pressured by society to be the (financial) provider. Taking responsibility and being held accountable for taking actions/ decisions seems to be considered a masculine characteristic by the participants, as expressed by Gustav:

Yes, I wanted to say that I think ... at least for me, the most meaningful part of being a man is to take on responsibility. So the moment you take on responsibility and are accountable to

all the actions you take, or the decisions you make... when that responsibility falls on you, you can say that I'm a man.

What Gustav is expressing relates to the subtheme of independence under the theme *Hypermasculinity*: being accountable is the opposite of relying on others. Gustav did not elaborate on what kind of 'responsibilities' he was referring to, however it becomes clear that 'being responsible' means taking on the leading role as opposed to passing on the responsibility to others: this can be associated with power and dominance.

The element of responsibility was also prominent in the analysis of the Instagram posts through the repeated topic of discipline. 68% (N=102) of the Instagram posts put forward the values of commitment, consistency and organization, which relate to living a disciplined lifestyle. The urge to work out is stressed by the phrase "no excuses", meaning that one must be disciplined and not make excuses, which are associated with laziness. References to the military are present through representations such as camo print, meaning that the brands are associating themselves with the military and the values around it such as discipline, violence and hypermasculinity. Camo prints and workouts called "military circuits" can also be related with the praise of risk-taking professions (soldiers risk their lives) and aggression (combat).

## **4.2 The physical male body**

This section is dedicated to the depiction of the physical male body by the *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*. The themes that emerged concern the physical representations of men and (in turn) the physical body standards that the participants of the focus groups feel they are being held to.

### *4.2.1. The objectified male body*

The body is often depicted as an object that can be modified (such as getting tattoos and/or artificial tan) or improved (through exercising) in the analysis of the Instagram posts. The models pose in order to highlight their muscular bodies, the clothing they wear is generally revealing and their bodies are often hairless, which can be associated with a depiction of a 'clean' and pure body in accordance with Kimbrell's (1993) definition of the male body ideal: a "'lean, mean machine': a hairless, overly muscled body, occasionally oiled, which very much resembles a machine." (Patterson & Elliott, 2002, p. 231). Body hair is only present in areas such as armpits in 10% (N=15) of the posts, which is considered the norm for men who do not have the same pressure as women to shave their armpits, according to Toerien and Wilkinson (2003). Similarly, 47% (N=70) of the models have facial hair, which is considered typically masculine according to previous studies that link facial hair with masculinity and maturity (Dixon, Sulikowski, Gouda-Vossos, Rantala & Brooks, 2016). Some models appear to have clearly used artificial tan as shown in *Figure 2.1*.



Figure 2.1. Dymatize, November 2019

This is perhaps achieved in order to highlight muscularity and is often considered an aesthetically pleasing look in the Western world since advertising has promoted tanned skin as an ideal from the 1920s on (Craddock, 2016). Additionally, Craddock (2016) argues that tanned skin (with moderation) has become symbolic for good health in recent years, even though artificial tanning is considered health-threatening. Artificially tanned skin can be associated with going to the tanning salon or getting a spray tan and represents evidence of one taking care of one's appearance. Taking care of one's body through consumption can be linked to Veblen's (1899) conspicuous consumption theory that the body is a symbolic entity that shows the work, money and time invested in it. Carolan (2005) argues that conspicuous consumption has changed over time; consumerism has made consumption become increasingly available and people want to become display their consumption by treating their bodies as a project over which they have control; a tanned skin represents a body project that embodies consumption. Additionally, it was said by one focus group participant (Ed) that masculinity occurs through consumption:

I think it also boils down... beyond like, what you wear or how you look, but also what you like, consume. So what kind of music you listen to what kind of TV shows you watch, that kind of thing.

Ed's comment indicates that masculinity is not limited to personality traits or physical characteristics. To a large extent, masculinity is defined by consumption.

Further examining *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram posts and the bodily representations of men, it was found that some pictures portray models whose heads are cropped out, only showing certain parts of their bodies. This could be interpreted as objectification and dehumanization of the model (Conley & Ramsey, 2011). Rohlinger (2002) argues that objectification has generally been associated with representations of women, however, there has been an increase in objectified and sexualized images of men in the media since sexualized images of men were normalized in men's lifestyle magazines. The author makes a connection between heterosexuality and masculinity by stating that sexuality is an area in which masculinity is performed, therefore heterosexuality can be a strong expression of manliness. The erotic man is increasingly dominating mainstream representations of masculinity (Rohlinger, 2002), with 'moderation' in his sexualization as too much eroticism runs the 'risk' of homosexual appeal, which is considered counter-hegemonic for men (Connell, 1992).

The depiction of the model as shown in *Figure 2.2*. objectifies the male body through its dismembering. The model's head is cropped out of the picture, suggesting that the lower body is more significant, and the photo is taken from a low angle. The advertised product is placed in front of the model in a phallic way, insinuating the sexualization of the male body.



*Figure 2.2. MusclePharm, August 2017*

As more attention is brought to the male body in the media (Rohlinger, 2002), the contemporary male body ideal is advertised: a lean but muscular body with well-developed chest and arm muscles, broad shoulders and a narrow waste (Law & Labre, 2002). *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* promote this standard as the captions and quotes on their Instagram posts put forward specific fitness goals; generally, they include losing fat and gaining muscle, strength and definition. The focus group

participants engaged with the male body standard and discussed their own motivations to work out, which include developing skills, gaining mass and losing fat. It was stated by one participant (Gustav) in the focus groups that being fit increases social value: “But if you think about it, it could be that okay, that's something you idealize because it's something you don't have and it's something that would increase your value.” Gustav (who is single) and other participants proceeded to explain that having a fit body comes with the promise of finding a potential partner. The participants, including the ones that are in a relationship, seemed to share the strong belief that getting fit would increase their worth in other people’s eyes, especially the opposite sex. A fit body as increasing one’s social value implies that the ideal body type comes with social benefits such as love, acceptance and success as stated by Carolan (2005).

#### 4.2.2. *The natural man*

When discussing male body ideals and societal expectations with regards to physicality, the focus group participants stressed biological factors such as physical strength as a basis for masculinity. Joe argued that biological differences between men and women were undeniable: “Uhm.. I think, for most of the sources like, some natural things, like physical strength. Like, men tend to be stronger than women, you know, like those are natural.” He also stated that it was natural for him to be attracted to a certain type of woman (he stated that he preferred women with large breasts and large hips) because, biologically, they would be a good mating partner: “Like, it's a natural instinct that you would want to go for those, right. So it's not something imposed on me, but it's a lot of instinct, nature.” Joe’s comment suggests that his preference for women with large breasts and hips can be explained by biology; he denies the societal influence on body ideals, which in reality are mostly socially constructed.

The participants all agreed upon the fact that a hypermuscular man (such as shown in *Figure 2.3*) was ‘unnatural’ and their reactions to *Figure 2.3* were rather negative; they stated that it was a superficial and inaccurate representation of masculinity. The participants seemed to admire a man’s fitness journey unless they believed it involved unnatural ways to achieve those results.



Figure 2.3. Dymatize, November 2019

The body depicted in *Figure 2.3* is especially idolized in bodybuilding culture. Although contemporary fitness culture was founded on the basis of bodybuilding culture, today’s fitness culture puts less emphasis on the hypermuscular body and more on the lean, well-defined body (Andreason and Johansson, 2013). After showing participants *Figure 2.3.*, their reactions were rather extreme: Joe called the image an “unnatural depiction” and some participants went as far as to make judgements about the model’s character, calling him “insecure” and “narcissistic”. Gustav agreed, insinuating that he must have committed to working out this hard in order to fill a void: “had to achieve those [muscles] to make him feel like something. So he's probably really insecure.” Gustav also stated: “he would consider himself being more masculine than you, because, invariably, you would then feel inferior to him.” Gustav based his argument on the assumption that the model considers himself to be the “alpha male”, because of his expression, pose and muscularity. The participants had similar negative feelings about *Figure 2.3.* in both focus groups. Wienke (1998) argues that men’s self esteem (partially) depends on how they position their own bodies to muscularity ideals, as muscularity is viewed as a measurement of masculinity. The author adds that some men redefine the stereotypical meaning of muscularity in ways that correspond with their own muscularities (Wienke, 1998); this could explain the participants’ reactions to an image of a hypermuscular man to which they could not relate. Similarly, social comparison theory could explain the participants’ reactions as they seem to be engaging in upward comparison. Upward social comparison is when individuals compare themselves with others who have characteristics perceived as ‘superior’, which Dworkin and Wachs (2009) argue can lead to feelings of inadequacy.

### 4.3. Advertising strategies

This section is dedicated to the particular strategies used by *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* in order to advertise their products that were identified during the analysis of their Instagram posts (apart from the masculine values and those relating to the physical male body). The tactics used by the brands to attract consumers and relate to them are discussed in this section. To some extent, the themes identified so far can all be considered strategies used by the brands to sell their products; however this section pinpoints four specific approaches that the brands take in order to appeal to consumers in personal ways: *Patriotism*, *Scientific reasoning*, *Self-improvement* and *Teamwork*.

#### 4.3.1. Patriotism

Both brands appeal to the consumers' sense of patriotism in some pictures. The American flag and the celebration of national (US) holidays as shown in *Figure 3.1*. is evidence that the brands feel affiliated with their nation (the US) and that they want to appeal to the consumers' own sense of nationalism.



*Figure 3.1. MusclePharm, July 2017*

Working out has historically been related to feelings of patriotism (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014), carrying national and political values; during World War 1, being overweight was considered unpatriotic as excess weight of American citizens was compared with the lack of food soldiers had access to. Carolan (2005) also refers to the climate of the Cold War: men had to have fit bodies in order to be strong enough to withstand the enemy. Even though there has been a shift in fitness movements towards a more individualized activity, the brands could be exploiting the notion of the body as related to national sentiments. Furthermore, Stearns, Borna & Oakenfull (2003) argue that advertisers often use patriotism in order to monitor public sentiment and sell their products. The “Made-in-the-USA” (Stearns et al., 2003, p.510) tactic implies that consumption is patriotic in



essence and therefore it is unsurprising that Dymatize and MusclePharm try to appeal to consumers' sense of nationalism.

#### 4.3.2. Scientific reasoning

Another strategy identified in the analysis of the Instagram posts is advertising the product by relying on rational, scientific arguments in order to make it more 'manly'. Some pictures portray a male model minutiously measuring the product into a container, this gesture being associated with carefully dosing medicine or chemicals. Some captions praise the benefits of the advertised product by providing a detailed scientific explanation about how it works, as shown in *Figure 3.2*.



*Figure 3.2. MusclePharm, August 2017*

This could be intended to appeal to the rational side of the buyers, as well as to justify the product's use as a health supplement rather than a simple nutriment. Fitness supplements can indeed be considered health supplements as fitness is health-related. However, they are not essential to one's health and their prime purpose is to enhance muscularity (Applegate & Grivetti, 1997), therefore altering appearance. Fitness supplements' purpose to improve physicality can be linked to the use of grooming products; men who take care of their appearance are quick to be categorized as 'metrosexuals' (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), which is associated with effeminacy (Ricciardelli & Clow, 2013). Therefore, rationalizing the use of the product by using scientific reasoning might seem more masculine to men, who are convinced that they are investing in a health supplement rather than a product designed to improve appearance.

#### 4.3.3. Self-improvement

The element of improving one's self is present in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm's* Instagram advertising, relating to the theme of *The objectified male body* discussed earlier; the body is treated

as an object of consumption that can be altered and improved. 31% [N=47] of the captions encourage the reader to become their best self; transformation posts such as *Figure 3.3*. compare men prior to working out with their newly obtained fit bodies, the latter considered to be the better version of themselves.



*Figure 3.3. MusclePharm, February 2016*

Jones (2008) engages with transformation posts such as shown in *Figure 3.3*. The author argues that we live in a ‘makeover culture’ in which the process of becoming is valued rather than being. Makeover culture emphasizes an individual’s transformation (whether cosmetic surgery or fitness progress) and portrays it as “an act of courage and bravery” (Jones, 2008, p.13). Working on the self is glorified and rewarded, as shown in the caption in *Figure 3.3*, in which *MusclePharm* congratulates the subject and gifts him products. Additionally, some pictures praise setting goals and achievement by mentioning victory and depicting smiling models, encouraging the audience to work on their bodies.

#### 4.3.4. Teamwork

It was mentioned earlier that independence is a value that is commonly considered as typically masculine. However, knowing the worth of cooperation is viewed positively by the focus group participants, and *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* both use the theme of teamwork in order to appeal to their consumers. We have seen earlier that there is a fine line between cooperation and ‘being needy’, the latter regarded negatively by the focus group participants. Teamwork is stressed as a value in some posts that depict the camaraderie between two male models and the cooperation between the two (*Figure 3.4*).



Figure 3.4. MusclePharm, February 2020

Some captions stress the element of friendship and (heterosexual) romantic relationships in which the two people push each other to work harder; heterosexuality is normalized in posts such as Figure 3.5 where a heterosexual couple is depicted in a Valentine's day celebration post. The representation of relationships as heterosexual comes as no surprise as it is considered hegemonic (Donaldson, 1993).



Figure 3.5. MusclePharm, February 2018

The element of teamwork concerning fitness and social life seemed to be valuable to the participants when showing them the stimulus material, which came as a surprise after they emphasized independence. Some participants made sure to distinguish supporting or relying on a friend, and being needy, the latter being seen as negative for masculine standards. Both the brands and the participants seem to glorify friendship and relationships, while still stressing the value of independence.

It must be noted that the brands refer to romantic relationships a heterosexual (as shown in *Figure 3.5*), excluding other types of romantic relationships by their lack of representation. Additionally, whenever participants mentioned relationships, it was always heterosexual relationships. However, the participants were all heterosexual as it was one of the requirement for the sampling criteria in order to achieve homogeneity. Furthermore, it could indicate that straight men are encouraged to adopt heterosexual behavior and repress all behavior that could be considered homosexual (Anderson, 2008).

#### 4.4. Conceptualization of masculinities

The themes discussed in this section concern the conceptualization of masculinities by the focus group participants and their discussion on the influences that shape masculine constructions, as well as the shift that hegemonic masculinity is undergoing.

#### *4.4.1. Influences shaping masculinities*

Various factors that shape masculinities on a macro level and reinforce masculine stereotypes were mentioned in the focus groups. Upbringing and specifically the father figure were mentioned as important sources for masculinity standards, reinforcing the Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that cultural factors interact with the formation of masculinities. After Joe stated that masculinity was shaped by both biological and structural factors, Somchai expressed the importance of upbringing in the process of 'becoming a man':

Can I add? Yeah. I feel like.. I agree with Joe, but I feel like it's also a combination of how you were brought up and the first men you find in your life, which is your father. And that kind of shapes how you want to be the man that you want to be. But also, society plays a role in how to just.. be a typical man.

The influence of the father on the process of becoming a man comes as no surprise as an individual's socialization process begins in the environment they are brought up in (Odekerken-Schröder et al., 2002).

Furthermore, all the respondents agreed that the media were a source for masculine standards and stereotypes. Symbolic interactionism discussed in Chapter 2 reflects the participants' views that the media we consume dictate the way we live. Advertising plays an important role in terms of people's socialization of gender and in representing power relations in society (Sherry, 1987). The media is a place where people learn socially acceptable behavior (Bandura, 1977) and the participants in the focus groups seemed to acknowledge the media's effect in their socialization process and construction of gender, as Gustav stated that the media was "making those [gender] roles very clear or imposing them on you". 50% [N=4] of the participants admitted to engaging in social comparison with athletes and celebrities, such as Greg who stated: "Growing up, if you like sports, you're always trying to be... the athlete that you admire". By admitting to measure their own abilities in relation to others', the focus group participants partially confirm the theory that individuals tend to determine their social worth (to a certain extent) by engaging in comparison with others (Vogel et al., 2014).

The participants acknowledged the influence of societal standards concerning male body goals; however, some of them, like Joe, denied that it affected them personally:

How I feel about them. Yeah. I mean I understand why, like there's an aesthetically pleasing one. You know, cause, me personally I would want to have this figure, or kinda close to that. Um, but to be honest, I don't feel pressure of having it that much, like I can imagine like for

me personally, at least I don't feel it that much. It's more like pressure I put on myself, not about this.

Joe's comment suggest that he is not under the societal influence to attain the 'ideal' body; this could perhaps be related to his level of education, in the sense that he might be more aware of social constructions of beauty standards than others. Pedro also seemed to believe that he worked out because of his own standards: "The standards are set by myself instead of society. So like independently I just think where do I want to be for what I want to do." Wienke (1998) argues that some men reject the hegemonic definition of the male body ideal in an attempt to avoid comparing their bodies with the muscular ideal. This could be an explanation as to why Joe and Pedro deny 'giving in' to societal muscular ideals.

It was stressed by some participants that masculine standards are very much culturally sensitive and that they often vary from one community to another. Societal expectations varied in their answers whether they came from different cultural backgrounds, or whether they were part of a certain community (such as different sports for example). Moreover, Jay brought up the importance of systematic regulations and policies at national level:

Um, one thing I was thinking about is maybe...so we talked about like media and celebrities but, um, what about sort of too, like, well... like things that exert influence over our lives, um, which is religion and the government. So I feel like religion also reinforces traditional masculinity in the sense of like, uh, a traditional...um, household like the man, man and woman. And then I guess that's also kind of related to the government.

Pedro agreed with his view and added that those policies affect gender roles on a large scale:

I think what Jay said also about the government is... If you live in a liberal country that offers paid time off paternity leave, so that's like, if you have a baby as a male in some countries you get time off to spend with your family. And I'm pretty sure the US like, that definitely doesn't exist. So you don't, you will never have a father getting time off of work to spend with his new kid. And I think that will enforce things like, oh, the man has to earn the money while the female has to raise the kid. But if you live in a country where you get more maternity or paternity leave, that will like, foster balance between like masculinity and femininity.

The argument brought up by Jay and Pedro directly refers to Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument in that regional-level masculinity plays an important role in shaping a wider model of masculinity and that cultural practices are influenced by it both locally and globally. The authors

stress that the regional level is often underestimated in studies of globalization and they argue that all levels (local, regional and global) must be considered in examining hegemonic masculinity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The dynamics between the local, regional and global levels also apply when studying US fitness supplement brands *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*: their representations of masculinity are inevitably linked with Northern American systematic conventions.

#### 4.4.2. Intergender relationships

The participants mentioned male-female relationships on multiple occasions. They seemed preoccupied by the way that women perceive men (both the single participants and those who are in a relationship) and they all stated finding a potential partner as one of the main reasons to get fit. Gustav stated that he thinks that a fit body is what women seek in a man: “It's what I, it's what I perceive as something that a woman I would like wants. You understand.” Joe agreed with this assumption by stating: “That's exactly what I'm thinking. Cause if I want to go for the woman that I want and she likes that, I wanna look like that.” Gustav and Joe implying that they are prepared to ‘improve’ their appearance if women prefer that can be traced back to Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005)’s argument that models of masculinity and femininity interact together and are co-dependent.

It was mentioned by Pedro that women are usually more pressured to meet body ideals than men in society: “I think it's worse for women than it is for men. So anything I say is kind of like... women have it worse. Like, I think women are held to a higher ideal, by society than men are.” However, Ed mentioned that a shift in masculinity is occurring as a response to women’s emancipation.

Even if you still have to do the whole, like... showing emotions and stuff. I still think there’s a big degree of you still have to be like, a protector, or you still have to be like, a provider of some sort. That it’s kind of changing as guys are realizing how women are responding. I don’t think.. I think it’s more like women are like, oh yeah, maybe we want more emotion as opposed to like, more protection and that kind of thing, so... guys are responding to that.

Ed’s word choice “have to” suggests that he believes that men are held to certain obligations in society. He is implying that women are changing societal masculine expectations towards a more emotionally aware model of masculinity, as opposed to the hypermasculine standard of toughness as emotional self-control (Vokey et al., 2013). Ed’s view is in line with Connell and Messerschmidt’s (2005) argument that gender is relational and that models of masculinities must consider femininities in order to grasp a full understanding of masculinities. Women’s agency in the shaping of masculinities undeniable, as shown by participants’ argument that they mainly work out in order to attract women. The focus group participants have indicated that masculinity is undergoing a shift due the agency of women, which Matthes et al. (2016) agree with as they argue that an increase in gender

equality in Western society is changing the face of masculinities. In the next section, the possible shift that masculinity might be undergoing is discussed.

#### 4.4.3. *The changing face of masculinities*

All the participants in the focus groups seemed to be in agreement with the fact that there is an ongoing shift in masculinity towards a less traditional and less hypermasculine model. Interestingly, in both focus groups, the participants mentioned a change in masculinity themselves, before the researcher even brought up the topic. It was said that the traditional lines between masculinity and femininity are increasingly being blurred in Western society, as stated by Greg:

Yeah I feel like, uhm.. Well, masculinity and femininity are kind of.. Converging, as gender roles are becoming more equal and gender equality is coming more [inaudible] and so with that, and expectations on men and women to be more masculine and more feminine, are kind of converging a bit more.

Greg went on to give the example of showing emotion as not being exclusively feminine anymore. Greg's argument is reflective of Andreasson and Johansson's (2020) observation that there is a "convergence of male and female physicality" (p. 148) in advertising, which can be observed to some extent in the analysis of the Instagram posts through elements that can be considered typically feminine, such as hairless bodies (Toerien and Wilkinson, 2003) and sexualization of their bodies (Rohlinger, 2002). Similarly, bodybuilding culture promotes the hypermuscular, hairless body and therefore it is unsurprising that it is recurrent in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s social media advertising.

The changes in masculinities as stated by the participants concern men being increasingly expressive of their emotion and taking care of their appearance without being judged. Generally, the participants seemed to be positive about this shift. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) state, heterosexual men are reevaluating their appearance and position in consuming cosmetic products is changing, after having long been expected to be indifferent about their physical appearance.

It was mentioned by some participants that society is increasingly shifting towards a multidimensional conceptualization of masculinity and that masculinity is increasingly a matter of personality traits. Pedro expressed this by saying:

I don't think there are multiple types [of masculinity], I just think there's a lot of different factors that play into it and then every person is their own... person. So I guess every single person is a single type of masculinity. But, besides distinctions between.. Traditional and how we used to think of it and then how... it's evolving today, I don't really think there's



different types, it's just... different men will take different aspects of masculinity, as they change over time.

Pedro seems to believe that even though there are not clear cut types of masculinity, there is more than just one form. Masculinity is thus viewed by him as a fluid concept that changes across culture, time and individuals. Pedro's statement that masculinity is personal and that different segments of an individual's identity interact with the way masculinity is performed by him, is in line with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that intersectionality must be considered in masculinity studies. Ethnicity, sexuality and other segments of identity are important factors in the development of social relations and subject formation (McCall, 2008) and therefore in the construction of masculinity.

## 5. Conclusion

The results of the thematic analyses of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram posts show that both brands attempt to appeal to their male consumers by portraying masculinity in a hypermasculine manner. This finding is unsurprising as fitness culture has been related to masculinity historically and generally supports the 'exaggerated' representation of masculinity (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* portray masculinity in both unidimensional and stereotypical ways in their Instagram advertising through their depiction of a 'typical man' who displays characteristics such as toughness, strength, and aggression and confidently flaunts his perfectly muscular and lean body. The model of masculinity that is conveyed by the two fitness supplement brands emphasizes values that are in accordance with Vokey et al.'s (2013) dimensions of hypermasculinity. By depicting masculinity in hypermasculine ways, *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* partially confirm the claim that social media is a platform on which toxic masculine behavior, which can be characterized by competitiveness and dominance (over women and other subordinate groups), is spread (Parent et al., 2019). The hypermasculine depiction of masculinity by the two brands is in line with the brand identities; fitness culture puts emphasis on a normative masculinity stereotype and the fitness industry generally sells "gendered identity claims" (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013, p. 287) in order to achieve capitalist goals. In this case, the brands that are being studied sell the ideal of the masculinity anchored in muscularity.

Traditionally, masculinity has been viewed as something that is 'accomplished', particularly through building muscle, which requires constant effort (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013). *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* contribute to the construction of masculinity through intense effort by putting forward determination as a masculine value, indicating that men must be driven by their goals and able to withstand pain in order to attain them. Both the brands' social media advertising and the focus group participants suggest that with being a man comes great responsibility. Having a sense of responsibility seems to be valued in society for men and having the discipline to attend to those responsibilities (such as being the financial provider, as stated by Ed) requires commitment, determination, consistency and organization. Other typically masculine values that seem to be encouraged in Western society according to some of the focus group participants include self-confidence and assertiveness; the focus group data indicate that men often feel pressured in society to appear confident, which can put great pressure on some men and affect their self-esteem (Parent & Cooper, 2019). The focus group participants also stressed the importance of being independent as a man and generally viewed asking for help as non-masculine, with the exception of some situations in which it is acceptable to cooperate through teamwork, such as when working out with a friend. Portraying the aforementioned values as typically masculine encourages a unidimensional representation of masculinity in which men are expected to display these qualities.

The unidimensional and stereotypical representation of gender by *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* could contribute to the reinforcement of gender roles; according to Vokey et al. (2013), advertising is a field where hegemonic discourses can be found, especially on gender roles. These discourses contribute to maintaining power relations and reinforcing them and Vokey et al. (2013) argue that advertisers sell more than products, they also sell distinct beliefs and attitudes concerning gender roles. The results of the thematic analyses of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram pages indicate that both brands adopt a traditional hegemonic discourse when it comes to the representation of masculinities. Hegemonic ideals of masculinity (often constructed on the basis of exemplars who are celebrated as heroes (Connell, 1990)) are a recurring masculine representation in advertising (Vokey et al., 2013). As discussed in Chapter 2, hegemonic masculinity is a concept that is difficult to define as it refers to a "historical situation, a set of circumstances in which power is won and held." (p. 594) (Carrigan et al, 1985) and therefore it is changeable across time and context. The main feature of hegemonic masculinity is that it is a form that is culturally powerful and that its dominance stabilizes the gender order (Connell, 1990). *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* put forward traditional hegemonic discourses of masculinity through the use of stereotypical representations and in turn reinforce the stereotypical representation of masculinity. Generally, no significant differences were found when studying the social media advertising of both brands. The fact that both brands market their products by using similar masculine representations reinforces the idea that advertisers tend to portray masculinity in a unidimensional manner.

The media theories discussed in Chapter 2 have shown that advertising is a field that both reflects and creates societal norms (Schroeder & Zwick, 2004). *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* therefore reproduce the status quo concerning gender dynamics by maintaining relations of power in advertising gender roles stereotypically. The brands portray men in a stereotypical manner that depicts them as tough and aggressive, which contrasts with general representations of women in advertising (Matthes et al., 2016). In doing so, *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* exclude some men that may not match the typically masculine expectations that are being put forward by the brands. Naturally, not all men are interested in fitness supplement products; however, even those who are may not match the masculine ideals that can be found in *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s social media advertising. The focus group dynamics showed that the participants engaged in comparison with the muscular ideal conveyed in advertising, as well as with their peers; they confirmed that consumer culture is demanding of men in terms of body ideals.

The thematic analyses of the focus group transcripts have confirmed that there is strong pressure for men to live up to a hegemonic masculine standard in the sense that they feel they must meet physical muscular ideals as well as stereotypically masculine values. The participants were in agreement that men are expected to meet these masculine ideals in Western society regarding both character and physicality, however they often distanced themselves from societal standard. This could potentially be explained by their level of education and awareness of those standards; or perhaps people generally believe that others are more susceptible to societal forces such as

advertising. The results of the thematic analysis of the focus groups bring a new facet to the discussion on masculinities that was absent in the analyses of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s posts: the participants generally stated that there was an ongoing shift in masculinity, towards a more flexible, multidimensional model of masculinities that is increasingly accepting of men's different character traits and other factors that interact with the way they perform masculinity. The participants' view that Western society is progressively moving away from the traditional hegemonic model of masculinity is in accordance with Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) argument that we must consider a reconceptualization of hegemonic masculinity that takes into account time, culture and individuals, as the hegemonic position is always changeable (Andreasson & Johansson, 2013).

### **5.1 Limitations and recommendations for future research**

In this section, the limitations of this research are discussed with regards to generalizability, sample diversity and researcher bias. Moreover, some recommendations for future research are presented based on the limitations of the research.

Firstly, even though the scope of this research is 'the Western world' and specifically the US, it must be noted that the results of this research are not fully representative of Western society as a whole and that gender perception is culturally sensitive and can vary from one culture to another. Therefore, the results of the thematic analyses of *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm* cannot be generalizable to North America; additionally, the focus group participants have different cultural backgrounds, which could shape their perceptions of masculinities to a certain extent. Moreover, fitness supplement brands are a specific branch of advertising that target a niche population that usually involves people who exercise regularly and wish to enhance their muscularity; such a lifestyle is not necessarily the norm for all men. Therefore, not all men in Western society are exposed to the specific masculine ideals that were discussed in the results and the results from *Dymatize* and *MusclePharm*'s Instagram advertising are not generalizable to men in general. Fitness supplement brands are only one segment in advertising and the results are not indicative of all masculine representations in advertising generally.

Secondly, it is not explicitly stated by *Dymatize* nor *MusclePharm* that they are brands that are exclusive to men only; their consumers may include women, however it was assumed for the purpose of this research that their main focus is to appeal men (due to the lack of female representation in both brands' Instagram pages). A look at *Dymatize*'s website indicates that the brand claims to be advertising to both men and women ([https://www.dymatize-athletic-nutrition.com/en\\_GB/](https://www.dymatize-athletic-nutrition.com/en_GB/)); more female representations are present on the *Dymatize* website than on *MusclePharm*'s, which has a special section for 'products for women' (<https://musclepharm.com/>). In order to have a broader understanding of gender representations in fitness supplement brands' advertising, future research should study more fitness supplement brands, as well as take into account the female representations not only on social media advertising but on brands' websites.

The third limitation of this research that should be taken into account in future research is researcher bias. It was observed that the focus group participants were usually careful in their phrasing when addressing the researcher; for example, they ensured to avoid offensive discourse when discussing women. It could be natural for them to adopt this behavior when discussing gender dynamics; however, the participants' attitudes and responses could potentially be influenced by the fact that the researcher is a woman. According to Williams and Heikes (1993), interviewers in qualitative research must be aware of the ways the respondents consider the gendered context of the interview (or in this case, of the focus groups). The authors state that "Voluntary research participants will likely try to avoid sounding offending or threatening the interviewer with unflattering or socially undesirable opinions and will tend to frame responses in ways designed to minimize this possibility" (Williams & Heikes, 1993, p.288). Future research could implement the notion that the participants' discourses could differ if they were to address a man. Conducting focus groups with a male moderator and comparing discourses held by the participants with the focus groups conducted with a female researcher could add value to the present research.

Additionally, the focus groups were made up of a rather small number of participants; including more men would have made the results of this research more complete and informative on men's perceptions of masculinities.

Lastly, the focus group participants were sampled in order to meet specific criteria concerning age, education and sexual orientation. Therefore, the results of the focus groups' thematic analyses are not representative of Western men, since the participants that were interviewed were limited to young, heterosexual men who had reached a certain level of education.

Due to the aforementioned limitation concerning the lack of representation of different groups of men, recommendations for future research include studying different groups of men and comparing them in order to retrieve data that is representative of various groups (while still studying men that exercise and/or use or have used fitness supplements in their lives). Comparing different samples with regard to socioeconomic status, age, education, religion and sexuality, could add additional value to this research in order to study men's perceptions and constructions of masculinities. Vokey et al. (2013) indicate in their research that socio-economic status especially is a strong variable in men's perceptions of hypermasculine markers in advertising. Therefore, considering groups of men with different socio-economic statuses would be beneficial in order to widen the scope of the research and gain a more complete understanding of men's experiences with masculine representations in advertising.

Additionally, a comparative study juxtaposing women's views on the construction of masculinities with men's views on the topic would be beneficial in order to further understand intergender dynamics, as masculinities are constructed in accordance with models of femininity, and vice versa (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Lastly, purposive sampling of men who are familiar with the researcher was deemed appropriate for this research. However, it must be noted that conducting focus groups with

acquaintances can have negative implications, such as that participants might be more reluctant to disclose certain private information to somebody familiar to them (Nancy, 2011). This aspect was carefully considered when making the choice to select acquaintances as participants for the focus groups. Nonetheless, after evaluation, the advantages of interviewing contacts of the researcher outweigh the disadvantages.

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## Appendix A – Thematic map

Theme	Subtheme(s)	Definition
Hypermasculinity	Active lifestyle	The male models are mainly portrayed in action and the captions often stress the importance of being active and energetic, as opposed to being passive.
	Dominance	Pictures are taken from a low angle; men are positioned higher than women
	Adventurous lifestyle	Many pictures are taken outdoors, in natural settings that evoke an adventurous lifestyle.
	Fast lifestyle	Living a fast lifestyle is encouraged; the element of time pressure is recurring, the captions praise taking action in the present moment and not letting anything slow one down.
	Risk-taking	High risk professions such as policemen or firemen are being promoted in certain posts.  Some pictures contain motorcycles/ cars that promote a dangerous lifestyle
	Toughness	The models appear tough as opposed to weak and sensitive. They are portrayed as strong and intimidating as opposed to approachable through their focused gaze and low angle of some pictures, that make them look imposing.
	Independence	Participants stress the importance of independence in masculinity  The male models in most posts are standing up (they do not rely on anything)
	Aggression	The element of aggression is present in posts that refer to fighting and through the advertising of

		<p>products that are called “Assault”, “Wreckage” and “Combat”.</p> <p>Some models are depicted in fighting position/ with fighting equipment</p>
Determination	Discipline	<p>The element of discipline is present in some pictures, on which the values of commitment, determination, consistency and organization are put forward.</p>
	Effort	<p>Some posts emphasize the hard work that must be put in behind working out and obtaining results.</p> <p>Some physical markers such as body sweat and veins popping out are proof of the effort made by the subject of the picture.</p>
Confidence	Individuality	<p>Captions stress the importance of ‘being yourself’ on Instagram posts</p> <p>Focus group participants emphasize being self-confident and unique</p>
Duty	Responsibility	<p>Focus group participants stress taking responsibility and being held accountable for taking actions/ decisions</p>
The objectified male body	Poses to highlight muscularity	<p>The models pose in order to highlight their muscularity, flexing their muscles</p>
	Body/facial hair	<p>The models’ bodies are often hairless</p> <p>The models often have facial hair</p>
	Sexualization	<p>Dismembering of the models’ bodies; photos are taken from a low angle. The advertised product is placed in front of the model in a phallic way.</p>

		Revealing clothing exposes the models' bodies.
	Artificial tan	The model's skin is tanned, which is often considered an esthetically pleasing look (in the Western world); it can be associated with going to the tanning salon or getting a spraytan, as evidence that one takes care of one's appearance.
The natural man	Biological instincts	The focus group participants stress biological instincts as a basis for masculinity
	Negative feelings associated with supplements	The focus group participants seemed to admire a man's fitness journey unless they believed it involved unnatural ways to achieve those results.
Patriotism	American flag	The American flag and the celebration of national (US) holidays are evidence that the brands feel affiliated with their nation
	Military references	Military references such as camo print.
	Americans as united	The caption talks about Americans as united, by referring to them as "us as a country".
Scientific reasoning	Measuring the product	Many pictures portray a male model minutiously measuring the product into a container.
	Scientific explanation	The caption gives a scientific explanation as to how the product works. The explanation relies on facts and rational reasoning.
Self-improvement	Before/after pictures	Pictures compare men prior to working out with their newly obtained fit bodies, the latter considered to be the better version of themselves
	Captions stress becoming your best self	The element of improving one's self is present as captions encourage the reader to become their best self.

Teamwork	Cooperation	Some pictures show two people working out together, helping each other out.
Influences that shape masculinities	Media	The participants mention the media as an influence that shaped their construction of masculinities.
	Upbringing	The participants mention upbringing as an influence that shaped their construction of masculinities.
	Culture	The participants emphasize that perceptions of masculinities vary depending on cultural factors.
Intergender relationships	Heterosexual relationships	The caption and picture represent and promote the notion of (heterosexual) relationships.  The focus group participants mention attracting women as a main motive for working out.
The changing face of masculinities	Convergence of masculinity and femininity	The focus group participants state that there the lines between masculinity and femininity are increasingly being blurred.
	Multidimensional masculinity	The focus group participants state that masculinities are dependent on personality traits, cultural background and/or different periods of time.

## Appendix B – Focus group guide

Hi everyone, welcome and thank you for participating in this focus group. My name is Eva Baglin and I am conducting this research for my Master's thesis. The main topic is masculinity and how it is represented in advertising. There is a lot of discussion currently on sexism and how women are portrayed in the media (and objectified). I want to investigate whether men feel the pressure to look and act a certain way, too.

This focus group will last about an hour and I will be guiding the discussion by asking you some questions. There are no wrong answers, so just speak your mind and don't be afraid of having different opinions from others. You are allowed to respond to each other at any point, if one of you feels like addressing a comment made by another, for example. Since we have to do this online, I need to ensure that it goes as well organized as possible. Therefore I am going to ask you to raise your hand if you want to say something, then I will call your name and then you can talk. Please, try to speak clearly! And have fun.

First, I want you all to introduce yourselves. Just tell me your name, age, your profession/what you study and why you agreed to participate in this research. Let's start with .....

*Great. I am gonna start by asking you some questions about manhood in general and what being a man is like in society.*

1. What does being a man mean to you?
  - What does society expect from men?
  - men's role in society?
  - Do you feel like there are certain things that men cannot do, or are not allowed to do in society?
  - How do you think masculinity is evolving?
  
2. What do you think are the biggest sources of gender stereotyping? Where do we get our masculine standards from?
  
3. What do you think about this statement: "There are multiple types of masculinity"?
  - what different types are there?
  - do you feel like there is a dominant type in society that men are expected to take on?
  - can you think of some masculinities that are often marginalized in society?



4. What do you feel are the masculine body standards in society?  
→ do you feel like there is a certain body shape that is expected from men, a certain level of muscularity?
5. How do you feel about them?  
→ Do you think there is pressure to attain these body goals?  
→ Do you think it can affect some people in terms of body image?

*Now, I am gonna ask you some questions related to working out and going to the gym*

6. Do you work out?  
→ How often do you work out?
7. Why do you work out?  
→ does it make you feel good mentally/physically?  
→ What are your goals?
8. Do you take fitness supplements (such as protein)?  
→ why?
9. I am going to show you a few images, taken from 2 Instagram accounts of fitness supplement brands.

a)



**dymatize** • Following

**dymatize** Happy Swole St Patrick's Day from all of us at @dymatize @teamdymatize! Swipe left to check out our St. Patty's Day Dymatize T-Shirt! @arashrahbar

55w

**trainermike1** Yes 🙌🙌🙌

55w Reply

**khendogg** 🙌

55w Reply

**human\_with\_purpose** Loving the chocolate fudge 🍫

55w Reply

1,393 likes

MARCH 18, 2019

Add a comment... Post

- What do you see?

→ How is masculinity portrayed in this picture? Does it align with your personal definition of masculinity?

b)



**musclepharm** • Following

**musclepharm** | GET AFTER IT | Change doesn't happen over night, it takes hard work, dedication and consistency. #welivethis #mpnation #motivationmonday #musclepharm

96w

**iammattbishop** Yes! 🙌🙌🙌🔥

96w 1 like Reply

**compoundsolutions** Amen to that! 🙌🙌🙌

96w 2 likes Reply

1,686 likes

JUNE 4, 2018

Add a comment... Post

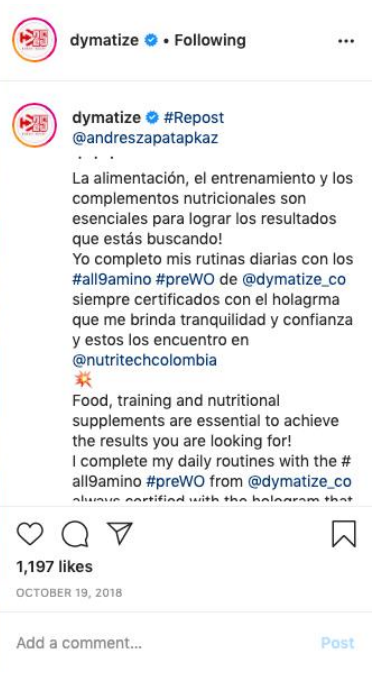
- What do you see?
- Is this picture inspiring? Why/why not?

- what do you think about the quote? motivating? Or is it pressuring?
- How is masculinity portrayed in this picture? Does it align with your personal definition of masculinity?
  - Take a look at the caption; Hard work, dedication and consistency
- why do you think that the brand chose to stress these values?
- why do you think that the brand has chosen those specific values/words to motivate men?



c)

- What do you see?
- Can you tell me how this one makes you feel?
- How is masculinity portrayed in this picture? Does it align with your personal definition of masculinity?
- Does this picture promote healthy body goals, in your opinion?



d.

- What do you see?

→ How is masculinity portrayed in this picture? Does it align with your personal definition of masculinity?

- Does looking at this image make you wanna buy Dymatize's products? Why/ why not?



e.

- What do you see?
- Can you relate to this picture in any way?

→ How is masculinity portrayed in this picture? Does it align with your personal definition of masculinity?

Does looking at this image make you wanna buy Dymatize's products? Why/ why not?

→ Do you feel positively or negatively about this image in general? Is it uplifting?

10) Closing questions

- Is there anything you feel that we haven't discussed but that would be important when discussing masculinities?

This concludes our focus group. Thank you for participating! If you have any questions or comments, do not hesitate to contact me.