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## **MASCULINE OPTIMIZATION INFLUENCERS AND THE SACRALITY OF SELF-OPTIMIZATION**

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### **Introduction**

From meticulous morning routines to obsessive fitness tracking, there is a rising cohort of American male influencers centered around reaching “maximum potential” physically, mentally, and financially. The fitness and self-help industries have found powerful combinatory power with each other as they have adjusted to the contours of platform economies. In this space, the mind and body are inextricably bound and proper discipline of both is necessary for general success. Fusing together fitness advice with career strategy, these influencers issue constant rallying cries to work out harder as part of unlocking generalized success.

Focusing on a cohort I’m calling “Masculinized Optimization Influencers,” I argue that this group is best understood through the lens of Sara Ahmed’s (2004) “affective economies.” Defined as those who place a dual focus on men’s need to hustle equally at the gym and in their career, Masculine Optimization Influencers present a particular vision of masculinity that binds physical discipline with financial success. Crucially though, this is presented as much more than a selfish pursuit, this cohort’s approach joins a long American tradition of presenting bodywork as a moral imperative (White et al., 1995). Moreover, as this research will argue, they construct this path of self-optimization as a sacred pursuit. Such an approach attempts to justify hierarchical relations at a time when masculinity and capitalism are facing critique.

### **Theoretical Framework and Approach**

As Ahmed (2004) explains, “emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities...through the very intensity of their attachments” (p. 119). Through identifying how “emotions circulate between bodies and signs,” and paying particular attention to the emotions of shame and disgust, this research examines how this affective economy mobilizes emotions to sacralize their ascendance in a dissymmetric economic system (Ahmed, 2004, p. 119).

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My research is rooted in a critical discourse analysis of thirteen US-based Instagram accounts with over 200,000 followers in this space. Applying the framework of affective economies, I paid close attention to the circulation of figures, products, health preoccupations, routines, and aesthetic sensibilities. How do Masculinized Optimization Influencers insist on the necessity of self-optimization? If self-optimizing is sacred, how does this group characterize those who are not in active pursuit of optimization?

## Findings

*Muscular male body as a sign of success.* The visual-forward nature of Instagram has led to an increase in men taking “gym selfies” and sharing imagery of their muscular figures (Chatzopoulou et al., 2020; Hakim, 2018). Through this circulation, images of the muscular male body increase in affective value and “become sticky, or saturated with affect, as sites of personal and social tension” (Ahmed, 2014, p. 11). This also has direct economic implications as increased engagement directly opens the opportunity for brand partnerships, sponsored posts, or, for the most successful, the ability to create and market their own product lines, events, or services. Thus, the highly circulated muscular male body becomes a source of perceived and actual economic success. The visibly disciplined male body becomes an affect-rich sign of an optimized, achievement-oriented life.

*Mobilizing disgust and shame for the undisciplined body.* Two key emotions are at play in the affective economy: disgust and shame. There is a threatening figure implicitly lurking in the shadows of the self-help speeches and inspiration posts of Masculine Optimization Influencers: the undisciplined body. Fat, lazy, and broke, this often unnamed and only sometimes acknowledged figure exists in two forms: the one outside of you (which evokes disgust) and the one within you (which evokes shame).

*Shame and the construction of “we.”* The affective economy of Masculine Optimization circulates the financially successful, muscled male body as the shared ideal, and this ideal binds members into a collective “we.” Because this ideal is dependent on self-mastery and a sustained physique, these connections are highly tenuous and always under threat of dissolving and causing shame. Certain objects have become particularly “sticky” affective objects through circulation within this space as part of one’s endless battle with a weaker self. Workout equipment, exercise stats, early morning alarms, supplements, and more are all crucial to the genre. One object has become a stand-in for full-life optimization: the cold plunge. Many Masculine Optimization Influencers film their daily ice bath submersion while reciting or superimposing quotes about self-transformation. Baptismal overtones saturate the discourse, and the ice bath thus becomes a ritual to purge the unmotivated, shameful self and become the optimized ideal.

*Disgust and the construction of “other.”* In the same manner that shame is crucial for the idea of “we,” disgust is crucial for the idea of the “other.” Fundamentally, disgust functions as a hierarchical emotion. Through visible signifiers of bodily discipline (namely extremely low body fat and chiseled muscles), men in this affective economy strive to earn the right to move past internalized shame and perform externalized

disgust. This mindset also enables the free dispense of blame. In purportedly “inspirational” posts offering paths for success for anybody “hardworking,” they construct the fit and rich as a class of rightful winners while the fat and poor are merely those who warrant disgust. A sense of “belowness” thus sticks to the physique of the imagined unoptimized other who does not have the discipline needed to lose fat, gain muscle, and achieve financial success. In this conceptualization, the fitness of the body reveals whether one is worthy of economic stability and willfully buries all discussion of systemic barriers.

*Self-optimization as sacred.* Sacralizing language is commonplace and appeals to spiritual journeys are woven throughout content both explicitly and implicitly. Most blatantly, the process of pursuing bodily discipline is regularly equated to spiritual discipline. Such rhetoric serves to position bodily transformation as a sacred path that carries the weight of moral obligation. The use of disgust also serves to construct a strict division between those inside the sacred fold who deserve to be blessed and those who have ostensibly chosen to stay outside of it. The magnetism of Masculine Optimization Influencers is indirectly and directly in conversation with increasing public discourse about topics like “toxic masculinity,” “male privilege,” and “white privilege.” Yet, performing more nuance than some openly misogynist Men’s Rights Activists or plainly bitter incels, this group seeks to couch their interest in a hierarchical form of masculinity and capitalist dominance as a sacred pursuit of self-improvement.

## **Conclusion**

I suggest the popularity of framing self-optimization as sacred is in many ways a defensive and reactionary movement to classical forms of patriarchal and capitalist hierarchy being questioned. Within this context, appealing to sacrality functions to insulate the practices and hierarchical beliefs from critique.

According to masculine Optimization Influencers, the muscular male body is inscribed with visual evidence of discipline. It is a body that is constantly proving itself as hard-won. Transforming one’s mind, body, and spirit is not only possible, but it is also a moral obligation that will be blessed with capitalist success and a deserved level of “aboveness” from the unoptimized other. For those who may be concerned that male privilege is no longer a given, perhaps, by framing self-optimization as a sacred journey, it is something they can claim is earned.

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