

Tran Thanh Thao
105271681@student.swin.edu.au

Digital Communities
MDA20009
Mr. Joe Pham

Assignment 3	Weighted 40%
Essay	Due 4 April 2025
<p>What role does social media play in body modification? To answer this question you need to explain and evaluate the key arguments as covered in the guest lectures for Weeks Seven or Eight. Refer to at least two of the readings in Weeks Seven or Eight. Beyond these references, you should source relevant research about social media and body modification. Remember that 'body modification' is a very broad term which may refer to a range of bodily practices including, but not limited to, piercings, tattoos, dermal fillers, hair dye, social media filters, beauty apps such as FaceTune, performance enhancing supplements or cosmetic surgery. This means you need to define your terms clearly in the essay.</p>	

Word count: 1847 words

Social media nowadays has become a primary force in socialization, supplementing traditional institutions like family, school, and religion. Within the digital world, influencers play a significant role in shaping perceptions and behaviors; they act as gender socializers by modeling and disseminating ideas about masculinity and femininity. This is particular for transgender individuals, including transmen, who utilize social media to explore, express, and affirm their gender identities. For transmen, navigating masculinity is a complex process with social media algorithmically exposing what it means to be a man, influencing how they perceive and pursue a masculine (ideal) physique. This paper will explore the role of social media in transmen's body modification.

Social media is overall valuable for transmen's identity work, providing a space where their social and self-presentational needs can be met. Transmen's online experiences are often enriching from connection and self-education, making social media a source of community and a trans resource (Buss et al., 2021, p.36). Especially given the

psychological challenges faced by transmen, who often experience higher rates of depression, self-harm, anxiety, PTSD, and suicidal ideation, which likely due to discrimination, lack of acceptance, and difficulty accessing care (Goodfriend et al., 2023, p. 2374), the role of social media in their identity formation becomes even more critical. This complex process of identity formation is deeply intertwined with how transmen navigate masculinity.

Masculinity encompasses the diverse cultural and individual meanings assigned to people with male gender identity, which go beyond their biological characteristics, influencing not only how they see themselves but also how they are perceived by others and how they interact within their social world (Anzani et al., 2024, p.1). These multifaceted meanings are cues that guide behaviors and decision-making in daily life. Traditionally, masculinity is rooted in the thought that it is what is not feminine and in male sexual performance and satisfaction (Parkins & Parkins, 2021, p.3). However, queer theory has expanded the discussion of masculinity development. Newer perspectives challenge traditional ideas by acknowledging the fluidity and diversity of gender identities, leading to a more complete understanding of how individuals experience and express their masculinity (Allan, 2019, as cited in Anzani et al., 2024, p.2).

A four-stage trajectory for masculinity development is proposed by Todd et al. (2022, as cited in Anzani et al., 2024, p.2): envisioning, adoption, questioning, and revisioning. The initial stage, envisioning, centers on the individual's construction of a personalized concept of masculinity, drawing inspiration and insights from available male role models within their environment. Subsequently, the adoption stage involves actively adjusting one's gender presentation, behaviors, and social interactions to more closely align with these internally envisioned masculine ideals. Critically, the journey often progresses into the questioning and revisioning phases, where individuals engage in a critical re-evaluation of their initial constructs and expressions of masculinity. These re-evaluations are frequently sparked and informed by experiences of gender affirmation, leading to a refining of their understanding. This iterative process of identity development is inherently fluid—individuals may revisit and cycle through these stages multiple times as they continue to explore and gain a deeper comprehension of their evolving sense of masculinity (Todd et al., 2022, as cited in Anzani et al., 2024, p.2).

Specifically, transmen experience several distinct phases in their masculine affirmation and gender expression of transmaculine (Anzani et al., 2024, p.2). Before the medical affirmation journey (which might include hormone therapy or surgeries to masculinize their physical appearance), transmen adopt very traditional and stereotypical masculine behaviors and styles—to gain acknowledgment and protection from negative experiences like misgendering. After the medical affirmation, they feel a sense of comfort in

appearance and liberation in gender expression. The newfound confidence enables them to incorporate a wider variety of traits into their expression, including even those traditionally linked to femininity (Anzani et al., 2024, p.3).

In shaping their own sense of masculinity, Anzani et al. (2024, p.6) research shows that while both cismen and transmen find physical appearance to be a desirable trait, their other masculine aspirations diverge significantly. Cismen predominantly desire traits associated with stereotypical masculinity, including success and the ability to protect and provide as a breadwinner. In contrast, transmen, in addition to valuing physical appearance, express a strong desire for traits that challenge traditional masculine norms. These include kindness, care, creativity, wisdom, free gender expression, a commitment to social justice, support of women's rights, and a rejection of rigid social expectations. Ultimately, from social media, transmen find essential alternative spaces to search for relatable masculinity models; this led to an ideal of masculinity that challenges traditional stereotypes and redefines masculinity to include emotional expression, empathy, and support for gender equality (Anzani et al., 2024, p.10).

Body modifications, achieved through fitness practices and gender-affirming medical interventions, are a significant aspect of many transmen's transition journeys. These modifications often involve striving for the size, strength, and physical characteristics traditionally associated with cismen (Dworkin & Wachs, 2009; Smith & Stewart, 2012, as cited in Farber, 2016, p. 259). This pursuit is often driven by a desire to align their physical appearance with their gender identity. The masculine ideal physique, as described by Farber (2016), is culturally constructed and includes features such as "broad shoulders, a large chest, deemphasized hips and thighs ('less curves'), visible muscles and a low body fat percentage." Testosterone use frequently plays a role in these modifications, working in conjunction with fitness practices to facilitate the development of increased physical size and muscle mass. It's crucial to acknowledge that the body's physical structure is adaptable, and cultural meanings assigned to body parts influence how bodies are perceived. Because certain shapes are culturally read as male, some transmen strategically modify their bodies to achieve these culturally recognized forms of masculinity. As Farber (2016, p. 260) notes, physicality is flexible, fluid, and at times, a carefully constructed visual presentation.

Online spaces have become vital resources for transmen navigating these complex processes of body modification and identity affirmation. As Farber (2016) demonstrated through online discussions and interviews, the exchange of knowledge online provides crucial support that is often lacking in broader social networks and traditional medical or research settings. These online platforms enable open conversations about the multifaceted challenges related to physical transition, such as the physical and emotional

aspects of top surgery, managing chest dysphoria, and the practical and emotional limitations of binding. Participants in these online communities frequently discuss the difficulties of exercising safely and effectively while binding and the dysphoria that can be triggered by wearing sports bras, which can significantly hinder participation in public gyms and fitness activities. These discussions highlight the importance of online support in addressing the specific needs and concerns of transmen seeking to achieve their fitness and transition goals.

Particularly, YouTube has become a significant space for transmen to document and share their transition experiences. This online documentation often involves visual representations of physical change. Techniques like time-lapse videos are frequently employed to depict transitions as 'linear' and 'smooth' (Horak, 2014, p. 580, as cited in Farber, 2016, p. 262), offering viewers and creators a way to witness the 'otherwise imperceptible processes' of how 'trans bodies morph as if by magic, drawn inexorably toward their felt gender' (Horak, 2014, p. 578, as cited in Farber, 2016, p. 262). Beyond simply sharing with others, these videos also serve as a personal archive, allowing transmen to observe and reflect on their own transformations, noting subtle changes that might otherwise go unnoticed (Farber, 2016, p. 263).

As they work toward a masculine presentation, transmen may both reinforce and challenge the dominant cultural and institutional hierarchies of sex and gender (Farber, 2016, p. 264). The public nature of social media platforms creates a space where influencers become key players in this dynamic, acting as gender socializers who model and disseminate ideas about masculinity, thus influencing the ongoing negotiation of gender norms (Parkins & Parkins, 2021, p.10).

Harmful and wrongful stereotyping, rooted in strong, simplistic beliefs about what gender is and should be, is a notable and recurrent algorithmic bias that reinforces social prejudices of gender and sexuality on social media (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021, p. 1). This bias stems from the fact that online platforms often fail to grasp that gender is a social construct, not merely a binary choice between 'man' and 'woman' (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021, p. 1). Consequently, social media exacerbates existing stereotypes because the algorithms that govern these platforms are trained on real-world datasets that frequently contain and perpetuate gender stereotypes (Fosch-Villaronga et al., 2021, p. 4). In the online world, algorithms make these dualist, sexist categories dominant, recirculate, and propagate (Schroeder, 2020, p.2). This can manifest in various ways, from the types of content recommended to users to the enforcement of community guidelines that may inadvertently penalize non-conforming expressions.

Algorithms are not neutral. That is largely why social media exhibits biases and shapes how visibility labor is valued and distributed. When transmen influencers create and post content, including selfies, their audience is not only human but also algorithms, as these visuals are converted into data for machine analysis (Rettberg, 2017, p.89). This visibility labor, which involves optimizing content for platform algorithms, is often unequally rewarded, with some creators gaining substantial visibility and profit while others, particularly those from marginalized communities, are systematically disadvantaged by algorithmic processes (Duffy & Meisner, 2022, p.300). Consequently, certain aesthetic templates that align with traditional, stereotypical cisgender presentations may be favored by algorithms, leading to their disproportionate popularization. Furthermore, it's important to consider that transmen who present as more traditionally masculine may also be perceived by online communities as more deserving of transition support, potentially leading to a more positive experience and greater visibility (Goodfriend et al., 2023, p.2387). This can marginalize diverse expressions of transmen, creating a skewed representation of their experiences and hindering the visibility of those from already marginalized communities and reinforcing a narrow view of what it means to be a transman.

In conclusion, social media's role in transmen's body modification journeys presents a complex and often paradoxical landscape. Platforms, particularly YouTube, serve as vital hubs for information sharing, community building, and the crucial visual documentation of personal transitions. Transmen influencers engage in significant visibility labor, modeling diverse yet often algorithmically skewed masculine aesthetics, and sharing intimate details of their experiences with fitness, hormone therapy, and surgeries like top surgery. This online landscape provides invaluable validation, practical knowledge, and a sense of belonging that can be scarce offline, particularly for those in marginalized communities.

However, the algorithmic architecture of these platforms introduces significant complexities. Biases embedded within training data and the platforms' often binary understanding of gender can lead to the uneven amplification of certain masculine presentations, potentially marginalizing more diverse or non-conforming expressions. The curated nature of online content and the pressures of visibility labor can also foster unrealistic expectations and contribute to body image concerns. Furthermore, the drive for engagement can sometimes prioritize sensationalized or narrowly defined narratives, obscuring the nuanced realities of transmen's experiences. Therefore, while social media undoubtedly empowers many transmen in their body modification journeys, a critical awareness of its inherent biases and the performative aspects of online identity is essential for navigating this evolving digital landscape.

References

- Anzani, A., Pavanello Decaro, S., Paganin, G., Miola, A., & Primi, C. (2024). Navigating Role Models: Shaping Masculine Identity Among Transmasculine and Cisgender Emerging Adults. *Sex Roles: A Journal of Research*, 87, 1-16.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-01029-9>
- Buss, J., Le, H., & Haimson, O. L. (2021). Transgender identity management across social media platforms. *Media, Culture & Society*, 44(1), 016344372110271.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437211027106>
- Duffy, B.E. and Meisner, C. (2022). Platform governance at the margins: Social media creators' experiences with algorithmic (in)visibility. *Media, Culture & Society*. doi:
<https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221111923>
- Farber, R. (2016). "Transing" fitness and remapping transgender male masculinity in online message boards. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 26(3), 254–268.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2016.1250618>
- Fosch-Villaronga, E., Poulsen, A., Søråa, R. A., & Custers, B. (2021). Gendering algorithms in social media. *ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter*, 23(1), 24–31.
<https://doi.org/10.1145/3468507.3468512>
- Ghorayshi, A. (2022, September 26). More Trans Teens Are Choosing "Top Surgery." *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2022/09/26/health/top-surgery-transgender-teenagers.html>
- Goodfriend, W., Garcia, A. L., Hoover, A. E., Habashi, M. M., Hack, T., & Raymond, A. (2023). Identity development and self-esteem in transgender men: The importance of masculinity. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 70(11), 2374–2394.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2022.2060056>
- Parkins, M., & Parkins, J. (2021). Gender Representations in Social Media and Formations of Masculinity. *Journal of Student Research*, 10(1), 1–11.
<https://doi.org/10.47611/jsr.v10i1.1144>
- Rettberg, J.W. (2017). Biometric Citizens: Adapting Our Selfies to Machine Vision. In: Kuntsman, A. (eds) *Selfie Citizenship*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-45270-8_10

Schroeder, J. E. (2020). Reinscribing gender: social media, algorithms, bias. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37(3-4), 1-3.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257x.2020.1832378>