

Consuming Desire: Commodification of Male Body Transformation Journeys on Instagram

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ABSTRACT

Social media platforms are being utilized to promote advertisements that encourage individuals to alter their appearance in order to conform to societal norms. In addition, many fitness challenges, featuring celebrities' transformations, have emerged in Social such as Instagram. This research delves into the underlying themes found in body transformation narratives on Instagram, as well as the economic dimension of promoting fitness through social media. To attain a deeper comprehension in the absence of established frameworks, an exploratory case study method is used. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and the collection of visual content from Instagram. The entire process, from narrating and producing fitness journeys to showcasing transformed bodies, predominantly takes place on Instagram, enabling global social connections. The findings emphasize three central ideas: 1. self-consciousness, 2. fetishization of muscular body image, and 3. engagement with the content on Instagram. Furthermore, a "Treadmill" Framework is introduced, comprising three phases: 1. the Warm-up Phase, characterized by a sequence of negative experiences before discovering motivation to interact with media and products that ultimately lead to positive body transformations; 2. the Workout Phase, noteworthy for the commercialization of muscular body ideals during their journeys; 3. the Cool-down Phase, involving the sharing of "before and after photos" coupled with inspirational quotes to inspire their followers to embrace a healthier lifestyle. Furthermore, Instagram is also shown to be a potent catalyst for this desire, as participants developed increased self-esteem and coping mechanisms, which in turn inspired their audiences to embark on their own fitness journeys.

Keywords: Commodification, Body Transformation, Instagram, Narrative, Treadmill Framework

INTRODUCTION

Social media, particularly Instagram, has become a global platform for fitness enthusiasts and experts, sharing attitudes and values for a fit and healthy body (Andreasson & Johansson, 2014; Smith-Maguire, 2008). The fitness community on Instagram is growing, with popular hashtags like #gym, #fitspo, #instafit, and #fitspiration (Stollfuß, 2020). Many fitness challenges, featuring celebrities' transformations, have emerged. This research project is borne out of my academic curiosity to explore how one human's desire and assertion of difference from the mediated text can transform into one's attitude, beliefs, and lifestyle change. Drawing inspiration from Cañete's study (2014) on masculinity influenced by western ideals in the Philippines. Examples of this are the images of Caucasian and half-naked male bodies exhibited in billboard advertising which produce muscular bodies as society's ideal body image. At the same time, "companies reproduce images of desirable bodies for the public to consume" (2014:111). Thus, as these ideal images become part of every Filipinos' everyday life, the desire to consume the products endorsed by models bring happiness and satisfaction to the public (2014:79). Furthermore,

the research aims to uncover the messages in body transformation stories on Instagram and the economics of communicating fitness through social media, examining how desire shapes the journeys of fitness influencers.

Construction of Desire in Consumer Culture

The concept of desire can be operationalized in the theoretical discourse of psychoanalysis; however, the study intends to conceptualize desire in the context of consumption. Desire, as per Falk (1994), is both a result and a driver of social comparison. Bocoock (1993) posits that desire, expressed through consumption, stems from a sense of 'lack,' where people desire what they lack. In late modern/postmodern capitalism, people's identities are intertwined with their consumption patterns. Bocoock (1993) emphasizes that the more people consume, the more they want to consume, labeling this as an 'idealistic practice' aimed at fulfilling emotional desires rather than material needs. Crossley (2001) underscores the role of recognition in understanding desire, asserting that the desire for recognition motivates individuals to shape their behavior and habits concerning identity, status, and privilege. He argues that people desire material objects cultivated within the social context.

In today's consumer society, the body has gained significant prominence, signifying people's narcissistic fixation and resembling a commodity in contemporary consumer culture, as per Katzwindel (2014). Media portrays an ideal body through various means such as diet, exercise, and plastic surgery, all geared toward profiting from the public's investment in their bodies, exemplified by reality shows like "Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss" and "Biggest Loser." These shows heavily rely on extreme weight loss for success, reinforcing societal standards of beauty and masculinity (Harris-Moore, 2014).



Figure 1: 'Before and After' photo of Raymond Gutierrez, a Filipino celebrity, from a 90-day challenge campaign for the brand Century Tuna (Instagram, February 12, 2017).

Fetishizing Muscular Body and the Mass Media

The concept of fetish in psychoanalysis operates at any level of human consciousness and has brought a rich understanding of the concept of fetish. Drawing from Karl Marx's theory of commodity fetishism, scholars like Kline, Leiss (1978), Lloyd (2008), and Kaplan (2006) argue that advertising conveys ambiguous messages to consumers. Commodity fetishism is seen as the manipulation of human consciousness, shaping popular demands in capitalist societies. It is linked to consumers' complex emotional states, impacting self-esteem, ego enhancement, and interpersonal comparisons. Lloyd (2008) relates fetishism to the association of identity with consumption, often reflecting class divisions. Kaplan (2006) describes fetishism as a mental strategy that transforms living beings into material commodities.

For instance, a man may be inspired to transform his body due to a celebrity crush, even if his financial resources don't support such a lifestyle. Dittmar and Halliwell (2008) explain how idealized media models, especially for male consumers, can lead to negative body image. This results from discrepancies between self-concept and the unrealistic ideals these models represent. The use of such models in advertising has adverse effects, including negative self-evaluation, depression, and unhealthy behaviors like steroid abuse, exercise addiction, and imbalanced diets. Exposure to these models heightens body dissatisfaction, particularly when people have internalized that their body has personal value, leading to negative emotions.

McCreary (2011) presents three factors associated with the drive for muscularity. Personality and individual differences suggest a link between a high drive for muscularity and mental health issues related to physical appearance. Interpersonal factors, including social comparisons and body-related comments, also play a role. Demographic factors, such as sexual orientation and ethnicity, can be influential. Media plays a significant role in promoting the drive for muscularity, having a muscular, mesomorphic, V-shaped body, with broad shoulders, a well-defined upper body, a flat, muscular stomach—ideally with "six-pack abs"—and narrow hips and waist. Mass media has become a powerful transmitter of societal ideals for the ideal male body, emphasizing muscularity. This drives individuals to consider body transformation, and it exemplifies the fetishization of the muscular body.

Fitness Participation and Commercialization

The birth of 'fitness participation' begins with the influence of this concept primarily in Western societies. Martschukat (2019) suggests that “the roots of fitness culture can be traced back to the birth of liberalism in the United States”, particularly with the Declaration of American Independence in 1776, which emphasized pursuing happiness and a good life. Fitness participation, in this context, extends beyond physical conditioning for sports and embodies the idea of having a body that reflects the ability to achieve self-improvement and pursue happiness. Additionally, Andreasson and Johansson (2014) explore the early development of physical culture, which laid the foundation for bodybuilding. Bodybuilding, as defined by Sandow (cited in Locks and Richardson, 2012), involves the overall development of the body, encompassing both physical and mental aspects.

Smith-Maguire (2008) highlights the increase in obesity rates in the United States from the 1960s to the 1990s, coinciding with a significant rise in commercial health clubs and fitness magazines. This growth can be attributed to the cultural perception of health, framing health and disease as matters of individual will. Smith-Maguire specifically examines the commercialization of the fitness industry in response to the obesity epidemic, which remains a pressing public health issue with substantial mortality rates. Harris-Moore (2014) argues that obesity has led to negative public perceptions of fatness, with medical and media experts using negative information to motivate weight loss. These attributions have not only affected gender identity but also self-confidence. Institutions like the media and medical sector frame fatness as a problem, especially for men who don't meet the medicalized Body Mass Index (BMI) standards, associating male obesity with emasculating traits. The body is now seen as a sociocultural construct influenced by medical and media narratives. Thus, The search for an ideal body, combining health and appearance, has become closely linked to fitness activities, offering solutions to the medicalization and stigmatization of obesity.

Political Economy of Technology

The studies on desire construction emphasize the importance of examining the tools of production and consumption. Technology stands out as a significant driver of increased consumption of public goods and services, offering both possibilities and constraints. This relates to the Political Economy of Technology (PE(I)), a precursor to the political economy of media and communication (Wittel, 2007), which also extends to the internet and social media (Bolaño & Viera, 2015; Dahlberg, 2015). Castells (1996) first explored the Political Economy of (Digital) Technology (PE(D)T), focusing on the use of knowledge and information for production, processing, and feedback. Unlike its predecessor, PE(D)T doesn't center on knowledge itself but rather on knowledge as a product. This shift has given rise to 'digital capitalism' (Schiller, 1999), with the internet being a prominent realization of knowledge as a product.

The internet has created a profit-based platform accessible to all, leading to various businesses migrating online and allowing audiences to assume both seller and buyer roles (Bolaño, 2000). In the context of social media, these roles transform into influencer and consumer. Dahlberg (2015) critically examines the political economy of social media, highlighting empowerment divides inherent in these platforms. These divides encompass control (regulating social media use), surveillance (information-seeking during registration), exploitative (income generation through value appropriation), and visibility (the extent of one's presence in social media). These divides drive social media activities.

Instagram and the Fitness Influencers

While Instagram's precise definition varies in different studies, it is commonly understood as a platform for sharing appealing visual content, whether for personal or business purposes. Miles (2019) notes that Instagram is uniquely powerful in the realm of social media marketing, offering various ways to publish visual content. These consist of Instagram TV (IGTV), Stories (ephemeral content that disappears after 24 hours), and Feeds (original photo and video sharing). Instagram also allows users to edit and share content with metadata like captions, hashtags, people, and locations, facilitating audience engagement and growth. In terms of influencers, a framework categorizes them by follower count, including “Nano influencers — from 10 to 1,000 followers, Micro influencers

— from 1,000 to 10,000 followers, Macro influencers — from 10,000 to 100,000 followers, Mega influencers — from 100,000 to 1,000,000 followers, Celebrity influencer — more than 1,000,000 followers.” (Miles, 2019). Abidin (2018) defines influencers as individuals who hold sway over a broad audience for marketing and advertising purposes. Influencers generate revenue through advertorials, selling advertising space, and selling pre-owned or branded items (Abidin, 2018). Mavroudis (2019) emphasizes that anyone with a significant social media following can be an influencer, with influence measured by reach, collaborative networks, and brand endorsements.

Instagram holds significant importance for businesses in the Philippines due to its engagement, visual content, and consistent feed (Calabia, n.d). Moreover, Instagram plays a crucial role in self-branding, where individuals create “distinctive public images for commercial gain” (Khamis et al., 2016). Regarding fitness participation, Instagram is widely used by fitness enthusiasts to share exercise routines and diet-related images, often referred to as fitspiration. This trend aims to inspire a healthier lifestyle but can also contribute to body image issues and eating disorders. Exposure to different body images on Instagram can lead to body dissatisfaction and dieting intentions, driven by narcissistic behavior and social comparisons (Jin et al., 2018). Therefore, Instagram is a powerful platform for sharing visually appealing content, fostering self-branding, and promoting fitness inspiration, but it can also have negative effects on body image and behavior.

Healthy Habits to Individuals of Higher Economic Status

Adopting healthy habits positively impacts both mental and physical well-being, reducing disease risk and boosting the immune system (Stark, 2013). These habits include exercise, a balanced diet, and supplements for long-term health. Achieving a healthy lifestyle was once seen as a privilege linked to economic status (Bonaccio et al., 2017). Economic downturns affected diet adherence and BMI for those with lower income. Socioeconomic factors, especially household income, play a vital role in dietary outcomes during crises (Bonaccio et al., 2017). Turrell and Vandevijvere (2015) assert that addressing diet and body weight disparities requires addressing broader socio-economic inequalities, especially for individuals with lower socioeconomic status.

Research Gap and Potential Research Framework

This study delves into the themes of desire construction, commodification of the muscular body, media representation, participation, and commercialization in the fitness industry. It focuses on the use of Instagram by male fitness Influencers in the Philippines and the phenomenon of body transformation. The media portrays a fit body as ideal, and the information for achieving it is transformed into a consumable product. This ideal is reinforced by technology and social media.

The study addresses a research gap by exploring the body transformation journeys of select male *fitsfluencers* in the Philippines. Previous research has mainly concentrated on women's journeys, leaving men's experiences less explored. The study draws inspiration from the Political Economy of Communication by Phil Graham (2007) to analyze the construction of desire in body transformation stories on Instagram. It hypothesizes that three factors drive the desire for body transformation: self-consciousness, the fetishized muscular body, and engagement with content on Instagram. Self-consciousness is influenced by various social and psychological factors, leading to body image concerns and a desire to change. Exposure to idealized muscular body images can lead to body dissatisfaction and related issues. Engagement on Instagram involves posting fitness journey content, attracting followers, and achieving Influencer status. Using these factors, the study employs a case study method in an exploratory research design to examine the representation of body transformation journeys on Instagram and the desire for body image transformation, with a focus on the political economy of communication.

METHODOLOGY

This research follows an exploratory approach to better understand a phenomenon: body transformation stories on Instagram. It deals with the desire for body transformation as seen in the narratives of selected male fitness Influencers. The study adopts a collective case study design, focusing on this specific issue. Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews and the collection of visual content from Instagram.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involves interpreting and organizing collected data. This process encompasses segmentation, coding, and interpreting data for patterns and themes. Thematic analysis is used for the interview data, focusing on predetermined themes. Archival communication research via textual analysis is employed to analyze Instagram content relevant to body transformation stories.

Unit of Analysis and Unit of Observation

The unit of analysis is “the entity that you wish to say something about at the end of your study, and it is considered the focus of your study. Furthermore, the unit of analysis of this study is the commodification of the desire for body transformation manifest in the stories of fitness journey on Instagram and the unit of observation is the male *fitsfluencer* stories where you observe, measure, or collect while trying to learn something about your unit of analysis” (DeCarlo, 2018).

Population and Sampling Method

The study uses purposeful sampling to identify factors affecting body transformation journey formation. The population consists of male fitness influencers, including Nano, Micro, Macro, and Mega influencers. Six representative cases from this population participate in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Participants are contacted via Instagram direct message, where they receive an invitation and consent form. Consent is obtained, and interviews are conducted via video conferencing to ensure safety during the pandemic. Transcripts are generated from video and audio files saved in MP4 and M4A formats.

Data Processing

Two techniques are used for data organization: open coding and memoing. Open coding categorizes data and is a starting point for more specific coding techniques. Memoing includes code notes, theoretical notes, and operational notes. These memo types capture insights, relationships, and methodological considerations during data collection and processing.

Respondents' Stories of the Body Transformation Journey

Interviews were conducted with the six participants to find out why they had decided to start body transformation adventures and then share their progress on Instagram. Some highlighted their motivation as being health advantages and a change from a sedentary lifestyle, putting their general well-being ahead of attaining an idealized toned body. They got to the point where they felt driven to post their transformational experiences on Instagram as their dedication to physical fitness grew. They started sharing their workout routines, diet plans, and inspirational quotations from fitness celebrities on Instagram, which helped them in their weight reduction journey. Encouragement and affirmation from fans encouraged them to keep posting about their health journey, drawing in more and more viewers. As their following count rose, prospects for product endorsements began to surface, with their body transformation narratives becoming a defining element of their identity as fitness influencers.

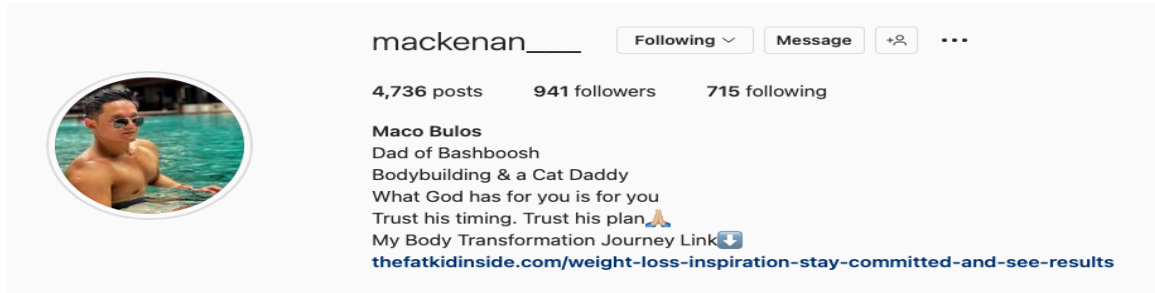


Figure 2: Instagram handle of Maco Bulos

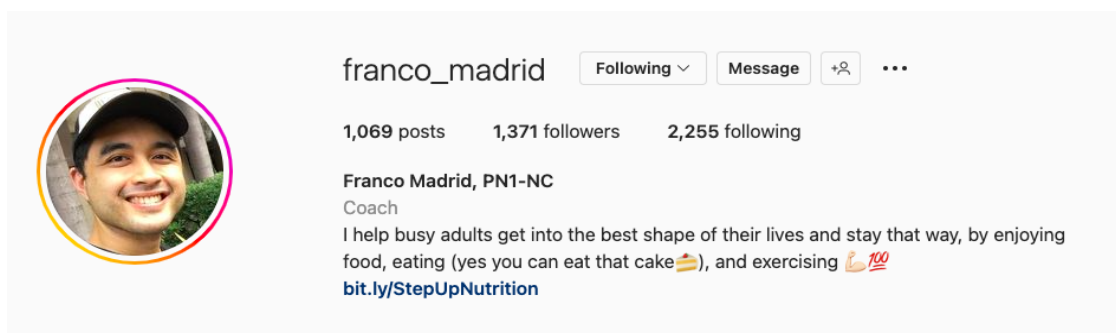


Figure 3: Instagram handle of Franco Madrid

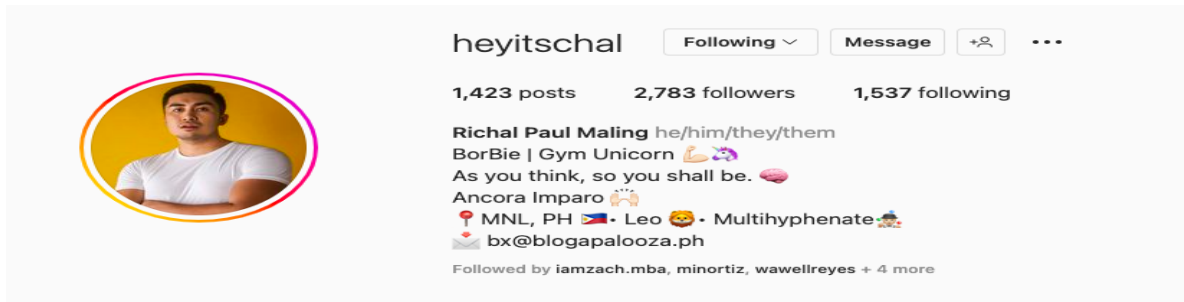


Figure 4: Instagram handle of Richal Paul Maling

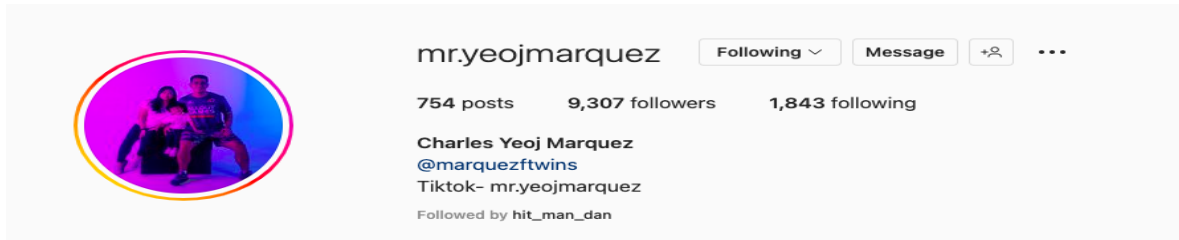


Figure 5: Instagram handle of Charles Yeoj Marquez



Figure 6: Instagram handle of Napoleon Andrei Dizon

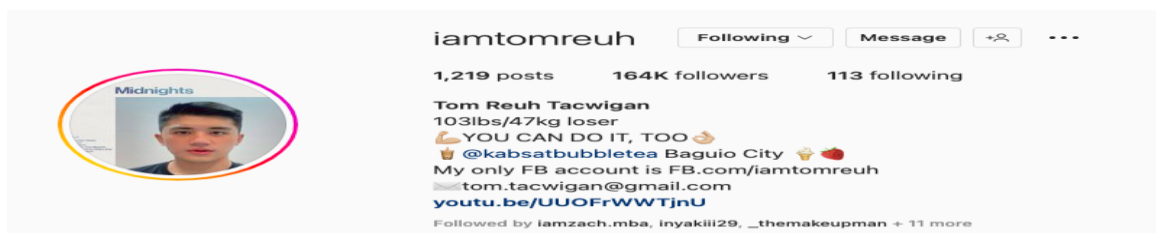


Figure 7: Instagram handle of Tom Reuh Tacwigan

Exposition of the ‘Treadmill’ Framework

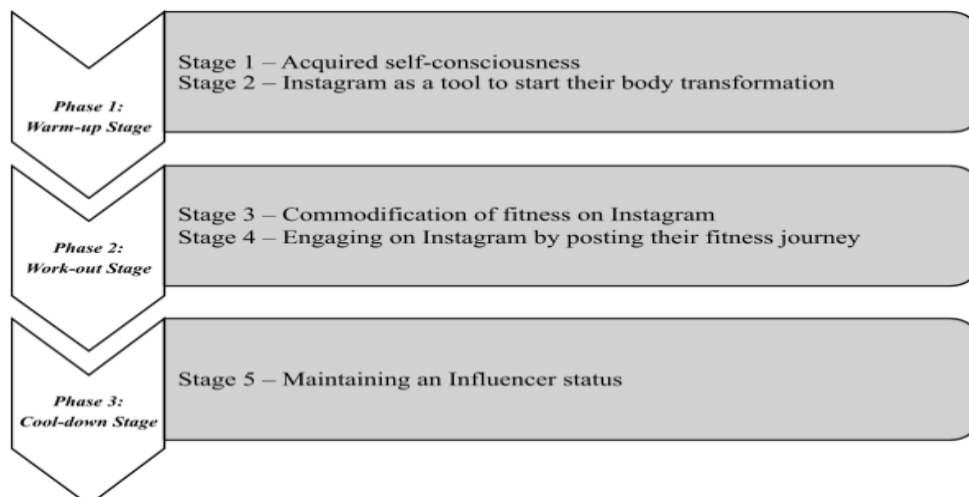


Figure 8: The ‘Treadmill’ framework shows the process of body transformation of the participants.

The "Treadmill" framework, as shown in Figure 8, was formulated based on the body transformation narratives of the participants. The primary findings are linked to three core concepts: self-consciousness, fetishized muscular body, and engagement with Instagram, all of which are aligned with Phil Graham's perspective on studying the political economy of communication in the 20th century. Graham asserted that the political economy of communication primarily revolves around the creation of values at the level of individual consciousness. This aligns with how Instagram, including its images and discourses, influenced the participants in their pursuit of fitness journeys. Similarly, Graham's argument that intimate aspects of human life, including desires, consciousness, and identity, have become saleable components in the economy corresponds to the commodification of the participants' fitness journeys observed in this study.

The entire process, from narrating and producing fitness journeys to showcasing transformed bodies, predominantly takes place on Instagram, enabling global social connections. The contrast between real-life experiences and curated online images aligns with Graham's concept of "alienation from their source." In summary, the framework, inspired by participants' stories, contributes to a new concept called the "Treadmill" framework, drawing parallels with gym treadmills. This framework consists of three phases: warm-up, workout, and cool-down, similar to how a treadmill assesses cardiovascular endurance and serves different exercise purposes.

In the warm-up phase, participants prepared for their body transformation journey. During this phase, they carefully considered the internal and external factors influencing their decision to start or continue losing weight. It was also during this phase that self-consciousness began. The primary argument here is that consuming Instagram content significantly shapes the participants' ideas and desires. This is in line with Graham's (2007) theory of the ways in which sophisticated media and communication affect people's awareness and mold their values and wants.

Each of the six individuals began their fitness journey with a goal for transformation, which was frequently sparked by a tragic or personal memory. These were recollections of events with friends and family as well as exposure to Instagram feeds. The steps of the procedure are as follows:

Stage 1: Acquired Self-Consciousness

According to Graham (2007), being self-conscious may result in a number of body image-related effects, including depressive, poor self-esteem, insecurity, and muscular ideals, as well as susceptibility factors such as being overweight, obese, or ill. These elements are confirmed by the accounts of the six participants' fitness journeys. Their travels usually started with exposure to Instagram material and personal experiences associated with tragic events affecting friends and relatives. These encounters made them aware of their bodies, and fitness celebrities on Instagram frequently served as an inspiration.

The participants' narratives highlight the role of disappointment with their bodies, the pressure to maintain weight loss, and family health history as significant factors in their decision to continue their fitness journey. Exposure to muscular body images on Instagram made them more aware of perceived flaws in their bodies and motivated them to make changes. This aligns with the theory that capitalist manufacturers promote idealized body images, encouraging individuals to strive for these ideals and inspiring others to embark on their own transformational journeys.

Body Appearance Disappointment

The participants' dissatisfaction with their physique had a significant impact, leading to reduced self-esteem. Self-esteem and body appearance are closely interrelated.

Pressure

The pressure to improve their appearance and maintain a healthy body intensified, driven by their inner motivation to overcome their disappointments.

Associated Health Problems

Various health problems associated with obesity and family histories of cancer, heart disease, hypertension, and diabetes pushed the participants to embark on their body transformation journey.

Stage 2: Instagram as a Tool to Start their Body Transformation

Participants found Instagram's visual content, especially images and videos, to be engaging and emotionally resonant. Instagram served as an educational and informational tool for wellness and fitness, with diverse content from fitness influencers benefiting them. The platform's visual appeal, user engagement features, and the impact of fitness content on health choices motivated their transformation.

Fitness apps and devices also played a vital role. Fitness personalities on Instagram promoted workout and dietary plans, emphasizing body positivity and self-love. They used inspirational captions and quotes to motivate

their followers. Furthermore, fitness-related apps, gadgets, and the broader digital fitness industry significantly contributed to participants' motivation and fitness journey enhancement.

In the workout phase, participants begin to appreciate their achievements in body transformation. However, they also face challenges in maintaining their diet and exercise routines. In this phase, participants seek inspiration and motivation to continue their journey, primarily by following fitness influencers on Instagram, purchasing products endorsed by these influencers, joining fitness communities and gyms, and conducting general research on achieving their desired physiques. They apply the knowledge and experiences they've gained from Instagram during this phase.

The participants benefit from the knowledge and information they acquire from Instagram, which can be regarded as "knowledge commodities," as per Graham's theory (2007). Through Instagram, they access various fitness-related resources, including workout routines, dietary plans, and wellness advice. They consider this information valuable and treat it as something that can be bought, sold, or used to their advantage. This concept aligns with the idea of "commodity fetishism" from Marxist theory, which involves imbuing products or commodities with symbolic meaning and value beyond their physical existence. Fitness-related goods and services, such as workout equipment, supplements, or athletic apparel, become intertwined with a person's identity within the fitness context on Instagram.

Participants develop an attachment to these products because they believe that owning or using them will help them achieve their fitness goals and project a specific image of themselves. Instagram's commodification process is best illustrated by the relationship between fitness-related products and personal identity.

Stage 3: Commodification of 'Health and Fitness' on Instagram

The act of converting values, wants, ideas, and cultures into commodities for sale and consumption is known as commodification, and it plays a big role in the training phase of participants' fitness journeys on Instagram. In the Instagram ecosystem, a number of health and fitness-related topics, including exercise regimens, eating habits, and sharing fitness journey narratives, are commercialized. Creating marketable goods and experiences out of these values is part of the commodification process. For example, fitness gurus' marketing and support of certain food products, meal plans, and nutritional supplements commoditizes good eating. With the selling of fitness gear, athletic wear, and influencer-endorsed training programs, workout routines and regimens become commodities. Individuals actively engage in the production, dissemination, exchange, and consumption of fitness-related material on Instagram, commercializing their cultures, values, goals, and ideas. These paid-for elements become obtainable and consumable for the general public on Instagram, influencing people's perspectives, goals, and actions about their personal fitness journeys.

The Habit of Eating Healthy

The participants disclosed that they had come across multiple methods on Instagram for devising meal plans, which encompassed arranging their meal times. The role of commercialization during the workout phase of participants' fitness journeys on Instagram is what distinguishes the platform. In this stage, participants develop an appreciation for the changes in their bodies and begin to face challenges in adhering to their dietary and exercise plans. They turn to fitness influencers on Instagram for inspiration and motivation to initiate or continue their journey. By purchasing the same exercise gear or supplements recommended by these influencers, they consciously strive to replicate the success of their role models. Moreover, they join gyms and fitness communities to seek support and assistance from like-minded individuals. Extensive research on diet, exercise, and body modifications is part of this pursuit.

Involvement in Exercise and Workout

Participants expressed a high regard for exercise and workouts. When questioned about the frequency of their workouts, most participants mentioned visiting the gym at least three times a week, while others used gym facilities nearly every day. They gained access to fitness services through gym memberships, which ranged in cost from free (provided by friends who owned gyms) to as much as P2,500 per month. The gym membership significantly aided them in cultivating self-discipline, as they surrounded themselves with people who could provide inspiration and motivation when needed. Similar to the fitness influencers on Instagram, whom they considered as companions in the online realm, they found greater motivation to actualize their fitness journey when in the company of trusted individuals.

Stage 4: Engaging on Instagram by Posting their Fitness Journey

For the six participants, a significant reason for continuing their body transformation journey is to share their fitness stories on Instagram. This "extracurricular" endeavor, in addition to their workouts and healthy eating, reflects their willingness to "promote" their stories on the platform, even if they aren't fully aware of this concept.

All participants are active Instagram users, where they initially discovered various weight-loss techniques and inspirational figures, as previously discussed. They use Instagram to gauge their progress, compare their workout results, and emulate the desired appearance and results of the accounts they follow. They exhibit a high level of Instagram usage, spending over five (5) hours on the platform daily during their fitness journey. As they witness progress in their own bodies, their motivation to post their latest body pictures and seek validation from their Instagram community increases. Moreover, they share their fitness journey on Instagram to inspire others to begin their own transformations.

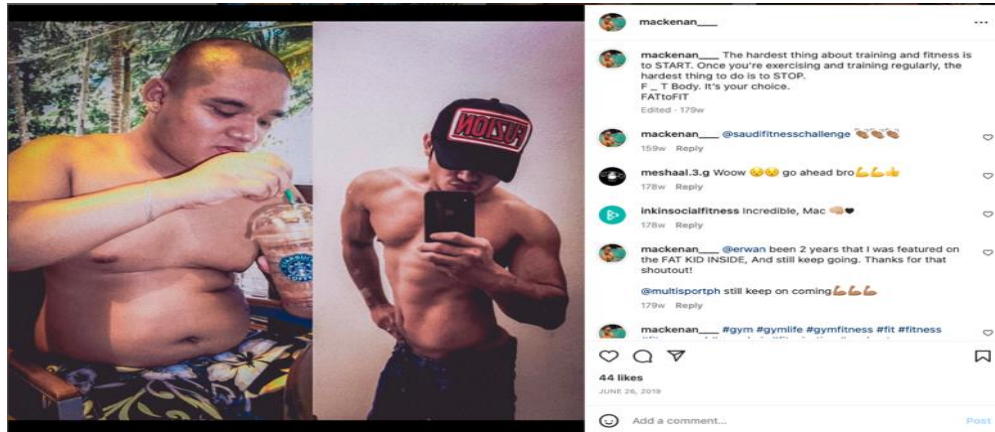


Figure 9: 'Before and After' photo of Maco Bulos (Instagram, June 26, 2019)

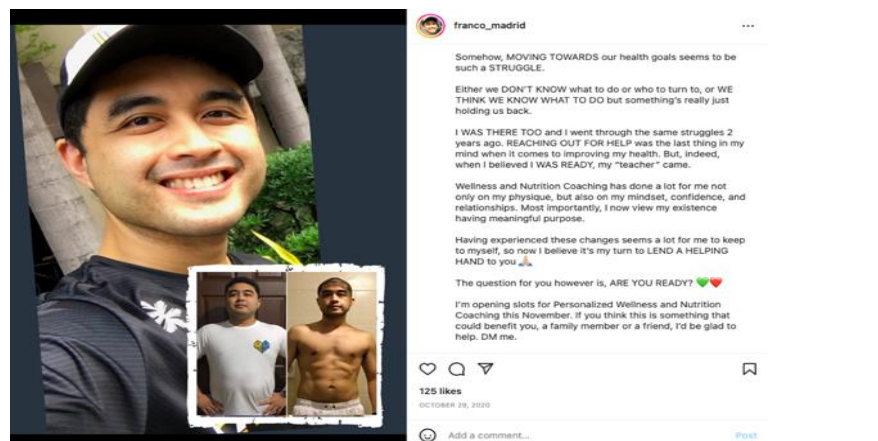


Figure 10: 'Before and After' Photo of Franco Madrid (Instagram, October 29, 2020)



Figure 11: 'Before and After' photo of Richal Paul Maling (Instagram, July 8, 2015)



Figure 12: 'Before and After' Photo of Charles Yoej Marquez (Instagram, July 4, 2019)

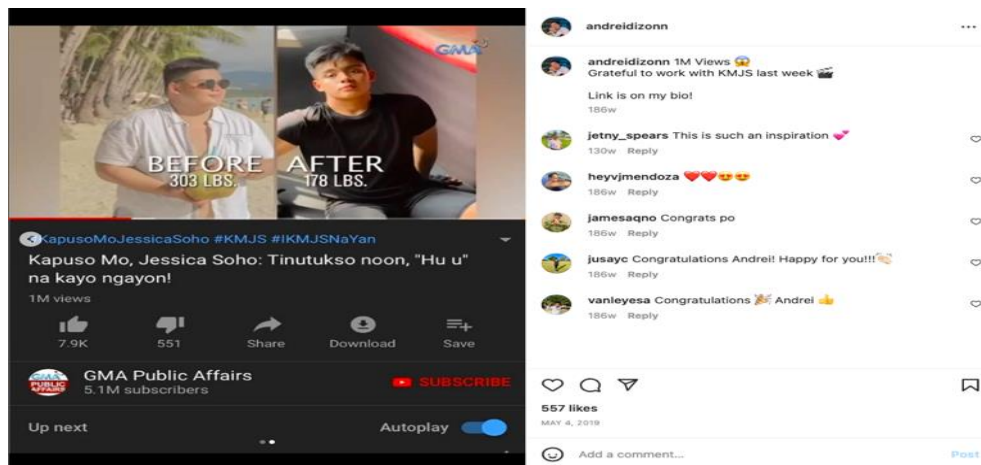


Figure 13: Napoleon Andrei Dizon's body transformation story on magazine program, *Kapuso Mo, Jessica Soho* (Instagram, May 4, 2019)



Figure 14: 'Before and After' Photo of Tom Reuh Tacwigan (Instagram, January 6, 2019)

The participants confess to having high Instagram usage habits, consistently spending over five (5) hours on the platform daily throughout their fitness journey. Their increasing body transformation progress motivates them to post their latest body pictures, seeking validation from their Instagram circles. They also express a desire to motivate others to embark on their own body transformation journeys. The images of the participants' transformations convey messages of discipline, hard work, and determination in pursuing fitness goals. They intentionally post photos that promote their new lifestyle, especially 'before and after' photos. Such content, particularly on Instagram, has been found to be highly effective in motivating followers to adopt healthier eating habits and exercise (Devereaux and McGrew, 2021).

While the participants used Instagram initially to consume fitness-related content, they have now transitioned into content creators, inspiring their followers to do the same. This transformation of roles aligns with Graham's

(2007) concept of mediation, where Instagram serves as an alternative commercial space, facilitating the transfer of meaning from one discourse to another. The visual nature of Instagram, emphasizing visual content, contributes to the desire for body transformation among both the participants and their followers. Exposure to idealized body images, associated products, and services promising these transformations fuels this desire. By showcasing their own physical changes, endorsing fitness products, and projecting success and attractiveness, the participants, acting as content creators, enhance this desire.

Before their exposure to Instagram, participants were already aware of narratives surrounding healthy living and attractive bodies. However, their engagement with these discourses on the platform intensified and reinforced their desire for physical transformation. This aligns with Silverstone's (1999) concept of the "movement of meaning," where the desire is overtly directed toward consuming products that can fulfill this desire. Participants on social media platforms contribute to commodification patterns. Their sharing of stories as a means of seeking affirmation could be seen as an unconscious act of subjecting themselves to an implicit valuation online. Likes, reactions, and comments serve as forms of validating desire, and the platform records them as an economic valuation. These actions mutually support each other: one action generates a market, while the other sustains it. Through the validation messages received from their audiences, the six participants confirm that their followers prefer visual communication that establishes a personal connection. This phenomenon is further amplified by traditional media's ability to pick up on viral stories from social media, including stories of dramatic body transformations.

While each participant frames their motivation for sharing their journey on Instagram differently, a common thread in their narratives is the feedback loop they experience. Sharing updates and developments in their transformation process, receiving positive feedback and encouragement from followers, and attracting new followers in the process all motivate them to continue their journey. Whether their eventual emergence as influencers was intentional or not is secondary to the "natural" process by which commodification of intimate human activities on social media, as Graham has proposed, takes place. Consumers become products, sold by the social media platform and/or the consumers themselves, and are subsequently consumed by other consumers. Thus, the monetization of the participants' experience on Instagram can be assessed through the lens of value, as outlined by Phil Graham. According to Graham (2007), value encompasses both "abstract and physical forms, considering both human experiences and financial factors" (4). The ideals promoted by fitness influencers, reflecting the abstract form of value, influence their followers' attitudes and behaviors within the context of the fitness journey on Instagram. To align their choices and actions with these beliefs, their followers try to emulate them by purchasing recommended products. This process of value creation and exchange is facilitated by postings and communication on Instagram, supporting the monetization of fitness experiences and the role of social media platforms in influencing people's choices and habits. The encouragement, advice, and words of support that participants received during this time increased their motivation and commitment.

Participants have already experienced the expected physical modifications throughout the cool-down phase. They now concentrate on keeping up their advancement. In this stage, they tell their story to a social media following they've developed based on their own transformation tales. Many of their followers want to experience similar transformations, so they provide advice and motivation to them. The participants saw becoming fitness influencers as a logical progression of their transformation journey, acknowledging that their fitness journey is a continuous process that extends beyond weight reduction. This change creates a number of options, including the ability to monetize their social media material and turn into real-life fitness teachers.

Participants are increasingly involved on Instagram as they continue to make progress, sharing pictures and videos of their everyday activities and transformation journeys. Like the people who first motivated them on their quest, they hope to become fitness influencers themselves. Their present lives revolve around their influencer statuses, since they have amassed sizable fan bases and become recognized experts in various domains through the documentation of their bodily metamorphoses. Benefits of becoming an influencer include brand partnerships and chances to make money off of their online presence outside of Instagram.

The way the participants engage with different media platforms demonstrates the relationship between the political economy of the media and the legitimacy they have gained. Their effective use of their influencer reputation outside of Instagram illustrates how influencer marketing has changed over time and how important it is for online authority to have a personal impact on consumer behavior. They solidify their status as well-known individuals and bolster their transformation tales and skills by appearing in TV series and other media. Finally, their reach, brand image, and authority in their respective areas have all been enhanced by their exposure and influencer status, which goes beyond Instagram, and has played a major role in their accomplishments

Stage 5: Maintaining an Influencer Status

Abidin (2018) defines "influencers" as those who have a substantial level of control over a large number of customers. Prominent firms have indicated interest in working with the research participants, who are in great

demand as brand ambassadors for a varied array of products, including fitness-related ones. Their determination to stick with their fitness regimen has been bolstered by their success in turning a profit from their transformation stories. Their influence increased as more people started to follow their Instagram posts. In addition to social media, their fitness-related tales have appeared in print and digital media. They have so arranged paid partnerships, trade contracts, and sponsored product placements with several well-known companies.

Their stories have been greatly influenced by opportunities they have had outside of Instagram, such as television appearances, which have contributed to their current level of popularity. By merging their online and real media personas, they have expanded their reach and gained more respect. They have a platform to offer their expertise, tell their experiences, and build stronger relationships with viewers on television. Through this exposure off of Instagram, their influencer position is further recognized and their brand image is strengthened.

Instagram has an impact on many facets of society, including the fitness and health sector. The participants adapted easily to the dominant culture of influence, where health and fitness are valued for their financial worth. They began their fitness adventures by immersing themselves in Instagram's idealized strong body photographs, which gave them access to the platform's insights and information. They then used this fresh knowledge to improve their Instagram engagement tactics and customize their fitness regimens. This occurrence is consistent with the notion of "knowledge commodities" put out by Graham (2007), drawing on Marx's theory (1973) that postulates these commodities to be presumptive kinds of labor that are exchangeable, tradable, or bought to support conscious human pursuits.

DISCUSSION

The six body transformation narratives in this study aim to raise societal awareness by suggesting that everyone may achieve an ideal physique, rather than just providing graphic depictions of individual fitness experiences. Instagram has served as a medium for the replication of ideal physical looks by encouraging body comparisons with others, spreading fitness and wellness-related information. Graham (2007) emphasizes the significance of self-consciousness, encompassing an individual's perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about their bodies. As participants internalized their body imperfections, they found themselves in an arena where body image discussions, societal judgments, body stereotyping, and health-related concerns unfolded. Based on the narratives of these six participants, images of muscular bodies from other fitness influencers on Instagram made them acutely aware of the perceived 'flaws' in their own bodies and what they needed to change to attain their ideal physique. This social dimension aligns with Cañete's (2014) argument that capitalist manufacturers disseminate images of the desirable body for public consumption in the realm of body image discourse.

In this study, each participant has essentially become their own producer of the coveted body, with their followers as the primary consumers. However, this sets in motion a cycle: while they were initially self-conscious about their own bodies due to perceived imperfections, they now serve as triggers for others to recognize potential shortcomings in their current physical state. Consequently, followers are inspired to embark on their own body transformation journeys, marked by similar patterns of consumption and lifestyle changes as those undertaken by the participants.

Instagram continues to exert significant influence across various societal domains, with health and fitness being no exception. The participants adeptly adopted the prevailing culture of influence, where fitness and wellness are recognized as economically valuable. They used the knowledge and insights they found on Instagram to start their fitness adventures by engrossing themselves in pictures of strong body ideals. They then used their newly acquired information and experiences to inform their Instagram engagement tactics as well as their daily health regimens.

Marx's (1973) theory serves as the foundation for Graham's (2007) idea of "knowledge commodities," which may be used to evaluate this occurrence. According to Graham, these commodities are presumptive kinds of work that may be purchased, sold, or otherwise exchanged to power conscious human activity.

The process of controlling people's awareness leads to the fetishization of a muscular body image. Participants contributed to the commercialization of the fitness business on Instagram by comparing themselves to other fitness influencers and letting their emotions get the better of them. Their exposure to these kinds of visuals encouraged individuals to take up exercise and eating regimens as part of healthier living. The creation and dissemination of their fitness-related Instagram content was the result of this transformation endeavor, which took a large amount of time and money. Through the process of documenting their bodily transformation journeys and curating their feeds to represent their quest for health and fitness, the participants became an integral component of the platform's video and image creation.

The concept of "social capital" was first used in 1978 by French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, who highlighted the link between the development of the body and social status. Bourdieu saw the body as a type of physical capital that was susceptible to commercialization in contemporary society. People started to feel more and more pressure to be aware of their bodies as looks and bodily functions became more and more important to them. Another

factor fueling their desire to lose weight was commercialization, which creates "standards" that force people—especially those who are not considered 'normal'—to follow the patterns created by the fitness and health services and goods offered on Instagram.

Another crucial element contributing to the participants' desire for body transformation was their engagement with the content on Instagram. Through frequent posts of their fitness routines to maintain influencer status, they built a follower base. All participants embraced influencer marketing, reaffirming their individual journeys as the right path to physical health and economic rewards. They aimed to preserve the progress they had achieved and eventually became fitness influencers themselves, following in the footsteps of those they admired on Instagram during their own journey. Ricciardelli (2013) noted that the pursuit of muscularity, leanness, and youthfulness in men is not a new aspiration, but it has intensified with the rise of image-conscious media, including magazines, films, television, and the internet. She argued that the male body has become increasingly commodified, much like what happened to the six participants. Intriguingly, this overt commodification of the male body appears to have surfaced later than the commodification of the female face and body.

The body transformations shared by the participants on their Instagram accounts must be understood within the framework of a "techno-social system," as proposed by Fuchs (2014). Fuchs describes social media as systems where information and communication technologies shape and limit human activities, involving the creation, distribution, and consumption of knowledge through dynamic and reflexive processes that link technological structures with human agency. In this context, both the structural aspects of Instagram and the discourse surrounding body image served as both mediums and outcomes of human actions, influencing the participants' motivation for embarking on body transformation journeys. The muscular body images on Instagram influenced and guided the participants in their consumption of fitness products and services showcased on the platform. Their cases serve as illustrations of this phenomenon, as they were inspired by specific accounts that not only featured images but also documented their own body transformation journeys.

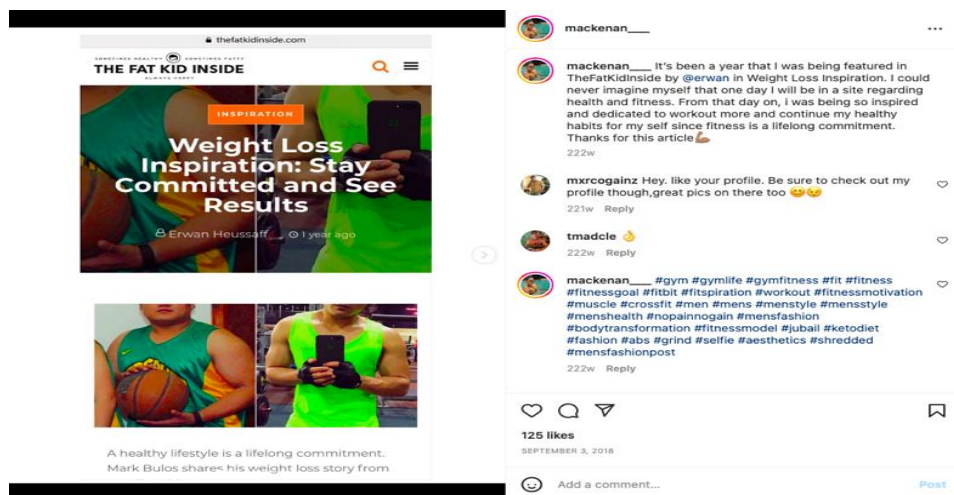


Figure 15: Maco Bulos' weight loss journey on TheFatKidInside.com (Instagram, September 3, 2018)



Figure 16: Franco Madrid inviting his followers to join in their online talks about wellness (Instagram, January 12, 2021)



Figure 17: Richal Paul Maling modeling for Starbucks Philippines posted on Facebook (Instagram, August 31, 2019)

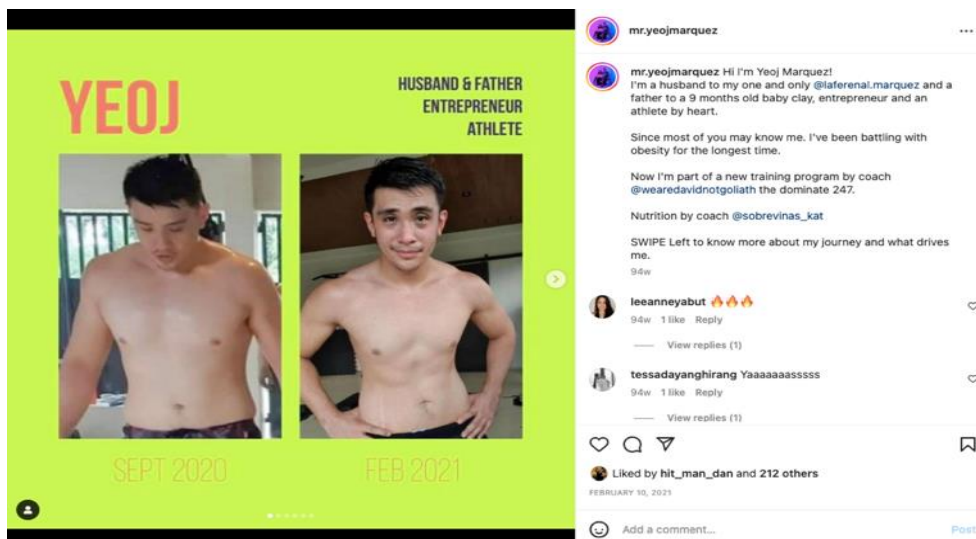


Figure 18: Yeoj Marquez as an ambassador of HMD gym (Instagram, February 10, 2021)



Figure 19: Napoleon Andrei Dizon as an ambassador for Anytime Fitness Angeles branch. (Instagram, June 3, 2019)



Figure 20: Tom Reuh Tacwigan on Coca-Cola No sugar promotion. (Instagram, January 16, 2020)

The stories of the six participants reflect a cyclical process: exposure to health and fitness content on Instagram sparked their desire to undergo body transformation journeys, which they documented on the same platform. They eventually turned their stories and bodies into "knowledge" and "products" that inspired others to embark on similar journeys, creating a self-sustaining *fitsfluencer* ecosystem. While Graham's concept of integrating intimate aspects of human lives into the global economy may be critiqued from an anti-capitalistic perspective for potentially degrading human dignity, it can also be viewed as an affirmation of humanity. The participants' accomplishments gave them a purpose and enabled them to positively influence the lives of others dealing with comparable health challenges, even though they were a part of a capitalistic cycle.

CONCLUSION

The following six individuals—Maco Bulos, Napoleon Andrei Dizon, Franco Madrid, Richal Paul Maling, Charles Yeoj Marquez, and Tom Reuh Tacwigan—participated in the study. It was guided by the Political Economy of Communication theory of Phil Graham, which was specially modified for this study using the "Treadmill" framework. Among these six individuals, body-related guilt was shown to be a consistent concern throughout the research. This humiliation was brought on by certain behavioral transgressions, which created tension and remorse over not conquering these transgressions. Graham (2007) argues that this self-consciousness, or sense of shame, becomes entwined in what he terms "the economy," a pervasive force that permeates all facets of human existence, including personal feelings.

The participants' path toward physical change went through many stages. The "Warm-up Phase" was the first stage, characterized by a string of unpleasant encounters prior to finding inspiration to interact with media and items that eventually resulted in a positive alteration of their bodies. The commodification of muscular body ideals within their fitness journeys became apparent as they advanced through the "Workout Phase" and utilized gym memberships and fitness coaching services as means of advancing their fitness journeys. Initially, the commodification of muscular body ideals was a powerful motivator for all participants to enhance their fitness journeys. Secondly, all participants utilized these resources to guide them on their path to body transformation. All of these things united to motivate them to start their journey, change their lifestyle, eat a balanced diet, and feel better about themselves. They also wanted to become fitness influencers like the people they admired on Instagram.

The six participants also acquired knowledge of the underlying causes, feelings, and experiences that might influence their following and online self-branding. In addition to establishing trends, fitness influencers also sell a lifestyle that persuades fans to buy the same things they recommend because they think they would improve their physical attractiveness. Additionally, by posting body images on Instagram and letting go of social pressure to fit in, these individuals discovered the significance of every stage of their path toward body change. Together, these individuals reached influencer status and started endorsing goods and services, ushering in the "Cool-down Phase" of their fitness journey. They developed healthy coping mechanisms while inspiring their audiences, who are seeking motivation to begin their own physical transformation journeys. The fitness-related content on Instagram can significantly influence their body perception and their relationship with food due to the heightened exposure to slim and toned body types, along with associated diet plans.

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