

ISSUE 25

HOW ONLINE FITNESS  
SPACES TURN BIOLOGY  
INTO A MORAL AND  
POLITICAL IDEOLOGY

A black and white photograph of a muscular man from the back, showing his back, shoulders, and arms. He is wearing dark shorts. The image is overlaid with a digital glitch effect, featuring horizontal lines of blue and purple light. The title text is superimposed over the center of the image.

# MAKE ALPHAS GREAT AGAIN

SOCIETY AND GENETICS 108 | PROFESSOR CARR  
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## DEAREST READERS,

The digital landscape has become one of the most potent forces shaping identity across populations, impacting the discourse on various topics. This has been relevant in online fitness communities, which are dedicated spaces for promoting health and discipline, opening the door to ideological conversations. As the boundaries between biological phenomena, masculinity, testosterone, and politics start to coexist, rather than acting as separate entities, young men find themselves navigating an ecosystem where training the body coexists with training their belief systems.

Over the past decade, social media has catalyzed a shift from traditional to narrative-based online fitness communities. In a traditional sense, these communities had a sole purpose: to promote fitness and healthy habits through tutorials and tips/tricks. Through the amplification of narratives, with influencers such as Andrew Tate, Liver King, and Joe Rogan, topics such as hypermasculinity and testosterone mesh with strong political rhetoric, which creates a spotlight on how feminized society is and needs a revitalization of masculinity. What was once fitness advice has turned into bold claims such as “masculinity is under siege”, “discipline is equivalent to nationalism”, and “greater feminization leads to a weaker society”.

The project is grounded through one driving question: **How do online fitness communities transform biological frameworks related to testosterone, masculinity, and discipline into moral and political frameworks that influence young men's political identity formation?** We took on the challenge of examining the evolution of the online fitness community through different angles, using our designated analytical objects: masculinity, testosterone, and identity politics. These objects will provide a strong understanding of how these claims are socially reconstructed to serve and support different cultural and political ideologies.

As fitness content has migrated from long-form YouTube tutorials to aesthetic-inspired short-form content, driven by TikTok and X algorithms, the definition of fitness has completely transformed over time, dipping into political messaging and rhetoric, controversial ideological narratives, and gender discourse.

As you flip through the pages, we invite you to unlock your curious minds and challenge the nuance. What does it mean when masculinity becomes a political brand? Will there be a world where online fitness communities and ideologies are separated? How do various stakeholders utilize biological rhetoric to support existing social hierarchies? There is no black-and-white answer, but it is more important than ever to start inviting these conversations.

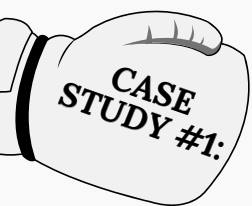
Together, let us explore how the fusion of online fitness communities and ideology pushes the “Make Alphas Great Again” mantra and its implications for future generations.

Sincerely,  
Your “MAGA” Editors

# THE PIPELINE: FROM PUSH-UPS TO PATRIOTISM - HOW FITNESS BECOMES IDEOLOGY

In the modern digital age, push-ups are not just push-ups; they enable the social construction of symbols such as masculinity, discipline, and political identity. Many fitness influencers and online communities foster the notion that physical training is directly linked to nationalism, political ideology, and the awakening of masculinity. This story strives to unpack this very pipeline - how the terminology and language of reps, weights, and daily routine intermingle with national patriotism, political ideologies, and the redefinition of self-identity. Through the transition from push-ups to patriotism, we will shed light on how our bodies become battlefields for social constructs to exist.

The center of Story #1 focuses on what we call the pipeline, which describes the gradual progression of online fitness content from workout motivation to broader ideological frameworks. The pipeline starts with the daily gym culture that gym-goers encounter. Values such as discipline, accountability, and strength are echoed in the four walls, but they seep through into the algorithmic loops. The culmination of gym values, social media rhetoric, gender discourse, and short-form content begins to reconstruct biological phenomena into bolder, socially grounded political or moral claims. For example, testosterone, known as a biological steroid hormone that men have, starts to equip social meaning to where individuals equate testosterone with aggression. Over time, the social reconstruction process allows individuals in this community to realize that physical strength symbolizes more than just body gains; ideas such as national strength and messages such as “masculinity is under attack” become more evident. This so-called pipeline is seen in significant political events, such as the UFC White House event set to take place next year, and in individual experiences, like Nick Zomaya’s fitness journey. The case study and the interview will help you understand the applications of this story in both national and individual contexts.



**THE WHITE HOUSE**



**UFC EVENT**

The decision to host a UFC event on the White House grounds signals an unprecedented display of violence, hypermasculinity, and athletic performance within the nation’s most iconic political space. President Donald Trump, in collaboration with UFC CEO Dana White, confirmed that the event will take place on the South Lawn to coincide with his eightieth birthday and the two hundred fiftieth anniversary of American independence (ESPN, 2024). The event’s placement at the country’s most recognized political building exemplifies a convergence of fitness culture and political spectacle, positioning the UFC as a key cultural institution that links masculinity, aggression, and athleticism with nationalist ideology. Lidborg et al. (2022) outlined that biological dimorphism, including differences in muscularity and strength, is often misrepresented by reactionary movements to legitimize hierarchical gender and racial norms.

By falsely classifying male dominance as biologically inevitable, opportunities are created for Make America Great Again (MAGA) rhetoric that links traditional masculinity and national strength together. The UFC White House event will seemingly reinforce narratives about the link between physical dominance and ideology, as UFC fighters whose physiques represent the end of male dimorphism are positioned on the White House Lawn to produce a spectacle on a national scale. These findings reflect what Smith and Jones (2020) identified in their analysis of the UFC’s marketing strategy that intentionally promotes violence, spectacle, and aggression.



Figure 1. UFC President Dana White with President Donald Trump (Peoples Magazine, 2025)



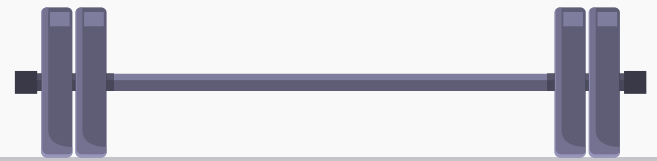
Their work raises broader ethical concerns about athletic performance being weaponized by national institutions, like the UFC, to reinforce narratives surrounding traditional ideas of masculinity. These concerns are further compounded by the well-documented friendship between Donald Trump and Dana White, both of whom are polarizing figures who value strength, defiance, and loyalty (Martin, 2024). Martin emphasizes the event's more profound symbolism as an example of a return to authoritarian principles that praise aggression and toughness as a corrective to what supporters describe as society's weakness. This collaboration builds upon earlier interactions between Trump and White, notably during the COVID-19 shutdown. As Butryn, Masucci, and Johnson (2020) detail, Trump personally included White in conference calls with commissioners of major sports leagues and allowed the UFC to brand itself as resilient, brave, and tough during national restrictions and social distancing. Deliberately, White has leaned on his political access to position the UFC as a symbol of American masculinity, while also maintaining his personal connection with President Trump to reinforce narratives that mutually favor right-wing ideology.

Figure 2. Dynamic Personal Trainer Nick Zomaya at LifeTime Fitness (LifeTime, 2025)



Nick Zomaya is a Dynamic Personal Trainer at LifeTime, one of the most premier commercial gyms in the United States. With his extensive experience as a student in Kinesiology, a former personal trainer at Equinox, and a bodybuilder, Nick has a strong understanding of how the fitness industry and space have shaped who he is today. When asked about his thoughts on the overlap between fitness advice and political or cultural commentary online, Nick exclaimed how ***“it does seem more conservative when it comes to fitness advice due to the large male presence. The idea of being responsible for your own body carries over to a lot of conservative views, such as being responsible for your own health, which is the opposite of how liberals support government programs and healthcare for the disadvantaged.”***

Additionally, Nick explained his struggles to find his purpose and the values he brings to the table, which align with another conservative value of developing into the man of the household. The idea of becoming the provider and protector of the household became another source of motivation for him to engage in the gym space and other parts of his life.



### Interview Highlight: NICK ZOMAYA

Overall, Nick agrees that the gym space has become politicized, and part of that stems from the divide between women and men. As women tend to be intimidated by men in space, “we need to appreciate and promote the intermingling of men and women in this space.” Lastly, when asked about his outlook on how the next generation of young men will define masculinity compared to today, Nick shared a quote that was quite interesting: “easy times create weak men, and weak men create hard times.” He believes that there is a greater saturation of weak men in today’s society, creating challenging times for the next generation of young men, who will ultimately be the strong crop. This ongoing cycle will create fluctuations in the intensity of masculinity in society.

Reflecting on this interview experience with Nick, an active member of the fitness community and a professional trainer, his inspiring storytelling and analysis of the overlap between fitness and politics helped us gain a deeper understanding of how this not only played a huge role in his development as an individual but will also impact future generations. Taken together, the UFC White House event and Nick Zomaya’s takeaways help illuminate the complexities in the pipeline, ranging from pure fitness to political ideology.

When looking at national institutions such as the White House, they leverage the UFC to promote hyper-masculinity and physicality on a global stage to reinforce traditional gender hierarchies, national strength, and revitalization of masculinity. On the other hand, looking at micro-interactions with gym-goers like Nick, we saw how individuals internalize the cultural narratives circulating in the gym about responsibility, male identity, and discipline, which align with broader conservative values.

Subsequently, the algorithm will allow mixing political ideology into the gym space, forcing individuals to view these narratives through a political lens. As we wrap up Story #1, this helps us set the stage to take a deeper dive into the ideological transformations that occur when individuals consume a breakthrough pill that is quite different from the pills you may be thinking of - The Red Pill.



Our project required us to step into the “manosphere,” which, according to Beihang University professor Xiaoting Han, is a cluster of male-centered online communities that promote anti-feminist and often misogynistic ideologies. The manosphere did not appear overnight. As Han shows, it is a reactionary backlash to feminism that reframes gender relations through a biologically deterministic lens (Han 2023). Influencers within this community claim that feminism has destabilized traditional masculinity, which leads men to believe they have been deprived of power and must “reclaim” it through a return to discipline and dominance. This narrative is foundational to online fitness communities, which increasingly frame self-improvement as a revival of masculinity in an age when feminism has taken over. Within this space, lifting weights or boosting testosterone acts as a pathway back to what these groups describe as “true” masculinity. Inside this universe, radical ideas do not sit quietly.

The manosphere thrives on what Han calls networked misogyny, a system where the most aggressive claims about women, gender roles, and “wokeness” get rewarded with likes, followers, and status (Han 2023). More importantly, they justify their ideology through pseudo-biological science. As Rothermel describes, the manosphere creators use charts, pseudo-research, and technical jargon to make gender hierarchy look “objective” and scientifically inevitable (Rothermel 2023). They purposefully misuse scientific facts to legitimize gender hierarchies and the belief that men are scientifically destined to lead due to their greater strength capacity. The manosphere also operates on men’s vulnerabilities. Sociologist Dr. Stu Lucy of the University of Portsmouth explains how “displaced masculinities” become the most susceptible to radicalization (Lucy 2024). His coined term describes men who internalize hegemonic masculine expectations but lack the resources to embody them. These individuals often feel inadequate or physically “unfit” and, therefore, turn to online fitness influencers who promise transformation. However, the transformation is never just physical. Dr. Lucy’s work shows how shame and insecurity can lead displaced men from fitness content to misogynistic worldviews as they attempt to find a sense of status and order in their lives (Lucy 2024). In our fieldwork, we noticed this dynamic. The manosphere, and the fitness creators within it, market discipline and muscularity as moral virtues to reclaim a sense of belonging in a world that is currently alienating them.

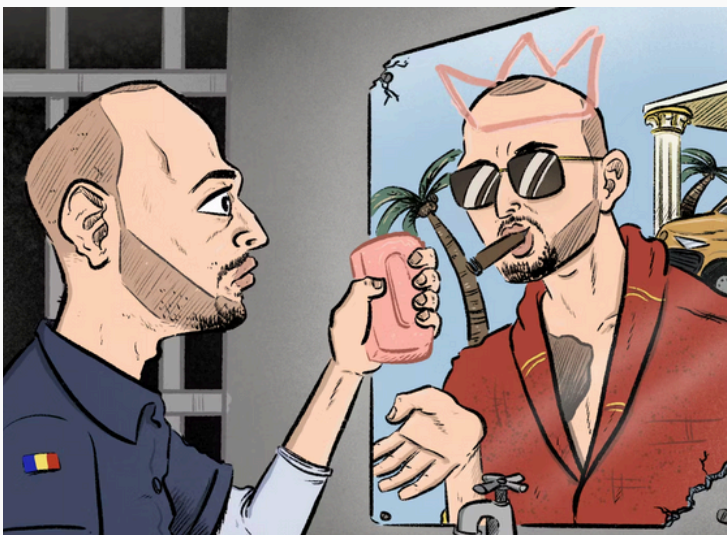


Figure 3. Male Individual Looking at a Painting of Influencer Andrew Tate (The Conversation, 2023)



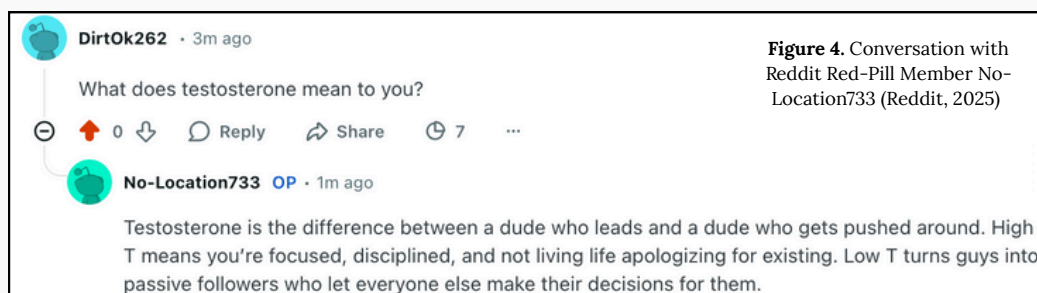
## Stepping into the Manosphere: Our Methodologies

In order to understand how online fitness spaces and manosphere communities shape young men's beliefs and identity, we conducted digital fieldwork inside Reddit, one of the largest and most active platforms for red-pill and fitness discourse. We began by creating a Google account, called "UclaFitnessStudy" and used it to register a new Reddit account. This allowed us to enter the platform without linking to any personal identities and ensured that participants were interacting with a consistent digital persona. From there, we joined a wide range of relevant sub-reddits, spanning fitness, masculinity, and political spaces, including r/RedPill, r/Conservative, r/MAGA, and more. These subreddits served as our primary field sites, each offering different expressions of gender ideology and self-improvement narratives, all developing into a political identity construction. Once inside these communities, we began by observing comment patterns and recurring talking points that fostered the most engagement.

To initiate contact, we used Reddit's direct-messaging system to reach out to users who frequently commented on or created red-pill or fitness-ideology posts. Additionally, we began posting our own threads, which included questions such as "What does masculinity mean to you in 2025" and "Why do you think so many men feel lost today?" These posts quickly generated comments, upvotes, and conversation threads, which boosted our account's "karma", increasing the likelihood that users would respond to interview requests. As our credibility grew, we were able to send follow-up messages and respond to specific threads to generate more conversation about fitness ideology or red-pill worldviews. Through this process, we interviewed multiple individuals across ideological spectrums, ranging from r/Conservative users all the way to some ex-Red Pill members. Together, these interviews form the backbone of our project, illustrating how online fitness spaces can shape, and sometimes distort, young men's understanding of themselves, their bodies, and their place in this world.

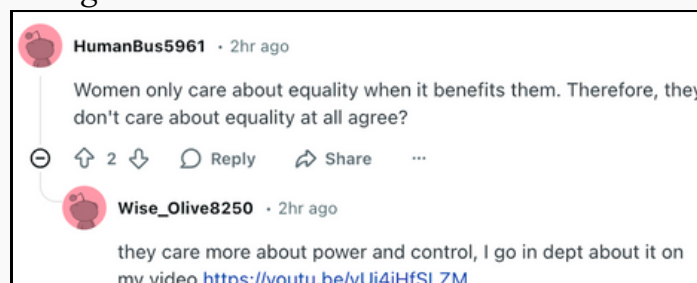
## The Red Pill Experience

Within the manosphere, there is a specific extremist community called "The Red Pill", which promotes misogyny and exposes the "truth" of how society is biased against men. Borrowed from the film *The Matrix*, taking the red pill means rejecting what we view as mainstream. In this regard, the mainstream narrative is influenced by feminism. r/RedPill attracted hundreds of thousands of men seeking meaning and direction, and what they found instead was a new, transformative worldview. When we explored the subreddit, we noticed some striking comments right away. One user told newcomers, *"She left you, for you to become the man she begs for."* Another wrote, *"The gym saved my life... every rep was a f\*\*k-you to the old me."*



**Figure 4.** Conversation with Reddit Red-Pill Member No-Location733 (Reddit, 2025)

Additionally, we began to ask questions within the subreddit to prompt members to respond. Many of them shared similar sentiments. These statements showcase what Han identifies as the driving force of the manosphere: the promise that personal pain can be converted into masculine power through discipline and biological determinism.



**Figure 5.** Conversation between Reddit Red-Pill Members Wise\_Olive8250 and HumanBus 5961 (Reddit, 2025)

## Case Study #2: Evolution of Online Spaces and The Algorithm

The online fitness community has undergone a significant transformation, moving from long-form YouTube tutorials to Instagram's polished aesthetics, and finally, to the algorithmic worlds of X and TikTok. In the early 2010s, YouTube built the first generation of fitness influencers. Long-form videos centered on instruction, such as optimal bench press form, and advice. Fitness was presented as knowledge, something you learned from experts. As sociologists Dr. Andreasson and Dr. Johansson note, this era marked the beginning of a global "fitness revolution", where discipline and body transformations were moralized markers of self-worth (Andreasson & Johansson 2014). However, as platforms shifted, so did the meanings attached to fitness. Instagram compressed fitness into aesthetics such as single images of shredded abs, transformation collages, and high-protein meal prep. This transition inspired many, including Nick Zomaya, the Lifetime trainer we interviewed, to start his own meal-prepping company on Instagram. The platform turned the discipline of the gym into a lifestyle product, making the gym body a visual shorthand for hierarchy and moral worth. The fitness content on Instagram reinforced what anthropologists Dr. Tebaldi and Dr. Burnett identify as the far right's aesthetic strategy, in which strength and muscularity were presented as biological indicators of superiority (Tebaldi & Burnett 2025). TikTok and X accelerated this evolution dramatically. As scholar Jake Pitre explains, TikTok's algorithm constructs the viewer's experiences, clustering different forms of content into a singular ecosystem based on micro-engagement signals (Pitre, 2023). If a user lingers on a clip about "the testosterone decline" or "discipline," the platform rapidly builds an entire world of pro-masculine influencers and red-pill self-help content around them. This system creates what Pitre calls "experiential seriality," an endless-scroll environment that encourages users to stay within the same ideological genre (Pitre 2023). This algorithm seamlessly intertwines several manosphere frameworks to blend online fitness content with misogyny and politics.

In this digital evolution, fitness spaces shift from apolitical self-improvement to ideological formation. The platforms actively shape young men's identity formations through algorithmic curation. For young men searching for discipline or a sense of belonging, these online spaces instead invite them into the manosphere, where fitness becomes ideology with every scroll.

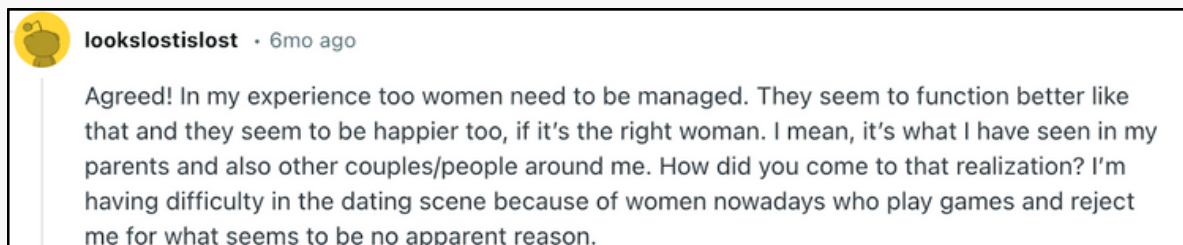
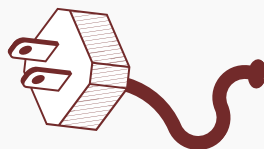


Figure 6. Response From Reddit Red-Pill Member lookslostislost (Reddit, 2025)



### Surviving the Algorithm: Ex-Red Pill Member Interview

In a digital ecosystem where platforms such as TikTok and X use algorithms that shape identities and funnel users into narrow ideological niches, some people still manage to break free. For "IronPatriot\_94," a former r/RedPill member, escape began with recognizing that the online world he had been pulled into no longer matched the reality of his life.

His entry point was similar to many others in the community. It was the gym. After a breakup, he turned to lifting for comfort, and that quickly spiraled from workout videos and discipline motivation to content about masculinity and gender roles. "When you are young and insecure, that structure feels comforting," he told us. However, the deeper he went in the manosphere, the more the gym stopped being an outlet and became a stage for proving status. Interactions with women felt rehearsed, and every rep became a testimony to male superiority.



The red pill ideology began to crack, however, when real-life experiences contradicted its claims. Listening to women dismantled the idea that they were “naturally manipulative.” Also, he noticed that outside the echo chamber, the narrative that society was “hostile to men” felt exaggerated. “The gym teaches humility, but the red pill teaches that doubt is weakness,” he said. What finally pushed him out was a healthy relationship, which revealed how distorted his thinking had become. “I wanted my life to feel real again. Not like a script written by strangers,” he said. For anyone trapped, his advice is simple: “Ask whether the red pill is expanding your life or shrinking it. The strongest thing you can do is admit you deserve a life that’s not built on suspicion.” His story sits as a counterpoint to the algorithm that shapes online masculinity. It shows that while the algorithm can pull you in, real-world relationships and the connections it provides can help pull you back out.

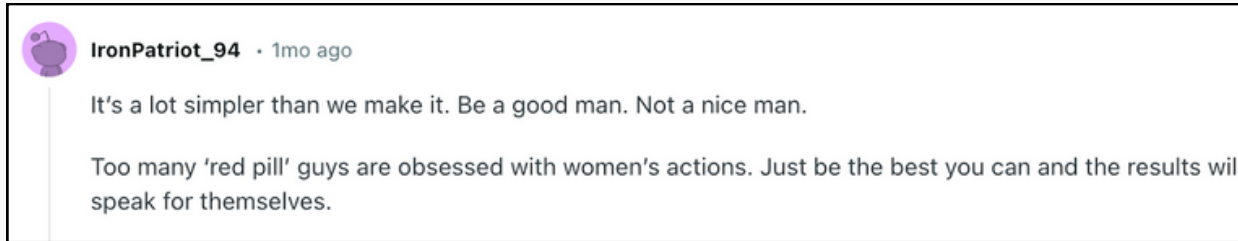


Figure 7. Response From Reddit Ex-Red Pill member IronPatriot\_94 (Reddit, 2025)



## SELLING SELF-ESTEEM: HOW SUPPLEMENTS/RAW DIETS CASH IN ON CONFIDENCE DEFICITS

Self-esteem remains one of the most profitable vulnerabilities to exploit, enabling fitness supplement companies to profit substantially. In modern times, the digital space can also cause further exploitation of young men, as they are dealing with immense pressure surrounding body dysmorphia, productivity, and masculinity. With the intention of gaining motivation from influencers or guidance, they encounter a commodified digital ecosystem that forces individuals to pay to overcome their insecurities. Supplement companies, fitness influencers, and other corporations are strategists when it comes to marketing their products, medicalizing everyday anxieties about appearance and performance with pseudo-scientific explanations, exaggerated commercials, and fake testimonies to make their mission seem legitimate. With nootropic supplements, extreme diets, and testosterone-enhancing drugs, these entities are posed as the “fix” to the decline in masculinity and male inadequacy. Ultimately, self-esteem is socially reconstructed into a marketplace where consumerism takes over, encouraging individuals to transform their biological engines into more powerful ones. However, the catch is that the individuals do not know what inputs the new engine is receiving, only the company's word.

### Testosterone

Testosterone is an androgenic steroid hormone that helps regulate male sexual development and serves as a key analytical object in our analysis (Ogino et al., 2021). Beyond its established role in sexual differentiation, testosterone also influences cognitive processes, including mood, spatial reasoning, and motivation (Zitzmann, 2006). Online fitness influencers have consistently reduced testosterone's biological complexity into a short-sighted narrative that suggests testosterone is the sole driver of discipline, dominance, and masculinity. Empirical research has shown that baseline testosterone shows only weak associations with aggression, and hormonal effects on behavior depend heavily on social and environmental cues, not biology alone (Geniole et al., 2020). Additionally, testosterone replacement therapy is effective only for medically diagnosed hypogonadism and cannot be said to function as a universal enhancer for all healthy men (Kelly & Jones, 2013).

While age-related hormonal decline is commonly accepted to begin around age 35, influencers have weaponized this decline to position aging as a consequence of the decline of masculinity and suggest supplementation, extreme exercise, and alternative diets to correct this problem (Cheng et al., 2024). These narratives are particularly harmful to young men who are already vulnerable to body dissatisfaction and anxiety, as research showed that Performance Inducing and Enhanced Drug (PIEs) use motivated by physical appearance is associated with psychological distress and symptoms consistent with eating disorders (Murray et al, 2016). When combined with evidence that image-heavy social media can distort body image, the discourse surrounding testosterone becomes an even more powerful ideological tool that links a natural hormone into a weapon for strength hierarchies (Rodgers et al., 2021).

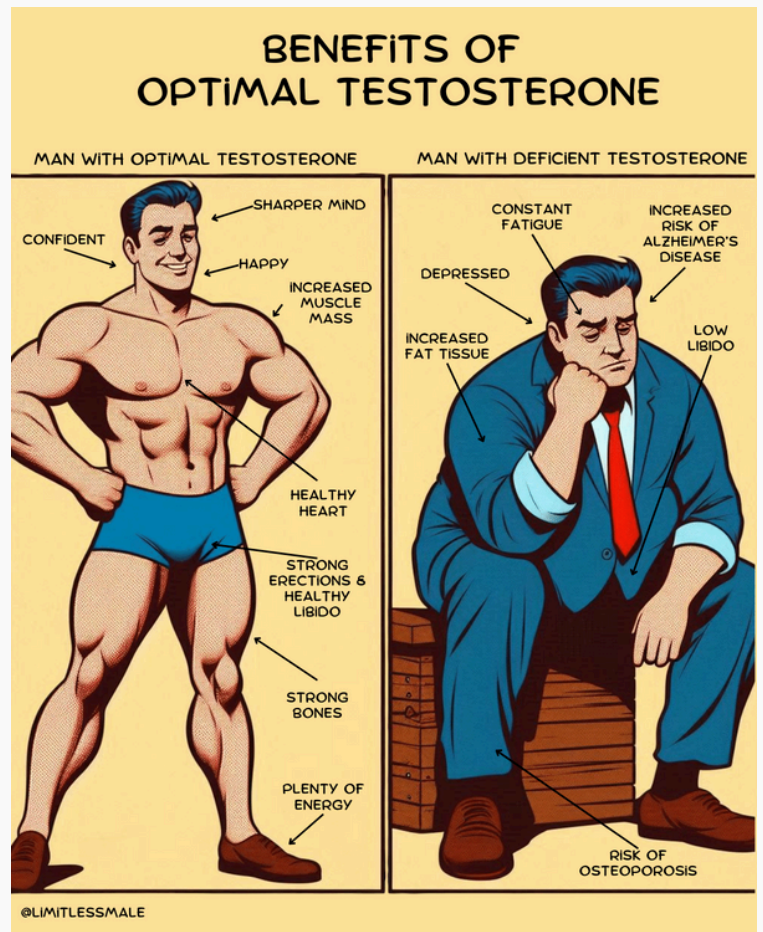


Figure 8. Description of the Benefits of Optimal Testosterone (Limitless Male Medical Clinic, 2025)

## Case Study #3: The Alpha Brain Lawsuit

A class-action lawsuit was filed against Onnit Labs on April 23 for the marketing and promotion of Alpha Brain, claiming that its listed cognitive enhancements are misleading because the available scientific evidence is insufficient. The backbone of this lawsuit is that the marketing for the Alpha Brain supplement is deceptive to consumers, causing misinformation and potential harm (Neath 2024). A clinical study found that most tests showed this supplement performed no better than a placebo, and in some cases, the placebo worked better than the supplement (Neath 2024). Due to the exaggerations Joe Rogan and his colleagues, as well as supporters, made about the efficacy of this supplement, this lawsuit was filed. Mr. Jean Lotz was the main driver who claimed Alpha Brain's misleading claims deceived him, and he represented a class of New York consumers of the product.

This case study sheds heavy light on how the marketing aspect of a supplement or company can be a detrimental methodology that companies capitalize on for profit, at the expense of the consumers' experience. Due to the fame that Joe Rogan holds, his audience - primarily composed of young men who are politically and socially active on social media platforms - will support his claims whether they are scientifically backed up or not. Additionally, young men tend to equate fame with legitimacy, a myth that has historically been shown to be false. Thus, whether supplements or body-enhancing products are legitimately marketed, the stakeholders involved in the entity's promotion play a significant role in shaping how the audience will engage with the product.



## Case Study #4: Liver King, the Carnivore Fantasy, and the Rise of Primal Masculinity

Brian Johnson, widely known as the Liver King, emerged as a significant figure in online fitness culture in the early 2020s. His platforms and content championed the idea that modern men have abandoned a righteous lifestyle, leading to weakened physiques, lower testosterone, and society's collapse of masculinity. Holmes (2022) explained how Johnson carefully crafted every aspect of his public image and the content he filmed to evoke shock, fascination, and primal authenticity intentionally. While Johnson's message and content were a key point of emphasis in our analysis, the way he delivered his messages is equally important for understanding how his content exploded in popularity. The Liver King conveyed a sense of credibility and professionalism that resonated with young audiences seeking purpose, clarity, and guidance. The more extreme his public displays were, the more persuasive his claims appeared to followers. However, this appeal extended beyond the Liver King and reflected a larger shift towards the expanding carnivore diet movement. Lennerz et al. (2021) surveyed more than 2,000 individuals, many of whom reported significant improvements in weight, mood, and overall well-being after following a strict carnivore diet for at least 6 months. Although the study relies on self-selected samples and cannot be used to establish causal benefits, participants reported substantial BMI reductions, few barriers related to food costs, and perceived absence of symptoms associated with nutritional deficiencies. Meat consumption has historically served as a symbolic marker of strength and vitality. At the same time, rejection of vegetables and processed foods is a key theme in the Liver King's content and has become a form of resistance against the softness seen in modern society. As a result, the carnivore diet and its emergence have operated as a cultural performance intertwined with dietary extremism and the formation of masculine identity.

The connection between Liver King and carnivore ideology is not incidental. His version of ancestral masculinity relies on similar assumptions that drive carnivore communities, especially the belief that strength is tied to extreme dietary habits. Gibbs and Piatkowski (2023) explain how Johnson masked unverified claims about testosterone, carnivore diets, and masculine decline as scientific truth, leading viewers to falsely believe his physique was a direct result of his ancestral lifestyle. When leaked emails confirmed anabolic steroid use, the Liver King was forced to release an apology video, leading to debate and discussion about the responsibility fitness influencers have to be open and transparent about their habits. Interestingly, men who use performance and image-enhancing drugs (PIEDs) exclusively for appearance-related reasons report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and symptoms consistent with eating disorders (Murray et al., 2016).

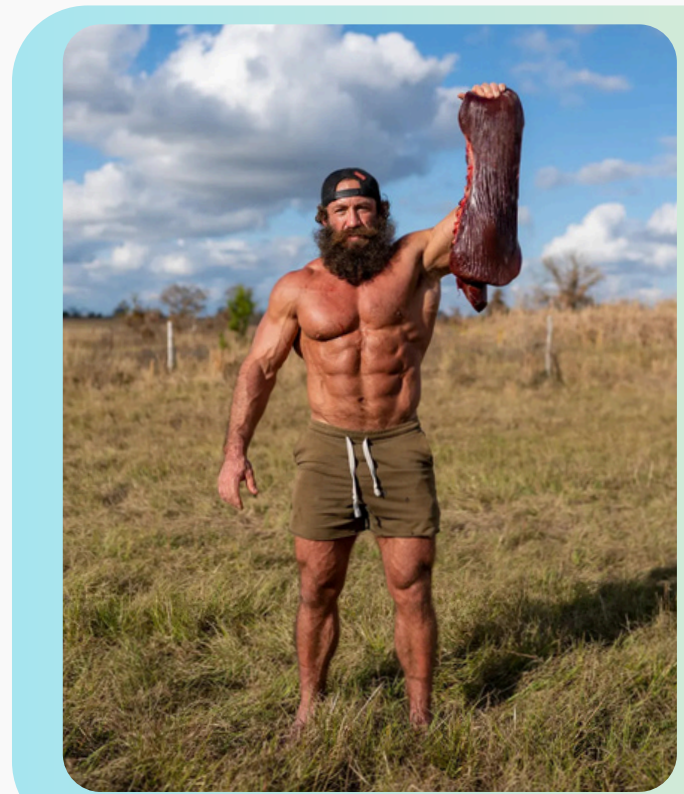


Figure 9. Influencer Liver King Holding a Piece of Raw Meat (New York Post, 2025)

This vulnerability is amplified in the digital world, as research shows that video- and image-based content can undermine body image and self-worth while distorting perceptions of what a healthy body looks like (Rodgers et al., 2021). As Festinger (1962) described in the context of cognitive dissonance, “Primals” who follow the Liver King's content may realize a disconnect between their lived experiences and the idealized lifestyle they are trying to attain. To reduce this dissonance, they may be influenced to engage in risky behaviors, such as intense dieting or PIED use, to close the gap between their image and the Liver Kings (Gibbs and Piatkowski, 2023). Together, Liver King and the carnivore movement have demonstrated the links between dietary extremism and cultural narratives of masculinity. Both have promoted the idea of the male body being compromised by modern life and promote “solutions” that lie on the boundary between scientific legitimacy and performance.



# **INSTITUTIONS OF INFLUENCE**

**ONLINE FITNESS COMMUNITIES OPERATE THROUGH VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS OF INFLUENCE, IN HOPES OF LEVERAGING SCIENTIFIC AUTHORITY, POLITICAL IDEOLOGY, AND SOCIAL MEDIA TO INFLUENCE HOW YOUNG MEN CONSTRUCT THEIR IDENTITY AND BELONGING IN SOCIETY.**

**CONTINUE ALONG TO HEAR FROM THREE INSIGHTFUL INTERVIEWS THAT REPRESENT EACH INSTITUTION OF INFLUENCE: ASHWANTH ACHARY (POLITICS), DR BRETT DOLEZAL (SCIENCE), AND CASHNASTY (SOCIAL MEDIA).**



# ASHWANTH ACHARY

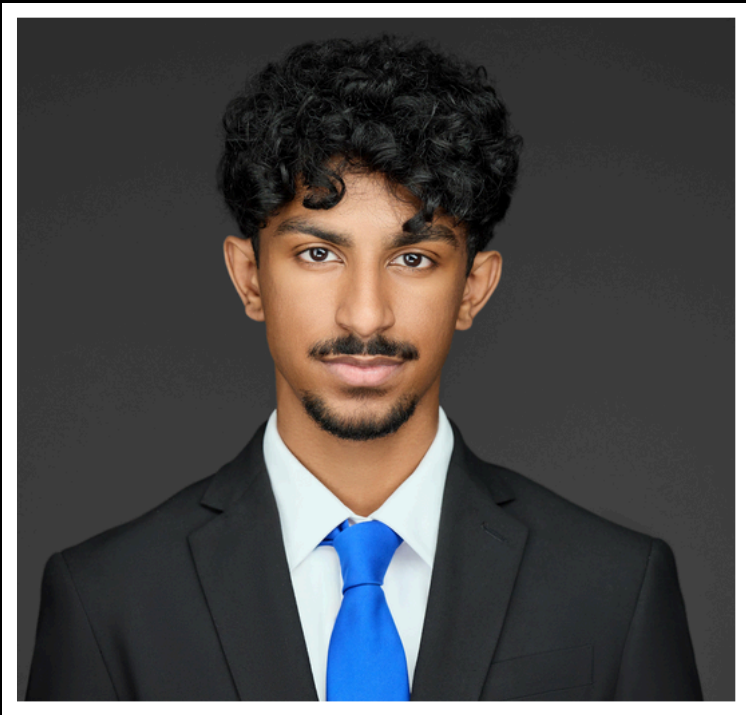


Figure 10. Headshot of Political Commentator Ashwanth Achary (2025)

***“BEING MASCULINE IS  
STANDING FOR WHAT  
YOU BELIEVE IN  
WHETHER IT IS RIGHT  
OR WRONG.”***

To understand the politics behind our project, we interviewed independent political commentator Ashwanth Achary, who became famous for interviewing right-wing personality Charlie Kirk before his death. His questions about JFK's assassination files and the truth behind Epstein made his interview go viral, amassing over 100,000 views on YouTube.

Our interview with Ashwanth was very informative, as he offered a unique counterpoint to our project. He argues that while many young men absorb masculinity through the gym culture, masculinity actually has nothing to do with physicality at all. “Masculinity is not attributed to the gym,” he told us. “It is in the mind... standing for what you believe in, doing what you love... that is what masculinity is about.” In his framing, conviction and resilience define masculine identity. His comparisons were deliberately provocative too: Harry Styles, he argues, is “more masculine than Will Smith” because he unapologetically does what he loves. For Achary, masculinity is an internal factor, not an external aesthetic.

Achary's relationship to the online fitness community mirrors the patterns we observed in our interviews and Reddit fieldwork. He began lifting to get bigger, look better, and “get girls”, which was a story almost identical to that of the former r/RedPill member we interviewed. However, unlike many young men swept into the algorithm of the manosphere, he eventually stepped back, calling the obsessive gym-bro aesthetic “kind of stupid.” He views extreme fitness culture as a symptom of insecurity rather than a path of fulfillment.

Politically, Achary sees an increasing overlap between gym spaces and right-wing politics. He believes many young men feel alienated by modern feminism and therefore gravitate towards figures who present a “strongman image.” Yet, he insists that the gym should be separate from politics. “If you have a high IQ, you would keep it separate,” even while acknowledging that today's online landscape makes that separation nearly impossible. Fitness influencers, politicians, and the algorithms constantly nudge young men to link fitness to masculinity and ideology. His solution is educational: “Spread the message that masculinity is in the mind, not physical by any means.”

# DR. BRETT DOLEZAL

Understanding the science behind fitness was important for us to determine whether the online landscape had much validity. We turned to Dr. Brett Dolezal for a scientific voice. As Associate Professor of Medicine at UCLA and Director of the UCFIT Sports Medicine Lab, he reminds us that:

**“TRUE POWER  
OF EXERCISE COMES  
FROM  
WITHIN!”**



Figure 11. Headshot of Director of UCFIT Sports Medicine Lab Dr. Brett Dolezal (UCFIT, 2025)

From a scientific perspective, exercise works because it transforms the brain. As he explained, movement boosts “serotonin, dopamine, norepinephrine,” increases endorphins, lowers cortisol, and enhances neuroplasticity. Altogether, exercise “recalibrates the brain and body,” building competence and emotional resilience that often is misattributed to ideology or “alpha” mentality.

He also challenged a core manosphere assumption: *muscle does not equal discipline*. “Bigger muscles don’t automatically make someone more disciplined or motivated,” he said. Discipline comes from routine, better sleep, stress reduction, and accumulating small wins. On testosterone, he clarified another misconception amplified by the online fitness culture: while sleep, lifting, sunlight, and healthy body fat can support production, these habits “won’t produce large increases beyond your natural range.” Optimization isn’t the same as enhancement, contrary to what supplement influencers claim.

But Dr. Dolezal’s most revealing answer came when we asked about the political interplay with fitness, specifically Robert F. Kennedy’s national fitness push. “Exercise is medicine is the mantra of my entire career,” he said. He supports the initiative because physical activity sharply reduces premature mortality and prevents over 44 chronic diseases. Finally, when asked what misconception he wishes he could correct in young men, he didn’t hesitate: “A healthy body isn’t something you buy... It’s something you earn by tempering pride, surrendering destructive habits, and showing up daily.” And his parting warning cuts directly through the online supplemental community dominating TikTok. “More is worse.”

Dr. Dolezal’s insights ground our project in scientific reality, showing what fitness *actually* does to the body, and how far online narratives have drifted from the evidence. His voice serves as a counterbalance to the algorithmic noise, offering a reminder that real strength comes from biology, balance, and discipline.



# CASHNASTY



Figure 12. Influencer CashNasty Meeting NBA Star LeBron James at Fanatics Fest in New York City (Instagram, 2025)

The social institution is the last institution we are focusing on, specifically to gain a strong understanding of how the online fitness community overlaps with social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, TikTok, and more. We interviewed one of the most premier basketball and fitness YouTube content creators, CashNasty, formerly known as Cassius Clay, who has over **10 million followers** across all platforms. As one aspect of CashNasty's content focuses on pushing his audience to immerse themselves in gym culture and take accountability for their health, we had the fantastic opportunity to understand his personal beliefs about the gym space and his decision to share his fitness journey with the rest of the world. This live-streamed interview, with more than 2,000 viewers, gained significant traction and attention, as clips of specific questions went viral on social media, sparking publicity and audience engagement.

When Cash was asked about his first time wanting to work out, he explained that he was at an upscale club bar in New York when he saw a swole individual walk in. He described how **“all of the energy in the club shifted to this guy, and you can tell he took the time to maximize himself and to make himself look good.”**

Especially after quitting his Walmart job and blowing up on YouTube, he realized this was his calling to the gym, and since then, his mental and physical health have skyrocketed. Growing up in a traditional household in the state of Louisiana, Cash also explained that the gender roles of the man as the provider and the woman as the nurturer definitely motivated him to stay fit after he had kids and knew he needed to spend more time with the family.

As the conversation shifted from his personal life to his integration of fitness into the content space, Cash decided to make it public because he knew how much of a positive impact his fitness ideologies had on him, including his mental capabilities and confidence. “If I can transform, then anyone else can transform,” Cash stated. As a content creator that is politically neutral and has adopted a traditional style of fitness content, such as tips and tricks or collaborating with other renowned fitness creators like Bradley Martyn and training for the infamous Diamond Gym, he continues to provide a more inclusive platform for all individuals to feel comfortable. His intentionality when collaborating with other creators or curating his online fitness content is quite similar to how LeBron James operates, with his fitness mantra and Nike branding: “Strive for greatness and push your limits.”

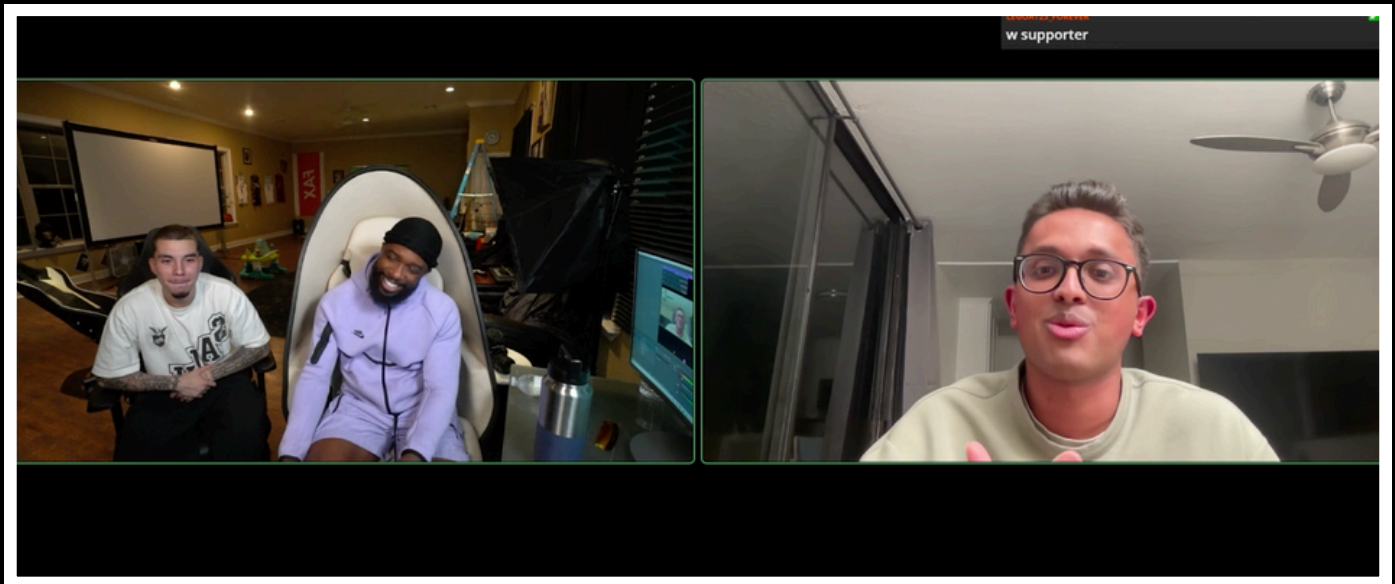
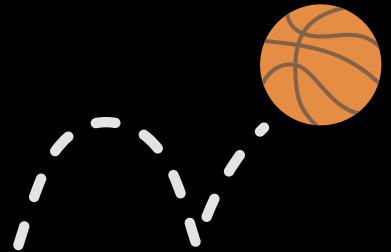


Figure 13. Screenshot From Twitch Live-Stream Between Rahi Patel, CashNasty, and JayyHoopzz (Twitch, 2025)

**RAHI: HOW DO YOU DEFINE MASCULINITY?**



**CASHNASTY: “OWNING UP TO YOUR IDENTITY, KEEPING YOUR WORD, NOT BEING FAKE, AND HAVING A STRONG MENTALITY”**



This quote ties into his own personal definition of masculinity, where masculine men are not something that can be earned in the gym. This answer was very similar to Ashwanth Achary's definition of masculinity. Lastly, Cash emphasized the difference between motivation and discipline, explaining that motivation is a feeling that comes and goes. In contrast, discipline is a permanent skill set that stays with you and improves over time. This also acts as another core component of the gym space where discipline is seen as the primary benefit over all others.

Ultimately, CashNasty's story adds crucial depth to our understanding of how he operationalizes his social media platforms as powerful public tools to foster positive identity formation, influence interactions across different communities, and showcase the directionality of fitness as a personal journey and social obligation. By engaging with a renowned figure that sits at this intersection, we learned how the gym space and online mass media have a symbiotic relationship, strengthening the messages echoed to the fitness community - one rep at a time.

# The Next Rep: Where Fitness Goes From Here



Figure 14. Illustration of Three Men Viewing Andrew Tate and the Digital Manosphere (ABC News, 2025)

After an academic quarter in the manosphere, spanning across Reddit threads, viral influencers, supplement scandals, and political events, one truth has become clear: the gym is no longer just a gym. It has become one of the most contested cultural spaces of our time, where biology is rewritten as ideology, insecurity is monetized, and where young men search for meaning in a world that feels unstable to them. The question now is what comes next.

The future of fitness will depend on whether we can disentangle physical practice from ideological capture. Platforms like TikTok and Z will continue to push identity-shaping content, clustering discipline, masculinity, nationalism, and self-optimization into a single feed. Fitness will remain a gateway, but as our interviews showed, not all roads lead deeper into the pipeline. Some, like IronPatriot\_94, find their way back out when real life, which contradicts the narratives the algorithm sold them. His story proves that relationships and community can interrupt the algorithmic loop and bring people back to reality.

Experts like Dr. Dolezal offer another path forward: one grounded in evidence instead of aesthetics. His reminder that “*exercise recalibrates the brain and body*” reframes fitness as science, and his insistence that bigger muscles don’t make you more disciplined pushes back against the manosphere’s idea that self-improvement is a moral duty.

Likewise, voices like CashNasty and Ashwanth Achary further the narrative. Both grew up inside the gym community, and both understand the pull it has on young men. They do, however, reiterate that masculinity should come from internal factors rather than bicep circumference or testosterone myths. Their perspectives hint at the next phase of fitness, which is a cultural shift away from the spectacle of hypermasculinity and towards a healthier balance between physical training and emotional maturity.



If the last few years were defined by the rise of the manosphere, the next will be shaped by how young men learn to navigate it. The gym will always be a place where people go to get stronger and gain confidence. The challenge for the next generation is ensuring that strength is not defined by algorithms, influencers, or political agendas. Strength must be reclaimed as something internal, scientific, and human.



**Figure 15.** Cartoon of Content Creators Hosting a Podcast (Financial Times, 2025)

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# The Final Set: End of Workout!



Our workout may be over, but the consequences of what we uncovered are not. This project began inside gyms, comment sections, and algorithms, but it ends with a much larger realization that online fitness spaces have become one of the most powerful identity-shaping institutions of our time. What appears on the surface as self-improvement and discipline increasingly functions as political formation and moral instruction.

Across Reddit fieldwork, influencer case studies, institutional interviews, and scientific analysis, we traced how biological concepts like testosterone and strength are stripped of complexity and rebuilt as ideological truths. In these spaces, testosterone becomes justification for misogyny, and discipline becomes morality. As we learned, social media platforms reward content that feels emotionally validating, and as a result, fitness becomes the gateway through which young men are pulled from push-ups into politics.

The significance of this project lies in exposing that pipeline. We wanted to separate what is biologically and psychologically real from what is algorithmically engineered. Exercise does improve mental health. Discipline does improve consistency. Community does matter. Yet our interviews with experts made clear that these benefits emerge from sleep, stress regulation, neurobiology, and routine, not from supplements, dominance narratives, or an “alpha” mentality. When fitness is hijacked by political and moral ideology, its real benefits are distorted, commodified, and ultimately weaponized.

This matters because many of the men drawn into these spaces are not extremists. They are recently heartbroken, socially isolated, body-conscious, or unsure of their place in a rapidly shifting world. The manosphere succeeds because it offers structure, certainty, and belonging. But what it offers in return is fragile: suspicion instead of connection, rigidity instead of growth, and identity built on opposition. As our ex-Red Pill interview revealed, these frameworks ultimately shrink lives rather than expand them.

So what comes next? The future of fitness depends on whether young men can reclaim the gym as a place of health, science, community, and self-improvement. As voices like CashNasty and Ashwanth Achary emphasized, masculinity is expressed through accountability and consistency. Strength does not need a political affiliation, and discipline does not require an enemy.

At the end of the day, the future of online fitness communities boils down to the last set: whether young men can find their ground in reality while rejecting the surrounding environment that converts insecurities into ideology. As the traditional definition of fitness centers on an individual’s journey to meet their fitness goals and to maximize their potential healthily, there is a need to revitalize this mindset in the 21st century.

If this zine serves any purpose, let it act as a reset button. A reminder to pause between reps and ask: Who benefits from the story I am being told about my body? The goal is not to destroy masculinity, but to reclaim it from distortion. So yes, maybe we can *Make Alphas Great Again*. Just not the ones built by social media, but those grounded in self-awareness, scientific understanding, and real human connection.

**We’ll see you at your next workout.**





## **WORKS CITED PAGE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

Thank you so much to everyone that has assisted us through the creation process of the magazine. Your guidance, feedback, and encouragement allowed us to exceed our expectations and push through each part of the process. From the interviews to the pieces of advice to hit our project “PR”, this would not have been possible to bring into fruition. To our readers: thank you so much for staying with us from the first warm-up session to the last rep on the page. We hope this magazine provides you a new perspective and experience, in which you can take some ideas to carry forward inside and outside the fitness space. See you next week at the gym.

To view all of our testimonials, sources, and stakeholders that were integral parts in the development of this magazine, please scan the QR code above.