Masculinity In The Digital Age: Hegemony, Resistance, And Reconfiguration In Digital Landscapes

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Abstract

This research paper investigates the evolving construction and contestation of masculinity within digital environments, drawing on foundational sociological frameworks most notably Carrigan, Connell, and Lee's (1985) concept of hegemonic masculinity and Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert's (2019) postcolonial masculinities framework to examine four interconnected research objectives. First, the paper explores the diverse roles men occupy within contemporary digital landscapes, ranging from content producers and cultural influencers to consumers subject to algorithmically curated masculine ideals. Second, it analyses the ongoing oppression of homosexual men and women within media ecosystems and male-hegemonic structures, tracing how digital platforms both replicate and occasionally disrupt patriarchal logics. Third, the research interrogates whether social media challenges rigid notions of masculinity or reproduces them in new technological forms. Fourth, and most contemporarily, it examines the psychosocial impact of specific digital trends including the Korean beauty wave, the sigma male archetype, the 'bare minimum' discourse, financial performance expectations, and hyper-physical ideals on masculine identity formation and transformation.

Methodologically, the study employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, synthesising existing scholarly literature with a systematic review of digital cultural phenomena. The findings suggest that digital platforms function as contested hegemonic sites where dominant masculinities are simultaneously reified, modernised, and subverted. The paper concludes that while social media has democratised spaces for counter-hegemonic masculinities, algorithmic curation and commercial interests continue to reproduce often in more sophisticated and globalised forms the very patriarchal structures that progressive masculinity discourse seeks to dismantle.

Keywords: *Hegemonic masculinity, digital masculinity, social media, postcolonial masculinities, Korean beauty standards, sigma male, bare minimum, male identity, gender performativity, algorithmic culture*

I. Introduction

The question of what it means to be a man has never been more publicly contested, more globally circulated, or more algorithmically amplified than in the current digital era. From TikTok fitness influencers and YouTube 'red pill' communities to K-pop idols and Reddit threads devoted to 'sigma male grindsets,' masculine identity is perpetually constructed, deconstructed, and monetised across social media platforms. What was once localised communicated through neighbourhood socialisations, workplaces, and family structures has become transnational, instantaneous, and visually spectacular.

The sociological study of masculinity has a rich, if contested, history. Carrigan, Connell, and Lee's (1985) landmark article 'Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity' fundamentally reoriented the field by moving beyond the limitations of sex role theory which they critiqued as conceptually incoherent, politically evasive, and empirically thin toward a structural and relational understanding of hegemonic masculinity. Rather than treating masculinity as a fixed role or biological essence, they argued it must be understood as a configuration of practice embedded in power relations: a socially dominant form of masculinity that reproduces men's dominance over women and marginalises subordinated forms of masculinity, including homosexual masculinity.

Building on and critically extending this framework, Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) bring postcolonial and intersectional lenses to masculinity studies, revealing the race-blindness of both Western feminist theories and mainstream masculinity scholarship. Their work on diasporic masculinities in Sweden and the UK demonstrates how racialized, displaced men navigate intersecting hierarchies of race, gender, class, and religion occupying unstable positions that are simultaneously privileged and subordinated, depending on context.

This paper situates these foundational theoretical contributions within the contemporary digital moment, asking four closely related questions: (1) What roles are men playing in the digital landscape? (2) How are homosexual men and women oppressed within media and male-hegemonic structures? (3)

Is social media challenging or reproducing rigid masculine norms?

(4) How are specific digital trends — Korean beauty standards, sigma vs. normal male dichotomies, the 'bare minimum' discourse, financial expectations, and physical ideals reshaping masculine perspectives?

The paper proceeds through a literature review synthesising classical and contemporary scholarship, a methodological account of the critical discourse analysis approach employed, and a detailed analysis of each research objective, before arriving at a set of conclusions that have implications for both scholarly understanding and progressive gender politics.

II. Literature Review

From Sex Role Theory to Hegemonic Masculinity

The intellectual prehistory of contemporary masculinity studies, as Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) meticulously document, is dominated by the sex role framework inaugurated by Talcott Parsons in the 1950s. Parsons' synthesis of structural-functionalism and psychoanalysis produced an account of gender in which masculine 'instrumental' and feminine 'expressive' roles were treated as complementary functional necessities of the social order. This framework naturalised gender differentiation and, critically, obscured power relations between men and women, treating the relationship as one of complementarity rather than domination.

The 1970s 'Books About Men' genre, which emerged in direct response to second-wave feminism, largely failed to transcend these limitations. As Carrigan et al. (1985) demonstrate, these texts either psychologised feminist critiques locating the problem in individual character rather than structural power relations or inadvertently replicated the androcentric assumptions they claimed to challenge. The central theoretical proposition of this literature, that men are oppressed comparably to women by the 'male role,' served ideological functions: it enabled men to appropriate feminist language while evading the central feminist insight about systematic patriarchal power.

The conceptual breakthrough came with the development of the concept of hegemonic masculinity, which Carrigan et al. (1985) derive in part from gay liberation theory and Gramsci's notion of hegemony. Hegemony, as they apply it, refers not to a fixed type or essence of manhood but to a historical configuration of practice through which certain groups of men exercise power over women and over subordinated masculinities while large numbers of men remain complicit in sustaining these arrangements even without embodying the hegemonic ideal. This concept captures several crucial dynamics simultaneously: the cultural exaltation of particular masculine forms, the subordination of homosexual and other non-normative masculinities, the legitimation of patriarchal power through consent rather than brute force, and the inherent instability of hegemonic configurations.

Postcolonial Masculinities and the Critique of Race-Blindness

Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) identify three critical lacunae in the existing literature: the race-blindness of Western feminist theories, the gender-blindness of postcolonial theories, and the ethnocentrism of predominantly Western masculinity studies. Drawing on foundational postcolonial and feminist thinkers — including Fanon's psychoanalysis of colonial subjecthood, Said's critique of Orientalism, Spivak's analysis of the subaltern, and Mohanty's deconstruction of Western feminist universalism — they argue for a framework that attends simultaneously to race, gender, class, sexuality, and colonial history.

Of particular relevance to the digital context is their analysis of how colonial and Orientalist discourses have historically employed sexuality as a prominent signifier of otherness. The hypersexualisation of Black men, the desexualisation of Asian men, the exoticisation of Arab and Muslim men, and the construction of Oriental femininity as promiscuous and available these racialised scripts continue to circulate in contemporary media environments, including digital platforms. The postcolonial masculinities framework therefore insists that any analysis of digital masculinity must account for the transnational circulation of racialised masculine hierarchies.

The ethnographic material Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert present on Iranian diasporic men in Stockholm, Sydney, and London, and on second-generation British Pakistani Muslim men in Bradford illustrates the lived complexity of these dynamics. Racialized men navigate what the authors call 'dislocatory experiences': the sudden encounter with subordination and racialisation that many previously unracialized men, particularly those from dominant ethnic groups in their countries of origin, experience for the first time in diaspora. This produces complex and sometimes contradictory masculine subject positions, including denial of racism, strategic identification with whiteness, and the performance of both 'hard' and religious masculinities as responses to stigmatisation.

Digital Media, Gender, and Power

The emergence of social media platforms as dominant sites of cultural production and identity formation has generated a growing body of scholarship on digital masculinities. Scholars such as Ging (2019)

and Banet-Weiser (2018) have analysed the ways in which online spaces particularly anonymous or semi-anonymous forums such as Reddit, 4chan, and YouTube comment sections have facilitated the formation of networked masculinist communities, including the so-called 'manosphere': a loose constellation of movements including Men's Rights Activists (MRAs), pick-up artists (PUAs), incels (involuntary celibates), and MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way).

These communities exhibit structural continuities with the 'men's liberation' movements critiqued by Carrigan et al. (1985): they appropriate the language of oppression and liberation while refusing to engage with feminist critiques of patriarchal power, and they similarly evade the question of homosexual masculinity. What is new is the scale, speed, and algorithmic amplification of these discourses, as well as their entanglement with broader right-wing political movements, anti-feminist backlash, and transnational racial politics.

At the same time, digital platforms have enabled new forms of counter-hegemonic masculinity queer masculinities, feminist men, non-binary and trans masculine identities, and cross-cultural hybridisations to achieve unprecedented visibility. The Korean Wave (Hallyu), and particularly the global popularity of K-pop and Korean drama aesthetics, has introduced a form of masculinity that directly challenges many of the parameters of Western hegemonic masculinity: prioritising soft aesthetics, emotional expressiveness, skincare, and mutual care between men. This phenomenon, as scholars like Jung (2011) and Oh (2018) have argued, both challenges and reproduces gender hierarchies in complex ways.

Body, Beauty, and the Masculine Gaze in Digital Culture

The relationship between masculinity and the body has been substantially transformed by the visual economy of social media. Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube have created powerful image-driven environments in which bodies are perpetually displayed, evaluated, and compared. For men, this has produced a dual pressure: the traditional imperative of hypermasculine physicality (muscle mass, height, facial symmetry, financial success) has been amplified and rendered newly visible through fitness influencer culture, while simultaneously new beauty and grooming standards influenced significantly by Korean and East Asian aesthetics have expanded the range of acceptable masculine presentation.

The 'sigma male' archetype, which emerged prominently on social media in the early 2020s, represents a particularly interesting ideological formation. Positioning itself as a rejection of both the conventional 'alpha male' hierarchy and the derided 'beta male' submissiveness, the sigma male ideal valorises radical individualism, emotional detachment, and financial success achieved through solitary means. As an ideology, it shares structural features with what Carrigan et al. (1985) identified as the central ideological move of the 'men's liberation' literature: the appropriation of the language of liberation and self-actualisation to modernise and privatise hegemonic masculinity without fundamentally challenging its power relations.

The 'bare minimum' discourse, the widely circulated social media conversation about men who perform the absolute lowest threshold of romantic, domestic, or emotional effort illuminates a different but related dynamic. This discourse, predominantly generated by women on platforms such as Twitter/X and TikTok, functions as a form of public feminist critique, exposing the gap between men's expectations of women's labour and their own contributions. Its viral circulation suggests both the new democratic possibilities of digital feminist discourse and its limits: such content is easily monetised, decontextualised, and appropriated.

III. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology centred on Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), a theoretical and methodological framework that examines how language, images, and other semiotic resources both reflect and reproduce social relations of power. Drawing on the tradition established by Fairclough (1992), van Dijk (2001), and Wodak (2001), CDA treats discourses not as transparent descriptions of reality but as actively constitutive practices: discourses produce subjects, normalise power relations, and circulate ideologies.

Data Sources
The study synthesises four categories of source material:
• Foundational scholarly texts: The two anchor texts Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) and Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) provide the primary theoretical framework, supplemented by a systematic review of peer-reviewed literature on digital masculinities, postcolonial gender studies, media studies, and sociology of masculinity published between 1985 and 2024.
• Digital platform content: A qualitative analysis of content, comment cultures, and discourse patterns across YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Reddit, and Twitter/X, focusing on masculine identity content including fitness culture, the manosphere, K-beauty masculinity, sigma male content, and feminist critique of masculine norms.

- Popular cultural texts: Film, television, music videos (particularly K-pop), and advertising that explicitly engage with masculine identity, beauty, and social expectations.
- Critical journalism and cultural criticism: Analyses of specific viral trends, online communities, and cultural phenomena from reputable journalistic and critical sources.

Analytical Framework

Analysis proceeds at three levels, following Fairclough's three-dimensional model: (1) the textual level, examining specific linguistic, visual, and rhetorical features of digital masculine discourse; (2) the discursive practice level, examining how texts are produced, circulated, and consumed within platform ecologies; and (3) the social practice level, examining how these discourses relate to broader structures of gender, race, class, and sexuality.

The postcolonial masculinities framework of Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) adds a crucial intersectional and geopolitical dimension to this analysis, ensuring that the study does not reproduce the ethnocentrism and race-blindness of much mainstream masculinity scholarship. Particular attention is paid to how digital platforms mediate and amplify racialised masculine hierarchies across national and cultural boundaries.

Limitations

As a theoretical and discourse-analytical study, this research does not include primary empirical data collection (such as interviews or surveys) and therefore cannot make claims about the direct lived experiences of specific individuals or communities. The rapidly evolving nature of digital platforms means that specific trends and communities may have shifted significantly between analysis and publication. Finally, while the study attends carefully to intersections of race, class, and sexuality, it cannot claim comprehensive coverage of the diversity of masculine experiences across all global contexts.

IV. Core Arguments And Analysis

Men in the Digital Landscape: Roles, Power, and Performance

The digital landscape has fundamentally reconfigured the spaces in which masculine identity is enacted, performed, and contested. Men occupy multiple and often contradictory roles within this landscape, which can be mapped across three broad dimensions: as producers of masculine discourse, as consumers of masculine ideals, and as objects of the masculine gaze.

Men as Digital Producers

Social media platforms have enabled unprecedented numbers of men to become producers of masculine discourse and culture. The fitness influencer, the gaming streamer, the financial advice YouTuber, the political commentator, and the lifestyle vlogger all participate in what might be understood as a digital economy of masculine performance. These figures do not simply reflect pre-existing masculine ideals but actively construct and circulate them to vast audiences, often with significant commercial incentives that shape the masculine ideologies they promote.

Crucially, this production of masculine discourse is not uniform. Hegemonic masculinity is reproduced and modernised across platforms, but so are counter-hegemonic forms. Gay masculine content creators, feminist men, non-binary and trans masculine influencers, and advocates of mental health for men all utilise the same platforms to circulate alternative models. However, as algorithmic research consistently shows, engagement algorithms tend to amplify content that provokes strong emotional responses — including outrage, anxiety, and tribalism — which systematically advantages more extreme and reactionary masculine content over moderate or progressive alternatives.

The Algorithmic Reproduction of Hegemony

One of the most significant findings of digital masculinity scholarship is the role of platform algorithms in shaping the masculine content users encounter. Research by Ribeiro et al. (2020) and O'Callaghan et al. (2015) suggests that YouTube's recommendation algorithm routinely guides users from mainstream political content toward increasingly extreme right-wing and masculinist content, a process sometimes described as 'radicalisation pipelines.' This technological architecture reproduces at scale the ideological functions that Carrigan et al. (1985) identified in the 'Books About Men' genre: modernising hegemonic masculinity while defending its core power arrangements.

The postcolonial dimension of this algorithmic reproduction is equally significant. The predominantly white, Anglophone masculine content that dominates global platform visibility reflects and reinforces what Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) identify as the ethnocentrism of mainstream masculinity discourse. Racialised men particularly Black, Asian, and Muslim men are disproportionately represented through the lens

of threat, hypersexuality, or cultural deficit, even within digital spaces that nominally celebrate diversity.

Men as Objects of the Digital Gaze

The digital revolution has complicated the traditional gendering of the gaze. While the male gaze in Laura Mulvey's (1975) foundational formulation, the structuring of visual pleasure around male subjectivity and female objectification continues to operate powerfully in digital media, men have increasingly become objects of scrutiny, comparison, and evaluation. The visual economies of Instagram and TikTok subject men's bodies, faces, lifestyles, and relationships to continuous public assessment in ways that have no precedent in the history of masculine culture.

This does not straightforwardly equalise gender power. As Banet-Weiser (2018) argues, the increased visibility of men as aesthetic objects is frequently compatible with and indeed serves to reproduce masculine power, because the male body that is celebrated is overwhelmingly one that displays markers of social dominance: wealth, physical strength, and racial privilege. Nevertheless, the exposure of men to aesthetic scrutiny creates new forms of masculine anxiety and vulnerability that have significant implications for mental health and gender politics.

Oppression of Homosexual Men and Women in Media and Male-Hegemonic Structures

The oppression of homosexual men and women within media and hegemonic masculine structures has both historical depth and contemporary digital manifestations. Carrigan et al. (1985) identify the systematic marginalisation of gay liberation arguments as the defining political failure of the 1970s 'men's liberation' movement, and argue that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is fundamentally constituted through the subordination of homosexual masculinity. This insight remains foundational for understanding digital masculine culture.

Homosexual Masculinity: Subordination and Visibility

Gay liberation, as Carrigan et al. (1985) document in detail, represented a far more radical theoretical challenge to hegemonic masculinity than anything produced by the heterosexual men's movement. By challenging the taken-for-granted heterosexuality at the core of hegemonic masculine identity, gay liberation exposed the historical contingency and social construction of the male-female binary that underpins patriarchal power. The 'radical drag' experiments of early gay liberation deliberately combining masculine and feminine signifiers to produce 'gender confusion' contained, the authors argue, more genuine political insight than the androgyny discourse that sex role theorists were simultaneously popularising.

In the digital landscape, gay masculinities have achieved significant representational visibility, particularly within commercial media and lifestyle content. Yet this visibility is frequently partial, conditional, and depoliticised. The 'acceptable gay man' of mainstream digital culture tends to be affluent, white, conventionally attractive, and politically unthreatening a figure whose homosexuality is accommodated within rather than challenging to hegemonic structures. This dynamic precisely instantiates what Carrigan et al. (1985) identify as the strategy of 'modernising hegemonic masculinity': adapting to new circumstances, including the incorporation of certain forms of homosexuality, without disrupting the underlying power relations.

Women's Representation and the Digital Patriarchy

The oppression of women within male-hegemonic digital structures operates through multiple intersecting mechanisms. At the most visible level, women content creators face systematic harassment, sexualisation, and devaluation that their male counterparts do not. The GamerGate controversy of 2014, in which women game developers and critics were subjected to coordinated campaigns of harassment, illustrated how digital masculine communities mobilise to enforce the gendered boundaries of digital spaces. More structurally, platform economies consistently reward masculine-coded content technology, finance, gaming, sports with greater monetisation opportunities and algorithmic amplification than feminine-coded content.

The intersection of gender and race is particularly acute in digital media representation. Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) trace the colonial genealogy of racialised femininity the construction of Oriental and African women as hypersexualised, exotic, and available — in Orientalist discourse. These scripts are reproduced and amplified across digital platforms, where racialised women face not only gender-based harassment but specifically racialised forms of sexualisation, dehumanisation, and erasure. Black women, in particular, face the intersection of misogynoir the specific combination of anti-Black racism and misogyny across digital platforms in ways that remain insufficiently addressed by mainstream feminist digital discourse.

The Manosphere and the Politics of Anti-Feminism

The 'manosphere' represents the most organised contemporary instantiation of the anti-feminist strand within masculine digital culture. Like the 'men's rights' organisations that Carrigan et al. (1985) trace to

the mid-1970s which rapidly moved from men's liberation toward a masculinist politics defined against women's rights manosphere communities articulate masculine grievance in explicitly anti-feminist terms. Incels attribute their social and romantic failures not to structural factors or their own attitudes but to feminist social engineering; MRAs contest women's rights in legal domains including divorce and custody; MGTOW advocates complete withdrawal from heterosexual relationships as a form of masculine self-preservation.

What distinguishes the digital manosphere from its 1970s predecessors is its scale, its transnational organisation, its sophisticated ideological elaboration, and its entanglement with broader reactionary political movements. The radicalisation pipelines identified by researchers facilitate pathways from mainstream men's self-improvement content to extremist masculine ideologies, reproducing at digital scale the dynamic Carrigan et al. (1985) identified: the evisceration of feminist insights in the service of masculine privilege.

V. Social Media: Challenging Or Reproducing Rigid Masculinity?

The question of whether social media challenges or reproduces rigid masculinity does not admit a simple answer. Digital platforms function as simultaneously hegemonic and counter-hegemonic spaces, and the balance of these tendencies varies by platform, context, user community, and algorithmic configuration. A nuanced analysis must attend to both the genuine transformative possibilities and the structural reproduction of patriarchal power.

Digital Counter-Hegemony: Real and Limited

Social media has undeniably created new possibilities for counter-hegemonic masculinity. Queer masculine content creators have built substantial audiences and communities that normalise non-heterosexual masculinities in ways that would have been unimaginable in the pre-digital era. Men who discuss mental health, emotional vulnerability, domestic care, and feminist politics have found platforms and audiences online. Cross-cultural flows particularly the global circulation of East and Southeast Asian masculine aesthetics have introduced alternative models of masculinity that challenge the narrowly Western, white, heterosexual parameters of hegemonic masculine norms.

The #MeToo movement, which originated on social media and achieved global reach in 2017-2018, represented a genuine and significant challenge to masculine impunity in domains including workplaces, the entertainment industry, and politics. Social media platforms enabled survivors to speak publicly in unprecedented numbers, generating a form of collective testimony that bypassed traditional gatekeeping structures. The discourse produced by this movement has had measurable effects on organisational cultures and legal frameworks.

Algorithmic Reproduction of Hegemony

Against these transformative possibilities, the structural logics of platform capitalism systematically favour the reproduction of hegemonic masculinity. As noted above, engagement algorithms amplify extreme and reactionary content. Business models dependent on advertising revenue incentivise the production of content that reinforces aspirational consumption of luxury goods, fitness products, grooming regimes that is typically coded as masculine achievement. The gig economy of content creation reproduces class hierarchies within masculine culture, with the most financially successful creators tending to embody and promote hegemonic masculine values of wealth accumulation, physical dominance, and romantic success.

The postcolonial dimension of this algorithmic reproduction deserves emphasis. Global platform dominance by US-based technology companies means that the masculine norms algorithmically amplified and monetised are disproportionately those of white, Western, affluent masculinity. This reproduces at digital scale the ethnocentrism and race-blindness that Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) identify in both mainstream feminist theory and Western masculinity studies. The result is a digital masculine imaginary in which racialised men are either absent, othered, or visible only through the stereotyping scripts of colonial discourse.

The Paradox of Visibility

A central paradox of digital masculine culture is that increased visibility of diverse masculinities does not straightforwardly translate into the dismantling of hegemonic power. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) argued in their reformulation of the hegemonic masculinity concept, hegemony operates not by suppressing subordinated masculinities entirely but by incorporating them in subordinated positions within a hierarchical gender order. The gay man who is celebrated in mainstream digital culture as witty, fashionable, and non-threatening; the Black man whose culture is appropriated while his personhood is devalued; the Asian man whose aesthetics are globally consumed while his sexuality is desexualised these are forms of visibility that can simultaneously increase representational presence and reinforce structural subordination.

Digital Trends and the Transformation of Masculine Perspectives
The fourth research objective concerns the specific contemporary digital trends that are reshaping masculine identity: Korean beauty standards, sigma vs. normal male archetypes, the 'bare minimum' discourse, financial performance expectations, and high-level physical strength ideals. Each of these trends represents a distinct site at which traditional and emergent masculine norms intersect, conflict, and mutually constitute each other.

Korean Beauty Standards and the Globalisation of Masculine Aesthetics
The global spread of Korean beauty (K-beauty) standards through the vectors of K-pop, Korean drama, and skincare culture represents perhaps the most significant challenge to Western hegemonic masculine aesthetics in the contemporary moment. Korean masculine beauty norms — characterised by smooth skin, careful grooming, softer facial features, slender or athletic rather than bulky physiques, and emotional expressiveness differ substantially from the traditionally dominant masculine aesthetic in both Western and many non-Western cultural contexts.
This challenge is genuine but partial. K-beauty masculine aesthetics broaden the range of legitimate masculine appearance, potentially reducing the stigma attached to men's investment in their appearance and personal care. At the same time, they establish new and often equally demanding standards of bodily management, creating new forms of masculine anxiety and commercial opportunity. The ideals represented by K-pop idols are as carefully constructed, managed, and commercially mediated as those of Western fitness culture, and they are similarly subject to racial politics: the celebration of Korean masculine aesthetics can coexist with the continued racialised stereotyping of East Asian men as asexual or submissive in Western contexts.
For diasporic and non-Western men, the global circulation of K-beauty standards creates complex negotiations with both Western hegemonic masculinity and local masculine norms. Following Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert's (2019) framework, we might understand these negotiations as dislocatory experiences at the aesthetic level: encounters with unfamiliar masculine norms that unsettle previously settled identities and demand new assemblages of masculine selfhood.

The Sigma Male, Toxic Individualism, and the Lone Wolf Ideal
The 'sigma male' archetype, which achieved significant social media circulation in the early 2020s, represents a particularly sophisticated ideological formation within the landscape of digital masculinity. Presented as a superior alternative to the conventional 'alpha-beta' male hierarchy rejecting both the dominance-seeking of the alpha and the submissiveness of the beta in favour of a solitary, self-sufficient, emotionally detached high-achiever the sigma ideal encapsulates several key features of contemporary neoliberal masculinity.
Most significantly, the sigma ideal privatises and individualises what are essentially social conditions. Men who experience social exclusion, romantic failure, or workplace marginalisation are offered an ideology that reframes these experiences not as the product of structural inequalities but as the consequence of their own insufficient commitment to self-optimisation. This is precisely the move that Carrigan et al. (1985) identified as the defining political failure of the 'men's liberation' movement: the psychologisation and individualisation of structural conditions, which serves to reproduce hegemonic power by diverting attention from its structural bases.
The sigma ideal also exhibits a characteristic racial politics. Its valorisation of lone-wolf individualism, emotional detachment, and financial success achieved through solitary effort maps closely onto the values of white, Western, middle-class masculinity. The 'sigma' who achieves success through the lone genius model implicitly devalues the collective, communal, and relational masculine ideals that characterise many non-Western masculine cultures, reproducing the civilizational hierarchy that Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) trace through colonial and Orientalist discourse.

The 'Bare Minimum' Discourse and the Feminist Counter-Public
The 'bare minimum' discourse, the social media phenomenon in which women publicly name and critique men's failure to meet basic standards of romantic, domestic, and emotional contribution, represents a genuinely novel form of digital feminist counter-hegemonic practice. By making visible the gap between men's self-assessments and their actual contributions, this discourse performs a critical function analogous to what Carrigan et al. (1985) identify as the feminist insight that the liberation of women necessarily means the loss of power for most men.
However, the 'bare minimum' discourse also exhibits significant limitations. Its predominant framing is heterosexual and tends to focus on individual relational failure rather than structural causes. Its viral circulation often strips feminist critique of its structural context, reducing it to interpersonal advice

content. And its monetisation by content creators of all genders risks its appropriation into the very commercial masculine self-improvement industry it critiques. The discourse is thus both a genuine form of feminist counter-hegemony and a site of the co-optation and neutralisation of feminist politics that Carrigan et al. (1985) trace through the history of the 'men's liberation' genre.

Financial Expectations and the Breadwinner Ideal in Digital Culture
Financial performance expectations remain one of the most persistent and powerful dimensions of hegemonic masculine identity in digital culture. The valorisation of financial success as the primary measure of masculine worth expressed through the ubiquity of 'hustler' and 'grindset' culture on YouTube and TikTok, the celebration of luxury consumption as masculine achievement, and the manosphere's obsession with 'financial independence' from women reproduces in digital form the breadwinner ideal that Carrigan et al. (1985) identify as central to the working man's masculine dignity in Komarovsky's classic sociological research.

This ideal carries significant class and racial politics. The financial success celebrated in digital masculine culture tends to be represented as individually achieved through talent and effort the self-made entrepreneur, the crypto investor, the fitness influencer rather than as the product of structural advantage. This representation systematically erases the role of class, racial, and educational privilege in economic outcomes, constructing a meritocratic masculine imaginary that is available to all men in theory while being structurally accessible to very few. For racialised men navigating what Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) describe as the devaluation of their credentials and social capital in diaspora, this meritocratic masculine imaginary functions as a particularly cruel form of ideological mystification.

Physical Standards, Fitness Culture, and the Masculinity of the Body
The intensification of physical standards for men in digital culture represents a significant development in the history of masculine embodiment. While masculine physical ideals have always existed — and have always served functions of social stratification and exclusion, the digital era has made these ideals more visible, more globally circulated, and more demanding than at any previous moment. Fitness influencer culture on Instagram and YouTube has established extremely high physical standards sub-10% body fat percentages, significant muscle mass, height above cultural thresholds as aspirational masculine norms, while simultaneously selling the products, regimes, and services through which these standards might (allegedly) be approached.

These standards carry complex and sometimes contradictory implications. On one hand, they represent a form of masculine body-shaming that has received insufficient critical attention: the normalisation of extreme physiques as the masculine ideal creates patterns of body image distress, disordered eating, and excessive exercise that parallel those documented for women. On the other hand, the celebration of the powerful, physically dominant body reproduces the equation of masculinity with physical force and the subjugation of what Carrigan et al. (1985) call the 'soft' or 'effeminate' masculine a reproduction that has direct implications for the ongoing subordination of homosexual and non-normative masculinities.

The intersection of physical standards with race in digital culture is particularly revealing. Black male athletes and fitness figures achieve visibility within fitness culture but are frequently framed through the lens of natural physical superiority rather than trained skill a racialised script with deep colonial roots, as Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert (2019) document. Asian men, conversely, continue to be subject to the desexualisation and physical diminishment that colonial discourse imposed, even as K-pop partially disrupts this through the globalisation of alternative physical aesthetics. These racialised dynamics within the physical masculine ideal demonstrate the continuing relevance of the postcolonial masculinities framework for understanding digital culture.

VI. Conclusion
This paper has traced the complex and often contradictory terrain of masculine identity in the digital age, drawing on the foundational frameworks of hegemonic masculinity and postcolonial masculinities to analyse four interconnected dimensions of contemporary digital culture. Several key conclusions emerge.

First, men occupy multiple and contradictory roles in the digital landscape simultaneously as producers of hegemonic masculine discourse, as consumers subjected to increasingly demanding masculine ideals, and as objects of a gaze that remains structurally weighted toward masculine power despite the apparent democratisation of visibility. The algorithmic architecture of digital platforms systematically amplifies hegemonic masculine content while marginalising counter-hegemonic alternatives, reproducing at unprecedented scale the ideological functions Carrigan et al. (1985) identified in the 'men's liberation' literature.

Second, the oppression of homosexual men and women within digital masculine culture is real, structural, and intersectional. The manosphere reproduces in more organised, transnational, and technologically sophisticated form the anti-feminist politics that the 'men's rights' strand of the 1970s men's movement

introduced. The subordination of gay masculinity operates through both explicit hostility and the conditional, depoliticised incorporation of non-threatening gay identities into mainstream digital culture. Women's oppression in digital spaces intersects with race, as Farahani and Thapar-Bjorkert's (2019) postcolonial framework illuminates, producing specific and severe forms of racialised misogyny that mainstream feminist digital discourse insufficiently addresses.

Third, social media neither straightforwardly challenges nor straightforwardly reproduces rigid masculinity it does both, simultaneously and unevenly. The genuine counter-hegemonic possibilities created by digital platforms for queer masculinities, feminist men, cross-cultural masculine hybridisations, and collective feminist critique are real but structurally constrained by platform capitalism's incentivisation of engagement, conflict, and aspirational consumption. The paradox of visibility in which increased representational presence coexists with structural subordination is the characteristic feature of this double movement.

Fourth, the specific digital trends analysed in this paper K-beauty masculinity, sigma male ideology, the 'bare minimum' discourse, financial performance expectations, and physical standards each represent a distinct site of negotiation between hegemonic and counter-hegemonic masculine norms. K-beauty genuinely broadens acceptable masculine aesthetics while establishing new commercial and racial dynamics. The sigma ideal privatises structural conditions in the service of masculine privilege. The 'bare minimum' discourse performs feminist critique while remaining vulnerable to co-optation. Financial expectations reproduce the breadwinner ideal in meritocratic guise. Physical standards intensify masculine body-shaming while reproducing the equation of masculinity with dominance and force.

The overarching conclusion is that the transformation of masculine identity in the digital age is real but deeply uneven. Digital platforms have created genuine new possibilities for masculine plurality, vulnerability, and counter-hegemonic practice. But the structural logics of platform capitalism, algorithmic curation, and the global circulation of racialised masculine hierarchies mean that these possibilities exist within and are persistently shaped by the same patriarchal power relations that Carrigan et al. (1985) analysed four decades ago. Progress is possible, as Carrigan et al. concluded in 1985, 'not in the form of grand schemes of change, but at least in the form of coalitions among feminists, gay men, and progressive heterosexual men that have real chances of making gains on specific issues.' In the digital age, those coalitions now extend across global networks and their possibilities, and vulnerabilities, are correspondingly greater.

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