

Masculinity in Transition? (Re-)Constructing Masculinity Through the Prism of Success on Male-Led Podcasts

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

*Hegemonic Masculinity,
Alternative Masculinity,
Motivational Podcasts,
Success Discourse,
Youtube Communities*

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the construction of masculinity through discourses of success in male-led motivational podcasts on YouTube. Drawing on critical discourse analysis of 10 highly popular podcasts published between 2024 and 2025, the study examines how narratives of success serve both to reinforce and challenge hegemonic masculinity. The analysis demonstrates that, while traditional masculine ideals, such as financial achievement, physical discipline, and emotional restraint, remain prevalent, an emerging counter-discourse advocates for men's vulnerability, emotional wellbeing, and alternative definitions of success. By investigating ways in which language and social norms contribute to conceptualisations of masculinity through the lens of success in these podcasts, the study reveals masculinity in a state of transition, signifying a stepping away from hegemonic masculinity ideals. Ultimately, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of contemporary evolution of masculinity through its relationship with success.

1. Introduction

Today, debates about what it means to be a man continue to intensify amid shifting social norms and gender expectations. On the one hand, since the end of the past century, feminist movements have worked to deconstruct the traditional notions of masculinity, rooted in the displays of physical fitness and violent behaviours. On the other hand, the emerging anti-feminist movements seek to reclaim the traditionally dominant role of men in society (Ghosh et al., 2025). Contestations of masculinity increasingly take place on social media, where its different versions are compared and contrasted, with some speakers seeking to uphold the existing gender hierarchies while others insisting on the need for new gender norms. While numerous definitions of masculinity have been proposed by scholars since the emergence of the field of masculinity studies, generally, masculinity can be referred to as “as an internalized sex role identity that was shaped by cultural ideals and role models” (Bhatti, 2020, p. 2). Researchers also outlined various types of masculinities, including dominant, such as the “alpha” masculinity (Russel, 2021), as well as alternatives to these models.

Recent studies on success have revealed a growing pressure experienced by men in connection to social expectations of how successful they should be. In a traditional sense, as

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Cite this article as:

Kornienko, M. (2025). Masculinity in Transition? (Re-)Constructing Masculinity Through the Prism of Success on Male-Led Podcasts. *Sexuality and Gender Studies Journal*, 3(2): 30-46. <https://doi.org/10.33422/sgsj.v3i2.1250>

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recent large-scale qualitative research found, a successful man is typically portrayed as someone “who enjoys the most conspicuous trappings of wealth”, including sports cars, luxury watches, and yachts, while displaying personal qualities such as ambition, hard work, and competitiveness (The Price of Success, 2022, p. 5). The study also found that men reported experiencing pressure from the media portrayals of success, with the highest pressure experienced in the areas of making a lot of money (25.9% of respondents) and leading a glamorous lifestyle (21.8%) (The Price of Success, 2022, p. 9). Overall, as many as 66.5% of millennial men said the media had a negative impact on how successful they felt. An earlier 2017 poll revealed that the public viewed men as experiencing significantly higher pressure than women to financially support their families (76%) and be successful in their career (68%) (Parker et al., 2017). In addition, these pressures were reflected in the ongoing discussion of the “masculinity crisis” (Kimmel, 2018). All these findings ultimately underline the growing dissatisfaction with the traditional view of success, seen as gendered, which results in excessive pressure on men, leading to stress and mental disorders, while contrasting with the prevailing manifestations of hegemonic masculinity in the media.

This paper focuses on connections between the notions of success and masculinity in popular male-led motivational podcasts on YouTube. Podcasts are seen as a genre popularly consumed by male audiences, with critics noting a recent rise of the distinct genre of “alpha male” podcasts (Marsales, 2023). Podcasts can therefore be viewed as fruitful sources of data to understand how success is used to construct modern masculine identities and translate them to thousands and even millions of subscribers. This research therefore aims to answer the following research question: *How do notions of success on male-led motivational podcasts support or contradict contemporary hegemonic masculinities?* Applying a combination of theories of masculinity, this paper argues that, while popular YouTube shows clearly continue manifesting images traditionally associated with hegemonic masculinity, they also begin challenging certain aspects of traditional masculine behaviours and lifestyles, advocating for a more balanced approach.

2. Literature Review

2.1 History of Masculinity Studies

The topic of masculinity has been featured prominently in academic literature over the past several decades, influenced by the areas of sociology, psychology, anthropology, economics, and others. Some researchers note the existence of three distinct theoretical waves in the study of masculinity. The first wave in the 1950s was concerned with the male gender roles, the second, in the 1980s, focused on the centrality of male power contributing to the conception of masculinity, while the third one, in the 1990s, was preoccupied with post-structuralist and post-modern readings of masculinity (Bhatti, 2020; Whitehead & Barrett, 2001). Other scholars pointed to some of the dominant historical perspectives on masculinity that were shaping the modern understanding of this phenomenon. From the positivist perspective, masculinity had been viewed as stemming from biology and male anatomy, which was later rejected by social constructivist thought proposing a view of masculinity as a practice of social interactions, beliefs, and behaviours (Moynihan, 1998). In postmodernist approaches, fixed categories of sex and gender were disintegrated, replaced by the idea of “floating signifier”, which rejected the very existence of “masculine” or “feminine” characteristics attached to sex or gender (Moynihan, 1998). The above briefly described theories and concepts help to contextualise more contemporary notions of masculinity and manhood in the changing narratives of what constitutes the masculine.

2.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

The research by R. W. Connell is one of the most influential approaches to the study of masculinity and its effects on men and society in general. Connell (1987) introduced the idea of “hegemonic masculinity”, based on the Gramscian concept of hegemony, originally rooted in class relations. According to Connell (1987), hegemonic masculinity “is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women” (p. 183). More specifically, hegemonic masculinity “embodied the currently most honored way of being a man” since it demanded that all other men “position themselves in relation to it, and it ideologically legitimated the global subordination of women to men” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 831). Hence, hegemonic masculinity was conceptualised as a regulatory and normative power, setting a standard for male social conduct (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). The authors proposed that hegemonic masculinity was distributed via a range of mechanisms, from media portrayals of men tied to sports and war imagery to institutionalised violence against alternative types of masculinities (e.g. homosexual men) (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Hegemonic masculinity, therefore, is one of the central theoretical frameworks relevant to this study, contextualising ways in which hegemonic masculinity dictates the norm for other men to follow.

2.3 Alternative Masculinities

In addition to hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) suggested three other types which could be considered the foundation for the more recent research on alternative masculinities. These included complicit (men accepting hegemonic masculinities for benefit), subordinate (those considered “not men ‘enough’” in accepted hegemonic masculinity perception) and marginalized masculinities (marginalised due to disadvantages social identities, including class race, ethnicity and disability) (Bhatti, 2020, p. 3). Building on the opposition to Connell’s (1987) hegemonic masculinity, scholars attempted to identify non-hegemonic, or alternative masculinities, those that were seen to “increasingly defy easy categorisation” (Lay & West, 2000, p. 9), resisting the pressures of hegemonic masculinity demands and reinventing characteristics of manhood. In turn, Anderson (2009) introduced the concept of “inclusive masculinity”, noting the changing perceptions of masculinity in the US and the UK, associated with decrease of homophobia, sexism, racism, and overall reinforcement of traditionally masculine behaviours.

Men who developed inclusive masculinities were also found more likely to embrace their emotions and display behaviours that were previously viewed as “feminine” (Anderson, 2009). In a similar way, in a later study, Bridges and Pascoe (2014) propose the concept of “hybrid masculinities”, where high-status men incorporate elements of emotional openness or queerness to appear progressive without threatening their dominant social status. Additionally, taking a step further, other works complicated the notion of masculinity by introducing the ideas of “female masculinity”, thus challenging the notion that masculinity is reserved to men exclusively, as well as raising questions about ways in which masculinity can be “performed” regardless of the biological sex (Halberstam, 2018). All these frameworks are crucial to understanding the evolving nature of popular perceptions of masculinity performance in the present study.

2.4 Intersectionality and Masculinity

The intersectional lens had already been incorporated into Connell’s (1987) view of marginalised masculinities to a certain extent, excluded as a result of their other, non-gender identities. Intersectionality was initially proposed as a concept by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), arguing that the intersection of different marginalised identities can create various forms of

oppression. Indeed, Coston and Kimmel (2012) studied marginalised masculinities to identify strategies used by working-class, disabled, and gay men to navigate hegemonic masculinity privilege. Indeed, in this particular context, success becomes a specifically class-based element of traditional masculinity, central to the present study (Walker & Roberts, 2018). Popular podcast hosts also appear to be overwhelmingly white, cisgender, and upper- to middle-class men, supporting the broader pattern of visibility and success in online motivational content.

2.5 Gender Performativity and Discourse

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the emergence of new theories transformed the understanding of masculinity as a fixed, easily described identity. In this sense, Tosh (2011) recorded the “cultural turn” in masculinity studies, saying that, with the emergence of new theories, masculinity could no longer be abstracted to a single identity “because it only has meaning in relation to other identities of sexuality, class, age and religion” (p. 23). For scholars like Judith Butler (2011), the concept of gender performativity redefined the earlier notions of masculinity, suggesting that it is both socially and linguistically constructed through repeated performance of the “norm”. The philosopher argues that gender “is the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes” (Butler, 2004, p. 45). Hence, as per Butler’s view, masculinity is also facilitated by constant performance, the purpose of which is normalisation of certain social practices, dynamics, and hierarchies. However, some of Butler’s critics also noted that her theory denied agency of the subjects, seeing them as products – as well as instruments – of the constantly reproduced gender norm located within the power hierarchies (Brickwell, 2005).

Butler’s theories of gender and performance were closely linked to Foucault’s discourse and power theory, providing an important discursive dimension to the study of masculinity construction. Inspired by Foucault’s “regulatory power” concept, Butler discussed how the power of the language contributed to the construction of the status quo, ensuring gender performance (McQueen, 2015). Hence, the theory proposes that speech production is inherently linked to performativity, as speech acts delineate the norm and social roles performed by subjects (McQueen, 2015). Later studies acknowledged the role of language in constructing contemporary masculinities, which is particularly relevant to the present study investigating reproduction of the masculine norm through online discourses. One such example is the portrayal of masculinity associated with professional athletes, where the male body is seen as a “weapon”, contributing to the construction of a certain discourse of masculinity (Messner, 1992, as cited Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 839). Additionally, Russel (2021), commenting on the concept of “alpha” masculinity, argued that language plays a central part in constructing gender through knowledge systems, formal and structural elements, as well as discourse. In more contemporary applications, Andreasson and Johansson (2013) studied the portrayals of masculinity in fitness blogs, highlighting the presence of both traditional notions and alternative masculinities, thus noting a change in masculinity-related discourses.

2.6 Definitions of Success

As the focus of the current study is success, it is necessary to briefly define this concept, as well as outline a potential gendered angle in connection to some recent studies. One earlier study analysed the definitions of success for men and women, noting that, in contemporary Western societies, success has come increasingly to be associated with wealth and social

status, which was consistent with masculine socialisation trends (Deutschendorf, 1996, as cited in Dyke & Murphy, 2006). The researchers argued that, for men, especially those who conform to traditional gender roles, career success becomes the primary mechanism of realisation, as well as fulfilment of other adjacent roles, such as the family role of a “provider” (Dyke & Murphy, 2006). Alewell (2013) investigated men’s and women’s understandings of success through in-depth interviews, revealing that men’s definitions of success were heavily reliant on career and financial achievements, while balance was more valuable for women. Finally, a study by Messner (2018) focused on the interpretations of success in the athlete community and its connections to the male identity, finding that sports serve as a platform for the promotion of traditional male ideas of success, based on the idea of male power and “superiority over” women amid the perceived “feminization of society” (p. 193). Hence, these studies locate general definitions of success in roughly the same sphere, suggesting a gendered aspect of its definitions, consistent with prevalent traditional gender roles.

2.7 Platforms, Algorithms, and Gender

To contextualise the visibility and popularity of male-led success podcasts, it is crucial to briefly consider the role of **platform infrastructures**. Literature shows that platforms like YouTube are not neutral distributors of content, and that their recommendation systems and monetisation logics favour certain types of affect, speech, and spectacle (Cakmak et al., 2024). In particular, content that aligns with neoliberal values of self-optimisation, hustle culture, and individual achievement is often algorithmically boosted, reinforcing dominant (and inherently masculine) success narratives (Burgess & Green, 2018). Hence, the construction of masculinity on YouTube is shaped not only by discourse, but also by the technical and economic affordances of the platform itself.

2.8 Research Gap

While previous studies have offered some coverage of the changing views on masculinity in contemporary, predominantly Western, societies, as well as provided some ground to support the stability of certain categories of manhood, the place of success in connection to constructing contemporary masculinity remains largely under-researched. As some previous studies clearly point to the gendered dimension of success, seen as an integral part of modern masculinity, the link between social (particularly, media) discourses of success and contemporary hegemonic masculinity is still unclear. The contribution of the current study is to illustrate the ways in which recent social media discourses of success continue to uphold or contradict the traditional masculine standard.

3. Methodology

3.1 Overview of Methodology

The following study relies on qualitative methods to investigate interconnections between contemporary media discourse on success and its role in the process of masculinity construction. Qualitative methodologies are positioned well to answer the research question posed in this study. Qualitative methods in sociology essentially adhere to the interpretive research paradigm, which focuses on the extraction of meaning (Scott, 2017). They are also linked to the inductive approach, aimed at gaining understanding of patterns and developing new concepts rather than collecting data to evaluate and support previously existing models or hypotheses (Taylor et al., 2016). Given the lack of research comprehensively assessing connections between narratives of success and constructions of masculinity, qualitative

methods are considered appropriate to establish the initial patterns and connections to construct a conceptual framework.

3.2 Method: Discourse Analysis

This study employs the method of critical discourse analysis to evaluate messages surrounding success and their connection to masculinity. Discourse analysis corresponds with the theoretical framework of this study, rooted in discursive practices as mechanisms of constructing masculinity (Butler, 2004; Brickwell, 2005). As a method, critical discourse analysis relies on a number of key assumptions. First, one underlying idea of this method is the belief that discursive practices through which texts are produced and consumed are considered an important form of social practice that contributes to the construction of social identities and relations, as well as support existing power relations, partially relying on the Foucauldian view of language (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Critical discourse analysis also implies focused linguistic textual analysis in a given data set (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). Thus, this research employs Norman Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model for critical discourse analysis. This method views discourse as contributing to the construction of social identities, social relations, and systems of meanings and knowledge (Jørgensen & Phillips, 2002). The three dimensions include: 1) the analysis of context (social practice); 2) the analysis of process of text production and interpretation; and 3) analysis of text (Fairclough, 1992). The analysis will be divided into three main sections, corresponding to each of the dimensions identified by the critical discourse analysis framework.

3.3 Data Collection

The study analyses discourses of success and links to masculinity in 10 English-language feature-length male-led video podcasts, published on YouTube in the period between the start of 2024 and early 2025 (See Table 1). The date of publication of the podcasts was considered to be important in identifying the most recent patterns relevant to the subject of this research. English-language content was selected with considerations of the hegemonic role of English language in producing social norms in the media (Guo & Beckett, 2008). The selection of podcasts was guided by thematic relevance, popularity metrics, as well as recency. Only English-language, male-led podcasts explicitly engaging with themes of success, masculinity, or self-optimisation were considered. "Male-led" podcasts were defined as having a male-identifying primary host. Exclusion criteria included podcasts with unclear thematic focus, non-public availability, or those that were shorter than 20 minutes. While a sample of 10 podcasts may appear limited, this number was found sufficient for thematic saturation, allowing for depth of analysis, while capturing a range of influential perspectives across various male-dominated YouTube communities.

The researcher adopted the approach of purposive sampling while selecting the podcasts for analysis, making sure that different types of podcasts were represented in the sample. Given the relatively limited number of popular male-led podcasters on YouTube who reach millions of subscribers, selecting one most thematically relevant and recent podcast from each of the identified content creators was considered the best approach, allowing breadth of ideas and perspectives for analysis. Each of the selected episodes can be considered a feature-length podcast lasting from 30 minutes to 4 hours, thus falling in the YouTube category of "over 20 minutes", used to designate the longest form in the search filter.

Recognising that YouTube's algorithms privileges certain types of content, such as male-dominated, high-engagement, success-driven narratives (Cakmak et al., 2024), podcasts were searched using both Google and YouTube search engines to mitigate filter bias. Both platforms were used to ensure a greater variety of podcasts fitting the criteria, based on

differences in algorithms (Hingoro & Nawaz, 2021). The main keyword used to search the relevant content both on YouTube and Google was “success”. Additional keywords employed to expand the search were “man”, “men”, and “masculinity”, as well as “goal”, “motivation” and “discipline” which were also found to be featured prominently in success-related podcasts upon preliminary search. The podcasts that were discovered via Google and YouTube searches were later filtered out based on channel popularity and numbers of views. The popularity of the podcasts was measured using the available metrics, such as the number of subscribers, following the data collection method described by Maloney et al. (2018) in their discourse analysis of gaming content on YouTube.

Table 1. Sample description

Podcast name	Number of subscribers	Podcast description	Chosen episode title	Number of views (as of May 2025)
Jay Shetty Podcast	4.2 million	Jay Shetty interviews experts, celebrities, and athletes on growth mindset and habit-building.	“Ed Mylett: Set Yourself Up For Success With These DAILY ROUTINES!”	490,000 views
A Bit of Optimism Podcast by Simon Sinek	2.47 million	Simon Sinek talks to his guests about life and leadership.	“The Definition of Success with author Neil Strauss A Bit of Optimism Podcast”	30,000
Rich Roll Podcast	1.45 million	Rich Roll speaks to guests to “to educate, inspire and empower you to unleash your best, most authentic self”.	“The Single Biggest Point of Failure In A Man's Life Scott Galloway X Rich Roll Podcast”	1.3 million
Modern Wisdom by Chris Williamson	3.56 million	Chris Williamson describes his podcast as offering “ <i>lessons from the greatest thinkers on the planet</i> ”.	“Discipline, Confidence & The Champion’s Mindset - Chris Bumstead”	1.1 million
The Diary Of A CEO by Steven Bartlett	10.33 million	Steven Bartlett’s podcast aims to provide an insight into the stories and habits of “world’s most influential people, experts and thinkers”.	“Adam Grant: 10 CRAZY Stats About Why Only 2% of the People Becomes Successful!”	644,000
The School of Greatness by Lewis Howes	4.66 million	Howes’s podcast shares “inspiring interviews from the most successful people on the planet”.	“The Success Expert: STOP Moving the Goalposts & Finally Say ‘I’ve Won’! Simon Sinek”	206,000
Joe Rogan Experience	19.8 million	Joe Rogan’s “a long form conversation” with guests from across fields.	“Joe Rogan Experience #2281 - Elon Musk”	13 million
Tim Ferriss Show Podcast	1.65 million	Tim Ferriss interviews his guests on the habits and behaviors that lead to success.	“Chris Sacca — How to Succeed by Living on Your Own Terms”	99,000
Jocko Podcast	1.94 million	Jocko Willink’s podcast is “discusses discipline and leadership” with various guests.	“Jocko Podcast 459: No Matter What Happens, Keep Moving Forward. SOG Warrior "Dynamite" Dick Thompson”	233,000
The Trent Shelton Podcast	844,000	Trent Shelton explores “mindset mastery, inner peace, and living in your full power”.	“EPISODE 61 [THIS IS YOUR ROADMAP TO SUCCESS] TRENT SHELTON”	3,900

3.4 Data Analysis

Podcast episodes were transcribed using YouTube's automatic transcription feature, providing time-stamped text of spoken content, extracted following the researcher's thorough initial familiarisation with the content. While YouTube's transcription tool offers a highly accessible means of generating transcripts, the auto-generated text was carefully reviewed and manually edited by the researcher to correct errors, fill in missing segments, and ensure accuracy in cases of overlapping speech, accents, or technical terminology. This combination of automated and manual transcription ensured both efficiency and reliability in capturing the discourse for analysis. The transcripts were analysed in three stages, using **Fairclough's three-dimensional model of critical discourse analysis**, first focusing on textual dimensions, followed by discursive dimensions and, in the end, social implications. Analysis of discursive practice established patterns of individual speech, dialogue, as well as the inherent elements in the podcast genre; textual analysis established primary codes based on prevalent linguistic patterns across podcasts (e.g. success, body, masculine vs. feminine language); finally, the social analysis identified key macro concepts discussed in the podcasts, connecting them back to theoretical notions of hegemonic and alternative masculinities.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

All data analysed in this study were publicly available, as it was created for public consumption. Given the prominent public profile of various speakers, direct attribution was deemed appropriate, consistent with existing media discourse studies. However, care was taken not to decontextualise or distort quotations. As the study was conducted by a sole researcher, a range of strategies was employed to minimise interpretive bias. These included **iterative coding** and **constant comparison of citations' meanings and quality** throughout the process, in order to document emerging themes and maintain a reflexive approach. Revisiting the transcripts multiple times at different stages of the analysis worked to contribute to consistency and transparency in the coding and interpretation process, thus supporting reliability of the findings.

4. Results and Analysis

As the following analysis relies on Fairclough's (1992) model, the following section is divided into three respective parts – discursive practice, text, and social practice.

4.1 Discursive Practice

The selected medium for the analysis in this research is podcast, which is a relatively new form of media emerging over the past decade. According to Murphy et al. (2024), a podcast is defined as an episodic audio content, produced by anyone who wishes or has the capacity to produce it, distributed via internet and social media platforms (citing Rime et al., 2022). The accessible and open nature of podcasts for creators is important in this study, as this medium facilitates the analysis of how masculinity is produced and consumed by the wider public beyond the traditional mass media narratives (Bottomley, 2015). The video podcast presents a separate genre that merges television, social media, and audio content, considered to have a stronger impact on the viewer due to greater editing capabilities and higher viral potential, targeting wider audiences by publishing on a platform that is not designed specifically for podcasts (Johansson, 2021). Therefore, popular video podcasts have high audience numbers and broader distribution channels, potentially having a wider impact.

The sample of podcasts selected for this study represents a body of highly popular content on YouTube with a large following. Some of the podcast authors have become influential specifically as podcast hosts, such as Chris Williamson, Steven Bartlett, and Jay Shetty, while others launched a podcast after becoming famous, for example, comedian Joe Rogan, athletes Trent Shelton (football player) and Rich Roll (ultra-endurance athlete), and authors Tim Ferriss, Jocko Willink, Lewis Howes, and Simon Sinek. The popularity and rates of distribution of these podcasts is in many cases supported by the previous popularity and fame of the hosts, contributing to the potential perception of the hosts' influence by the listeners. While 9 out of 10 selected podcasts feature two speakers – a host and a guest – the two rarely present contradicting opinions, instead building off of each other's knowledge in the same sphere, reaffirming similar views and agendas, which might result in bias (Clarke & Van Slyke, 2010).

Moreover, the analysis of the ten podcasts reveals a great deal of intersection and interconnections among the speakers, who also describe predominantly masculine, role models, quote the same authors, as well as invite each other to their podcasts to talk about similar topics (See Table 2). For example, Elon Musk is the guest on Joe Rogan's podcast, while he is also referred to by speakers in two other podcasts as an inspirational male figure – the *Tim Ferriss Show* and *The Diary of a CEO*. In the same fashion, Simon Sinek is the host on the *A Bit of Optimism Podcast*, while also a guest on *The School of Greatness*. These trends essentially suggest a construction of an "information bubble", where speakers might be contributing to bias by reinforcing the same ideas about success and masculinity. It could also be suggested that the speakers and hosts share the same model of success, working in the same sphere, which can result in the construction of the dominant mainstream narratives on male-led podcasts, reinforcing the same ideas of what success means for a man.

Table 2. Occupations and background of speakers and hosts on the sampled podcasts

Podcast	Speakers	Occupation/Background
Jay Shetty Podcast	Jay Shetty (host)	Author, YouTuber and podcaster
	Ed Mylett (guest)	Podcast host (The Ed Mylett Show), motivational speaker, author
A Bit of Optimism Podcast	Simon Sinek (host)	Author and speaker on business leadership
	Neil Strauss (guest)	Author and journalist
Rich Roll Podcast	Rich Roll (host)	Ultra-endurance athlete and motivational speaker
	Scott Galloway (guest)	Professor of Marketing at NYU, podcaster (The Prof G Show)
Modern Wisdom	Chris Williamson (host)	YouTuber and podcaster
	Chris Bumstead (guest)	Professional bodybuilder and business owner
The Diary Of A CEO	Steven Bartlett (host)	Podcaster and entrepreneur
	Adam Grant (guest)	American popular science author, Professor of Organisational science
The School of Greatness	Lewis Howes (host)	YouTuber and podcaster, author, entrepreneur
	Simon Sinek (guest)	Author and speaker on business leadership
Joe Rogan Experience	Joe Rogan (host)	Comedian, podcaster
	Elon Musk (guest)	Entrepreneur; richest man on the planet
Tim Ferriss Show Podcast	Tim Ferriss (host)	Author of self-help book series, investor, entrepreneur

Podcast	Speakers	Occupation/Background
	Chris Sacca (guest)	Investor
Jocko Podcast	Jocko Willink (host)	Retired United States Navy officer, author, podcaster
	Dick Thompson (guest)	Consultant, author, former special operations officer in the US army
The Trent Shelton podcast	Trent Shelton (host)	Football player, podcaster

Moreover, a discursive aspect evident in these podcasts, confirmed by scholars in the past, is their claim to truth, as the hosts consistently emphasise their expertise and knowledge in various spheres, especially in connection to the topics of success. While podcasts on YouTube are framed as “balanced, authentic, and uncut talk that realises the epistemic ideals of journalism” (Vaarala, 2022), they can also pose a threat to journalistic objectivity by relying excessively on popular “truths” or promoting the host’s agenda, which is often guided by economic interests (e.g. attracting more views and likes, selling other products, attracting certain advertisers). Some of the examples in line with these dynamics of “truth”-building are manifested in phrases like “most people aren’t aware” (*Jay Shetty Podcast*, 14:30), suggesting superior knowledge of the speaker, or generalisations like “most people quit on the thing that is meant for their life” (*The Trent Shelton Podcast*, 01:50), implying the speaker’s in-depth knowledge of human nature, once again above that of the regular listener.

Finally, the gendered aspect of the podcasts should be evaluated from the perspective of discursive practices. For instance, though in all of the podcasts all the speakers are men, they do not always explicitly address male audiences. Some of the speakers maintain a neutral position when speaking about the gender of their listeners, for example, Ed Mylett on the *Jay Shetty Podcast*, saying: “Remember when you were a little boy or a little girl...” (31:30). However, the very fact that the podcasts employ male speakers almost exclusively suggests a conscious or subconscious focus on the male audience, even if it is not stated anywhere in the content. Moreover, based on the above analysis, speakers and hosts of the podcast take the position of an expert, or even a guru, thus – consciously or not – constructing themselves as successful role models audiences should identify with and follow. Finally, according to recent statistics, podcasts remain a genre that is consumed by more male than female listeners (57% vs 52%), reflecting a gendered angle (Statista, 2025). These discursive practices, therefore, construct the tone of narrative in the podcasts, presenting the information in a certain manner with the purpose to persuade the audience, pass certain knowledge of success, as well as present a certain worldview.

4.2 Text

Since the key discursive mechanisms that underline narratives of success in the selected male-led motivational podcasts have been established, revealing the mechanisms based on which the content is produced, distributed, and interpreted, focusing on the analysis of text helps reveal the key thematic elements connecting the notions of success with masculinity. The key sub-themes identified in the textual analysis include the following: 1) *definitions of success*; 2) *“masculine” and “feminine” language*; 3) *body and physiology*.

4.2.1 Definitions of Success

In the selected podcasts, various definitions of success seem to emerge, some more consistent with the traditional notions of masculinity and the view of a man as “protector, provider, procreator” (*Rich Roll Podcast*), while for others the view diverges from these material

success-oriented views. On the more traditional side, there are examples from the *Jocko Podcast*, which describes success from the point of view of a former US military officer: “Practice, practice, practice. Mindset drives success. High stress equals bad decisions. Adapt, adapt, adapt. Don’t stop moving.” (03:21:24) This particular view is in line with the “hustle culture masculinity” originally based on the needs for economic survival and hypermasculinity demonstrated in the American Black communities (Klein, 1989). In modern interpretations, however, hustle culture has come to emphasise the value of productivity and being busy, often at the expense of one’s physical and mental health, according to experts (Munro, 2022).

In the same way, the connections of success to hustle culture are articulated in the *Tim Ferriss Show Podcast* by the guest, Chris Sacca, whose definition of success is also tied to hard work and economic wins: “I can see the direct correlation between the entrepreneurial risk we took and the hours we put in and what we got. I don’t think there’s a way to shortcut that” (52:40). A similar, more materialistic view of success is presented by Trent Shelton, who describes success as follows: “[This is when] your body transforms from workouts, you start eating healthy, this is when your business starts to take off, this when the people want you around” (*The Trent Shelton Podcast*, 30:58). Athlete Chris Bumstead, makes an ironic comment about different interpretations of success on the *Modern Wisdom* podcast, acknowledging the more “feminine” vision of success as happiness and balance (Alewell, 2013): “It depends on what your version of success is. Like, can these people live a life to be more happy and fulfilled? Yes. But will they be Michael Jordan and have six championships? Probably not, you know?” (*Modern Wisdom*, 05:52) While this specific comment indeed gives space to other possible interpretations of success, the speaker highlights the dimension of achievement as key to being successful. Therefore, these podcasts tend to reinforce the more traditional gendered understandings of success tied to career progression and financial metrics.

On the other hand, other podcast hosts and their guests seem to present a contrasting understanding of success, one that goes against the traditional gendered notions of success as equated to career achievement and financial wellbeing, as described in the works by Dyke and Murphy (2006) and Alewell (2013). In *The School of Greatness* podcast, the speakers critically review the traditional notions of success as linked to being “rich and famous”, while emphasising the psychological and emotional toll of the race to success on men. Similarly, success, according to Simon Sinek’s *A Bit of Optimism Podcast* guest Niel Strauss, various forms of success should be treated equally, including family, travel, or work.

Ed Mylett, on the *Jay Shetty Podcast*, goes further to say that work must be, first and foremost, tied to one’s feelings of happiness and fulfilment rather than financial gain or career promotion. Both the *Tim Ferriss Show* and *A Bit of Optimism Podcast* also outline the diverse roles of men which can be linked to different types of success: a father, a partner, a business owner, a friend. Hence, in contrast to the traditional definitions of masculine success, these speakers are gradually stepping away from these metrics-driven measures of success, instead adopting views that emphasise plurality of forms of success and promote balance.

4.2.2 Masculine and Feminine Language of Success

Building on the above definitions, there also seem to be some variations in the language used by the speakers to describe success and the processes of achieving it, indirectly providing a comment on how men can and should behave to be successful. According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), masculinity is communicated through language with the use of sports

or war imagery, delineating hegemonic masculinity. Such words are heavily present in various podcasts analysed in this sample. First and foremost, sports and games imagery is highly prevalent in episodes of *Modern Wisdom*, *The Trent Shelton Podcast*, and *The Diary of a CEO*. As an athlete, Chris Bumstead talks about his “definition of success and [his] definition of being a champion, definition of winning”, connecting the sports symbolism with wider notions of success. Trent Shelton uses the imagery of climbing, which also connects to the sport-like narrative of endurance: “I wanna see you climb, I wanna see you take the road of success” (*The Trent Shelton Podcast*, 10:20).

On the other hand, other podcasts show some reflexivity on these traditional linguistic representations of success, for instance, as Simon Sinek says on *The School of Greatness* podcast: “I don’t believe in winning or losing; it’s a rhetorical trick” (18:10). Another important aspect of masculine language in the podcasts is the presence of military language, which is highly prevalent in the *Jocko Podcast*, which is hosted by a former military officer, who, in this particular episode, also hosts a military man: “I see you’re a warrior; you are relentless and not afraid to mix it up” (14:48). Finally, another area of terms identified in the podcasts is technical terms, or terms that link to technology and construction, such as “building” skills or confidence (*Modern Wisdom*), “rewiring” (*Jay Shetty Podcast*), “reprogramming the Matrix” of success (*Joe Rogan Experience*). This type of language contextualises success within the more masculine professional domain and stereotypical masculine behaviours of aggression or domination (Roberts & Utych, 2020), suggesting a certain approach to success that is rooted in traditional masculine labour and representation.

At the same time, other podcasts increasingly employ language that may be categorised as feminine, referring more to communal purposes and caregiving roles (Wilson et al., 2011). Such language is prevalent in Simon Sinek’s podcast *A Bit of Optimism Podcast*, as well as Lewis Howes (*The School of Greatness*), where Sinek acts as a guest. In Howes’ podcast, Sinek emphasises the idea of service in “contributing to the lives of others”, reflecting a changing dynamic within the view of success and traditionally aggressive, masculine behaviours associated with it. The idea of giving instead of taking has also come up in other podcasts, such as *Jay Shetty Podcast*’s episode, with his guest Adam Grant saying that, to achieve success, “it might be better to be a giver than a taker”. In turn, Niel Strauss on *A Bit of Optimism Podcast*, goes on to suggest: “Instead of taking validation, give validation to someone else” (09:15). Finally, despite the highly traditional definitions of masculinity in the *Rich Roll Podcast*, there is also a reflection on how masculinity is “about service... real masculinity is purpose-driven and service oriented” (42:27). This language is associated with traditionally feminine roles of servers and caregivers, reflecting the possible change of the trajectory in male-dominated narratives of success and men’s overall role in society.

Finally, the use of emotional and spiritual language is prevalent in some of the podcasts, which is also typically associated more with feminine language (Lutz, 2013; Sointu & Woodhead, 2008). Adam Grant, for instance, uses spiritual – and even esoteric – language, describing his “healing journey” and saying that his “truth vibrates at the highest frequency” (*Jay Shetty Podcast*, 33:17). In turn, Sinek and Strauss talk extensively about “male vulnerability” and “trauma” as obstacles to success. Therefore, the language used by podcast hosts and guests clearly delineates masculine and feminine conceptions of success, demonstrating a transition from traditional, aggressive and individualistic patterns of achieving success towards its more balanced, community-oriented forms.

4.2.3 Body and Physiology as Instruments in Success

Another theme that emerges from the analysis is the role of body and fitness in achieving success, which falls in line with the traditional displays of masculinity through physiological traits, like muscular body and endurance. Thus, for Adam Grant in *Jay Shetty Podcast*, his “physiology matters, but hydration matters... so that [he is] feeding [his] soul and spirit” (13:42). Chris Bumstead talks on Chris Williamson’s *Modern Wisdom* podcast about discipline and how he “used to support [his] brain body and sleep are Omega-3s... and magnesium L3... to support cognitive performance, optimal hormone function and better sleep” (46:01). Similarly, Trent Shelton says in his show that a part of success is “eating healthy” and having one’s body transform as a result of exercise, which is also seen as success on its own. In this sense, it can be argued that a man’s body becomes an instrument of success, as well as a site of success, which, however, once again imposes a certain physical standard and pressure on men who want to be successful, reinforced set by the way in which the podcast speakers themselves look and conduct themselves.

4.3 Social Practice

4.3.1 Hegemonic Masculinity

The final part of the analysis is concerned with the social practice entrenched in the narratives about success and masculinity. On the one hand, some podcasts continue to uphold traditional visions of masculinity, viewing success through this prism – of physical fitness, career achievements, and financial gains. It could be argued that these portrayals continue to uphold the existing hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005), by setting a standard which should be aspired to by many men, but, in reality, could be achieved and sustained by a few. The community of podcasters, indeed, present a closely knit community where all the members are engaged in the same field; hence, the measures of success are also likely to be tailored to the metrics of success used in this specific field of content production. The speakers continuously emphasise the need to engage in hustle culture, engage in achieving goals and set new standards, as well as continuously work on self-improvement. These dynamics position men to step on the dangerous road of sacrifice and excessive work without any real guarantee of success, while reinforcing unrealistic expectations and harmful images of success as being rich and famous.

4.3.2 New/Alternative Masculinities

On the other hand, a new type of masculinity seems to be emerging from the discourse on these podcasts, one that is in direct opposition to traditional hegemonic masculinity. One vivid example is the criticism on the *Rich Roll* podcast, expressing ideas of “feminine masculinity”, saying: “Masculinity is a societal construct, it’s whatever we fill it with. A lot of women demonstrate wonderful masculinity... it’s not the domain of people born as men” (*The Rich Roll Podcast*, 42:54). In addition, various speakers dedicated time to the criticism of “toxic masculinity”, for instance, pronounced by Neil Strauss on *A Bit of Optimism Podcast* describing “self-taught alpha males trying to out-alpha male each other, and it becomes toxic” (05:12). Speakers also consistently challenge the traditional notions of success that pressure men into working too hard, sacrifice happiness and connections, once again demonstrating the change in the dominant social media narratives of what success means and what role it might be playing in a man’s life.

5. Conclusion

This study has explored ways in which male-led motivational podcasts on YouTube construct and convey narratives of success and, in doing so, shape both the traditional and evolving conceptions of masculinity. Through critical discourse analysis of ten highly popular YouTube podcasts, this research has demonstrated that, while traditional attributes of hegemonic masculinity, such as financial achievement, physical shape, and discipline, remain prevalent, there is a growing trend toward alternative masculinities that emphasise emotional vulnerability, balance, as well as different forms of success that challenge the traditional gender norms and expectations. The findings demonstrate how these motivational podcasts potentially serve as spaces where gender norms are reinforced, negotiated, and challenged. On the one hand, it has been shown that success is still often framed through a masculine linguistic lens based on themes and images of competition and dominance, this way reflecting consistent pressures on men to conform to an unrealistic standard of productivity and success. On the other hand, there appears to be a shift towards new definitions of success that are no longer attached to traditionally masculine metrics. Hence, these competing narratives illustrate masculinity in transition – a process of simultaneous adherence to and challenging of the traditional gender norms and definitions of success.

5.1 Practical Implications

This study has implications for podcast creators, digital platforms, and educators. For content creators, the findings highlight the need to reflect critically on ways in which success and masculinity are portrayed, particularly in light of the potential influence such portrayals have on male audiences. Indeed, emphasising emotional well-being, vulnerability, and diverse definitions of achievement can help challenge narrow models of success and contribute to the formation of healthier masculine identity perceptions, stepping away from stress-inducing materially driven models. Further, for platforms like YouTube, the research reflects the threats of algorithmic privileging of content aligned with dominant, hegemonic narratives of masculinity. Platform designers and moderators should consider promoting a broader spectrum of voices and success discourses to reduce normative bias and offer more inclusive representations of masculinity. Finally, educators and media literacy practitioners can use these findings to engage students in critical discussions about gender, digital culture, and the role of online discourses in shaping identity, which can be particularly relevant for younger, more vulnerable groups of students who consume online content. Incorporating podcasts into classroom analysis may help young people start thinking critically about online media and masculinity, giving them practical skills to navigate success-oriented pressures in healthier, more reflective ways.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Alexander Pershai for invaluable guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement throughout the development of this paper.

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