

Performative Male Memes

Challenging the authenticity of consumers' identity projects, reinforcing gender stereotypes

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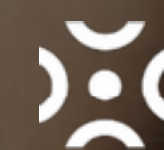
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UNIVERSITY
of York



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Gustave Eiffel

MARQUES
VALEURS
SOCIÉTÉ

A person is standing in front of a blue corrugated metal wall. They are wearing a white short-sleeved shirt with a black and white checkered pattern on the sleeves and dark-colored pants. They are holding a small book titled "mulan" in their right hand and a large clear plastic cup filled with green juice and ice cubes in their left hand. A small yellow and orange lion plush toy is hanging from their pants. A dark grey rectangular box is overlaid on the image, containing the text "THE CONTEXT" in white capital letters.

THE CONTEXT

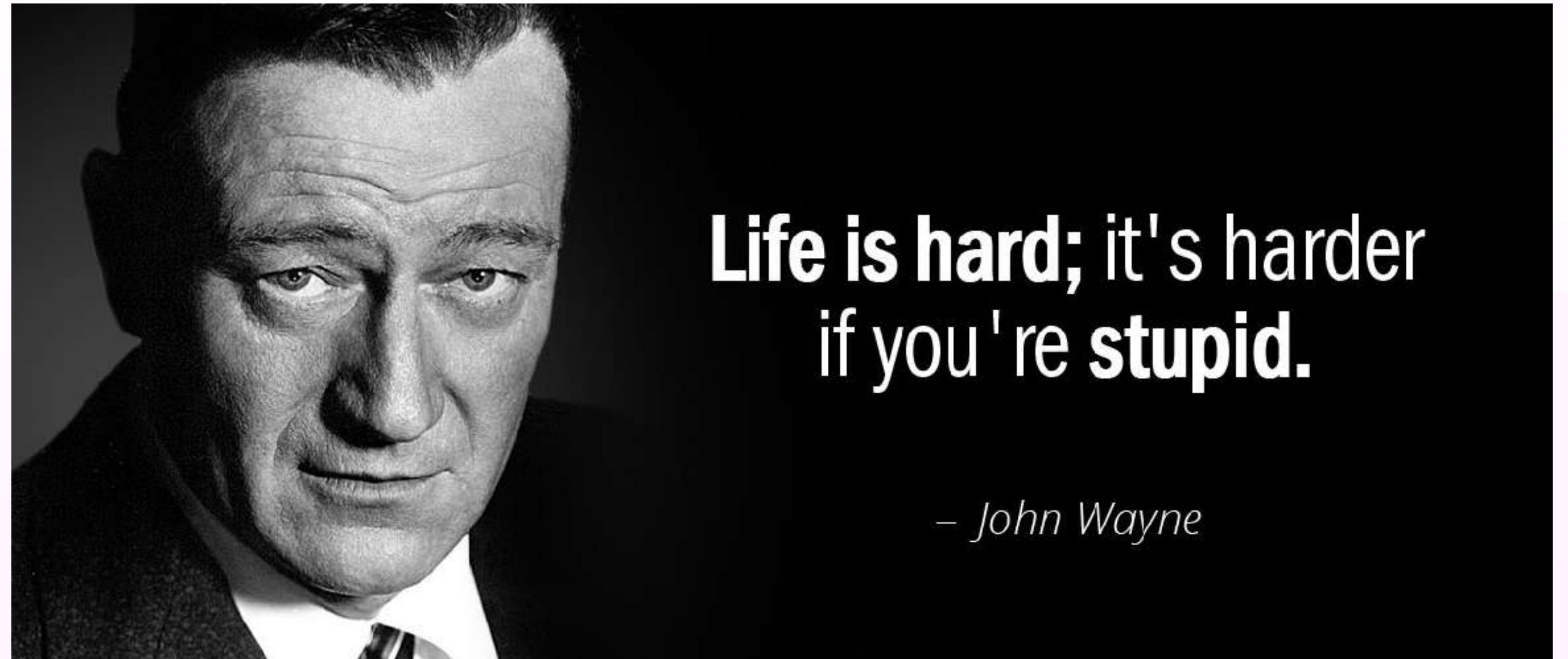
Imagine a world in which men...



...would be mocked for consuming feminine things

In the same world, men consuming feminine products...

**AS JOHN WAYNE
PUTS IT:**



...would do so deceptively to seduce women!

THE CONTEXT

PERFORMATIVE MALES AND THEIR MEMES

Performative males memes emerged in the summer of 2025.

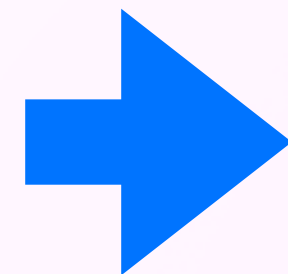
As “men who try too hard to look like feminists” (Connolly, 2025), they stem from a **lineage of other forms of non-virile masculinity** linked to **manipulative seduction**.



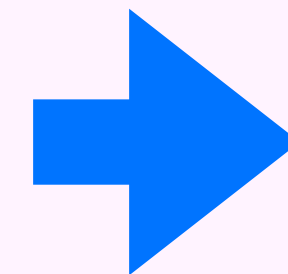
They have alternative interests and come across as very open with their emotions, but there's a dark side



2015-2019



2020-2024



There's so much more to him than being a meme

BY TAKESHI UCHIDA AND SADACHI KAWABATA • JANUARY 2, 2008

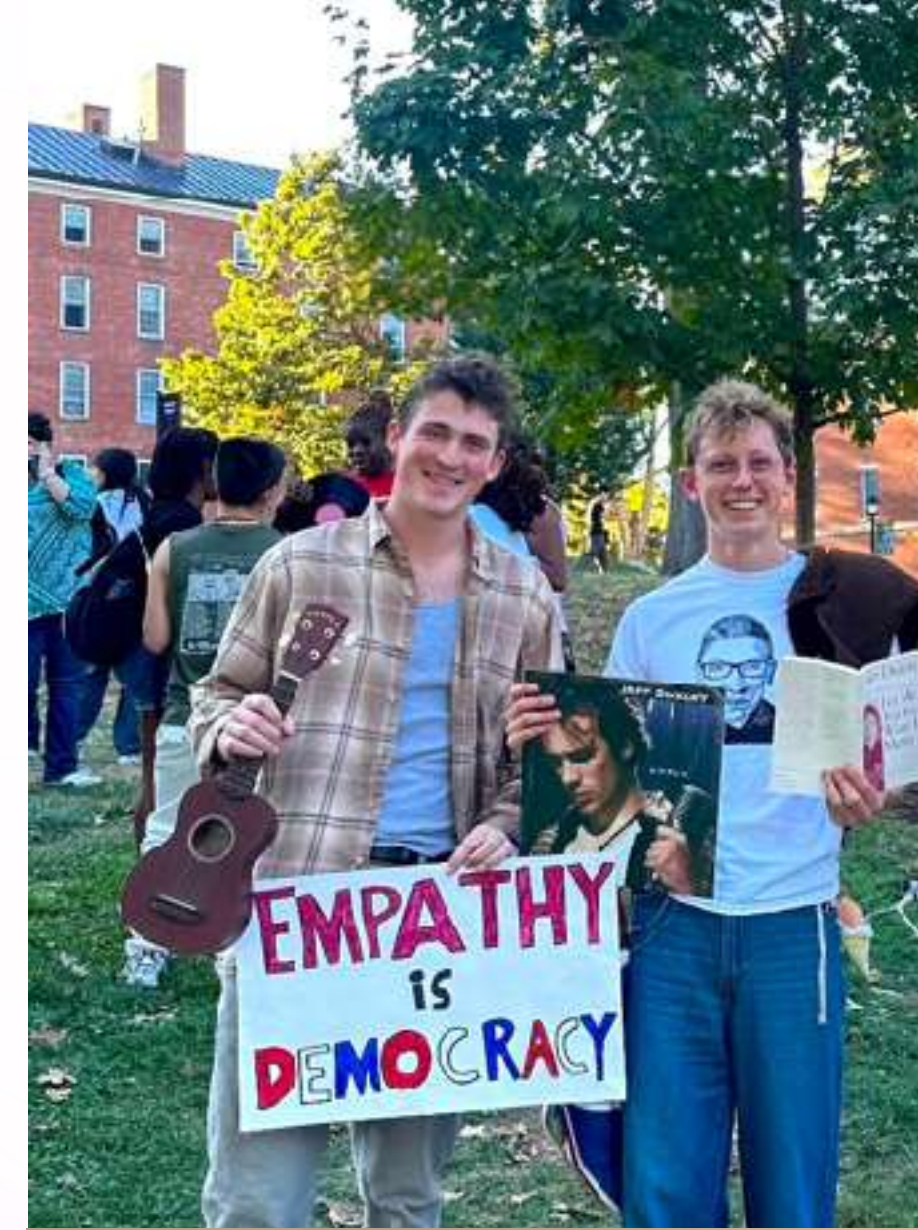
2025-

COMMON THREAD

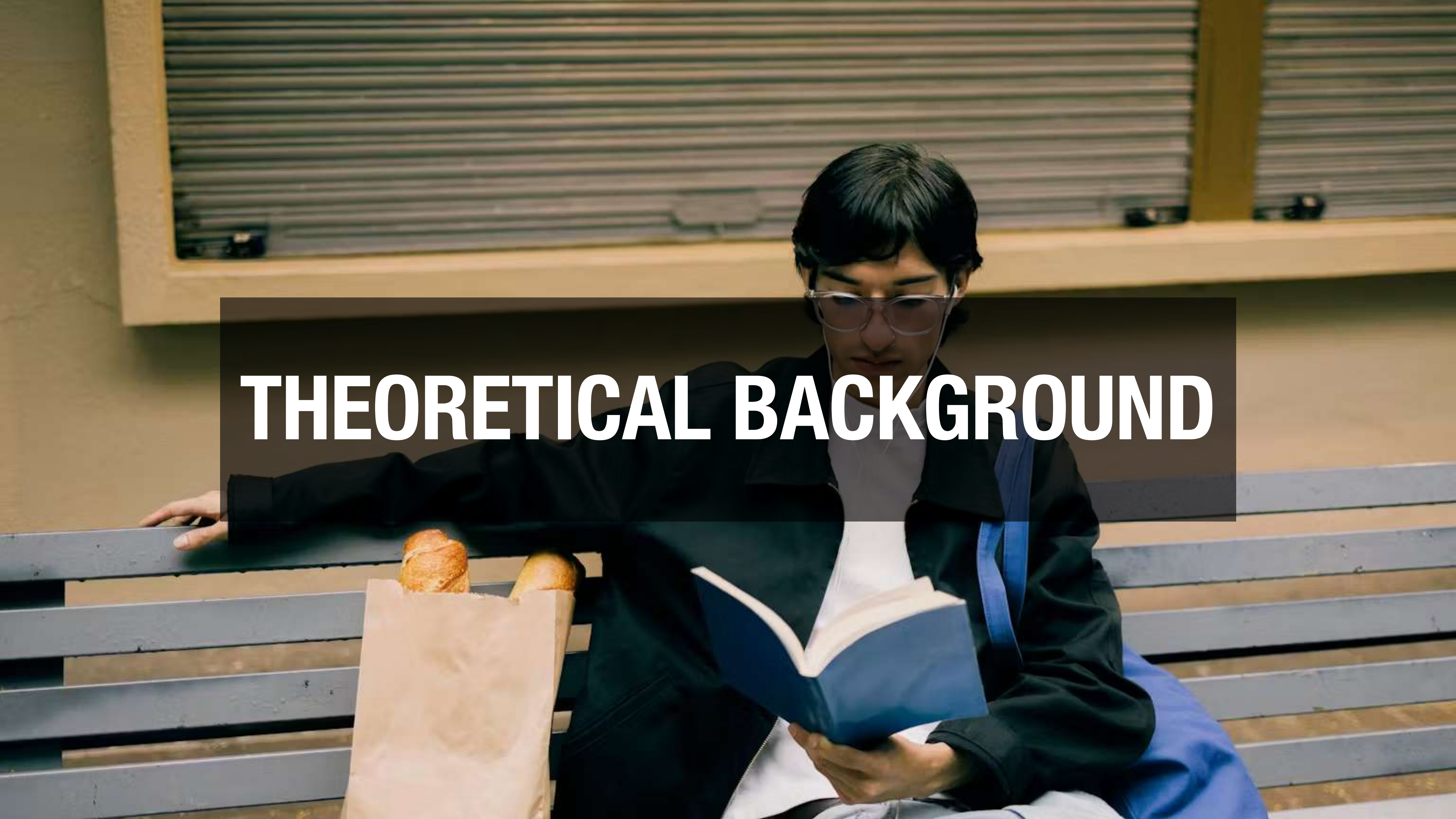
GOODS SIGNALS ALTERNATIVE FORMS
NON-GENUINE MASCULINITY

Several “**Performative male contests**” sprouted in the Summer of 2025 across the world, from New York to Lahore, passing through Singapore or London.

Just like other forms of alternative non-virile masculinity, **consumer goods** and **discourses** were used as **signals**.



THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A person with dark hair and glasses, wearing a black jacket over a white shirt and a blue backpack, is sitting on a grey metal bench. They are holding and reading an open book. In the foreground, a brown paper bag with two baguettes sticking out of it sits on the bench. The background shows a building with a window and horizontal blinds.

CONSUMPTION & IDENTITY

SIGNALLING ONE'S IDENTITY THROUGH ONLINE CONSUMPTION

Consumers are '**identity seekers and creators**' (Arnould & Thompson, 2005) who shape and **express their selves** through **offline** (Belk, 1988) and **online** (Belk 2013; 2016) **consumption**.

Consumers may have **ambivalent feeling** about products (Hogg et al. 2009; Dunn et al. 2025).

They express their identities through their **choices and non-choices** (Hogg and Michell 1996; Bourdieu 2010).

CONSUMPTION & GENDER

CONSTRUCTING GENDER IDENTITIES THROUGH CONSUMPTION PERFORMANCES

Gender = the social relations and practices arising from the reproductive differences of our bodies (Connell 2010).

Gender identity is **expressed through consumption** practices (Gurrieri and Drenten 2025; Kacen 2000).

Gender performativity (Butler, 1999, 2010)	Gender performance (West and Zimmerman 1987)
Gender is constructed by the “very expressions that are supposed to be its results” (Butler, 1999 p.33) The performances that define gender are deemed natural since they are habituated and internalized throughout socialisation.	Gender is “done” by recognizing, implementing, and legitimizing social differences and roles (West and Zimmerman 1987). Gender would be a more playful and free part of consumers’ identity assemblages.

MASCULINITY & AUTHENTICITY

NAVIGATING BETWEEN HEGEMONIC AND NON-HEGEMONIC MASCULINITIES

Masculine identities take many forms according to their compliance/non-compliance to traditional gender norms.

Hegemonic masculinity is the set of practises legitimizing that social order (1995; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

Men can perform different strategies to negotiate their masculinities:

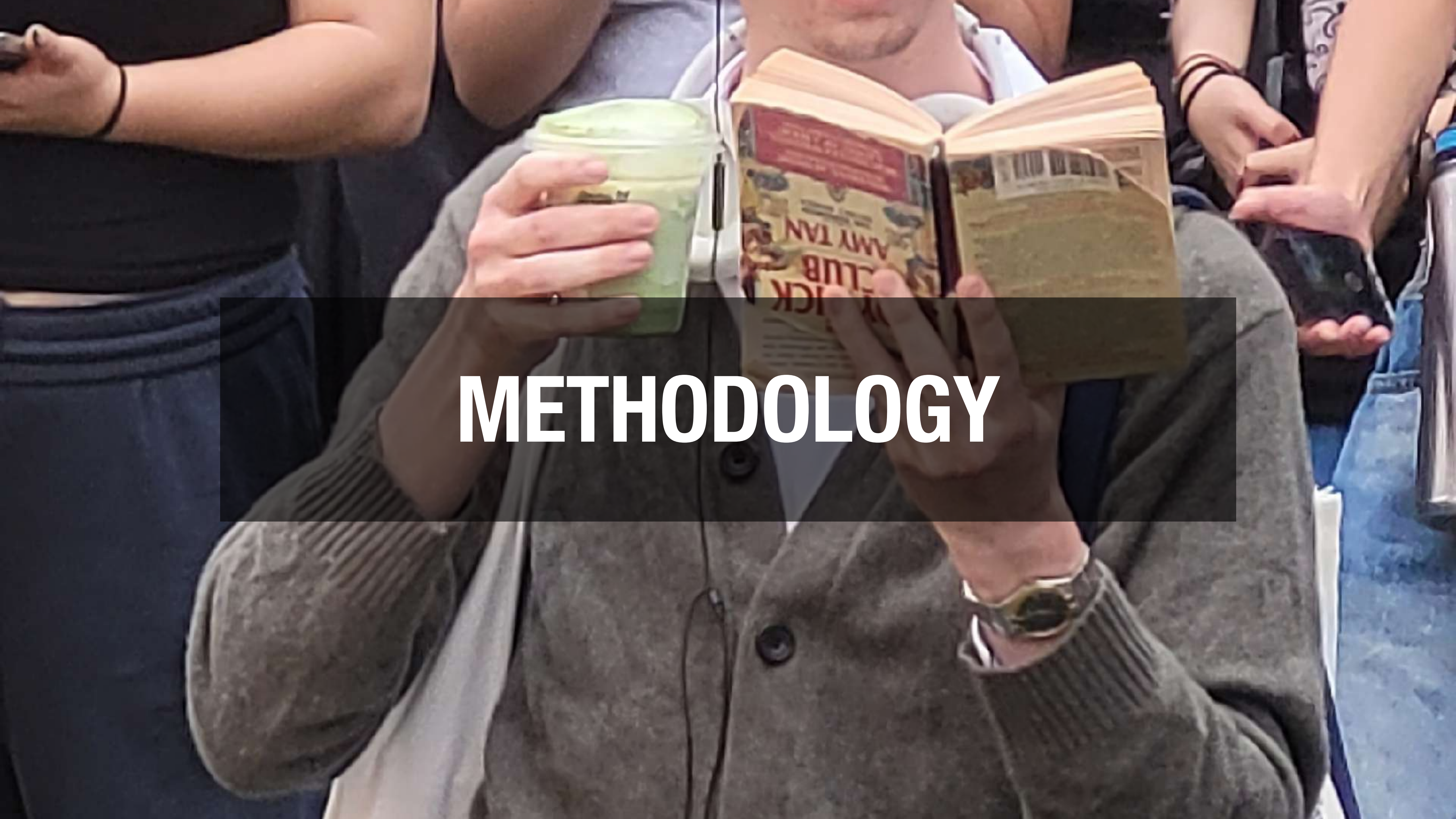
- **Embracing subordinate masculinity** (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014, Barry & Philips, 2016)
- **Humor** (Hein and O'Donohoe, 2014)
- Contextual **adaptation** (Bird, 1996; Flood, 2008)

This and our context brings questions about the perception of authenticity in online gender practices.

RESEARCH QUESTION



**HOW CAN THE STEREOTYPE OF THE PERFORMATIVE
MALE AND THEIR PRODUCT PANOPLY INFORM US ON
THE CONTESTATION AND RENEGOTIATION OF MALE
IDENTITY PROJECTS?**

A photograph of a person sitting and reading a book. They are holding a green drink in their left hand and the book in their right hand. The book's cover is visible, showing the title 'AMY TAN' and 'CLUB'. The person is wearing a grey cardigan and a watch. A semi-transparent dark rectangle is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the word 'METHODOLOGY' in white capital letters.

METHODOLOGY

NETNOGRAPHY

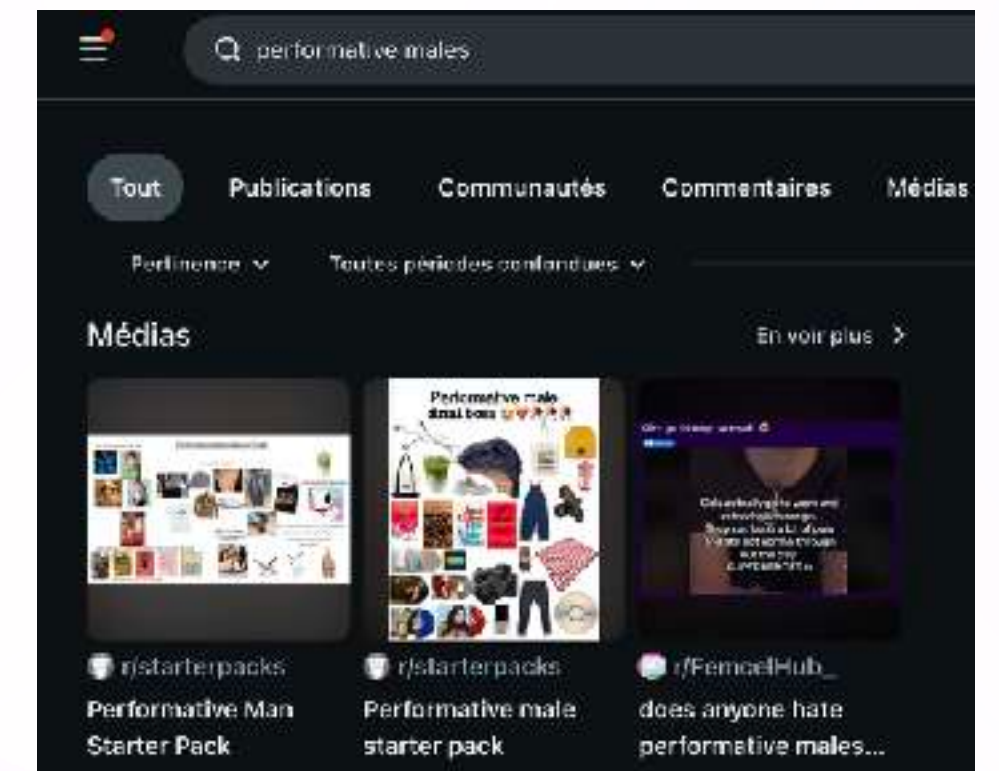
STUDYING PERFORMATIVE MALE MEMES ON THE INTERNET

Netnography highlights the **complexity of consumer identities** and considers images, videos, online posts, tags, and clicks as “**communicative performances**” (Kozinets, 2015 p. 458).

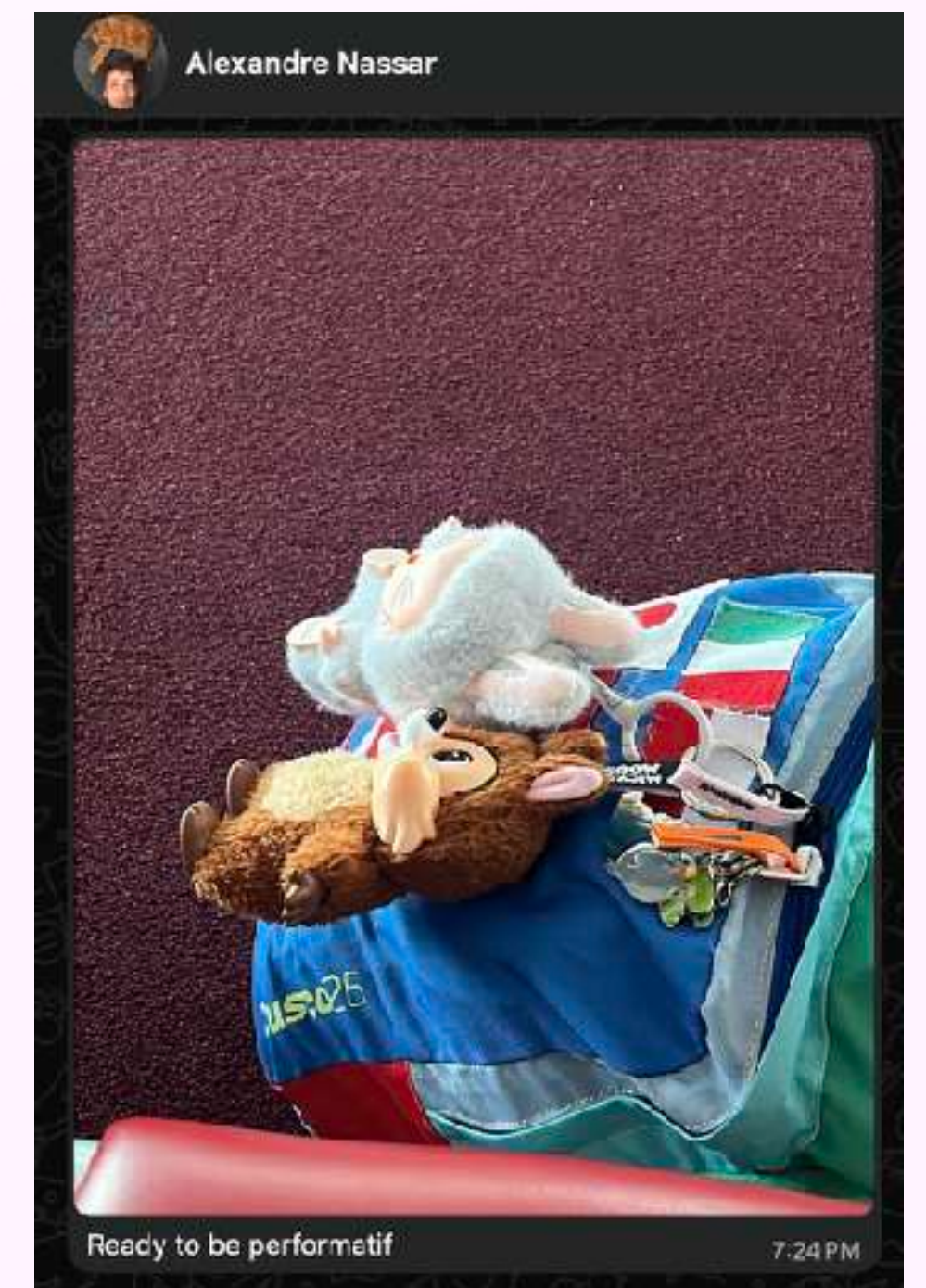
Exploring the **exchange and reception of memes** on social networks such as Reddit, Instagram, and YouTube.

We studied (Shifman, 2013):

1. Their contents, ideas and ideology
2. Their format
3. The position of the communicator



We followed Kozinets' advice and fully immersed ourselves in the environment.



A photograph of three young men standing outdoors in front of a blurred background of green trees. The man on the left has dark curly hair, wears sunglasses and a white t-shirt with a small graphic, and has white earbuds. The man in the center has dark hair, a mustache, and wears a red t-shirt with the text 'i'm confused wait... maybe i'm not' and white earbuds. The man on the right has curly hair, wears sunglasses and a brown jacket over a white shirt, and holds a green cup while wearing white earbuds. A semi-transparent dark grey rectangle is centered over the image, containing the word 'FINDINGS' in large white capital letters.

FINDINGS

MOCKING & DENOUNCING CALLING OUT DISINGENUOUS CONSUMPTION PERFORMANCE

The contents of the memes and the reactions to them were **often ambiguous**.

Most were humorous, either to **denounce** the disingenuousness of the consumption performances of performative males.



UniqueAthena: "He's manipulating me right now i can feel it"

sonnet.5 (Meme creator): "Is it working?"

soniaaaa: "Yes"

– Extracted from a meme found on Instagram

DOUBTING & COPING

THE PHENOMENON BROUGHT DOUBTS AND IDENTITY CRISIS, SOLVED BY COPING STRATEGIES

On memes, the adjective “performative” is not intended to refer to gender performance, but **disingenuous** or **inauthentic** gender performance aimed at luring women.

This generated anxieties of being toxic or displaying too many “red flags”, that some solved by reassurance or humor.

“So, when a man reads women, educates himself, avoids wasting plastic bags, and owns his music —is that really a reason to mock him?”

“It's not making fun of men who GENUINELY like that stuff, it's making fun of men who pretend to like that stuff just to get women. Get it right! 💋 ”

— Comments to the @voxdotcom Instagram post



RIDICULING & MASCULINIZING SPACES FOR THE EXPRESSION OF TRADITIONAL GENDER NORMS

To some, the calling out of performative males' “disgenuineness” was actually **the reflection of traditional gender norms**.

It ultimately resulted in **collective reconstructions of the scope of masculine identities**.

“It seems to turn into something that's reinforcing gender norms and saying men/women can only have certain interests under the guise of being ‘woke’. It may be a controversial opinion, but I guess I don't mind it even if it is ‘performative’”

– A Reddit User on a Feminist channel



Comment 1: Is this International problem?

Comment 2: Bro that's zero testosterone nothing else 😂

Comment 3: 250mg of Testosterone should fix this issue.

DISCUSSION



SUSPICIOUS MINDS

HYBRID GENDER IDENTITIES OR STRATEGIC APPROPRIATIONS?

Our findings align with Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) concept of hybrid masculinities.

Performative males incorporate in their extended selves consumer goods and experiences traditionally associated with femininity, sensitivity or feminist culture — Labubus, feminist books, tote bags — or retro items.

This is a **strategy** opposed to the gender-bending gap identified by Brough et al. (2016):

Not embracing green practices to express virility

VS

Embracing feminine practices to express virility

TENSIONS

THE HOMOSOCIAL/HETEROSOCIAL DOUBLE BIND

Our results extend Bird (1996) and Flood (2008) observations that **men adapt their gender performance** depending on their audience and show how their audience reacts to them.

Genuine performative males are in an impossible position:

Performative males are **simultaneously** accused of **manipulating women** through fake progressivism and attacked by men for **abandoning hegemonic masculinity**.

The phenomenon can be an illustration of how **social media reinscribe gender norms** (Schroeder, 2021).

WHO ARE WE TRULY?

QUESTIONING THE AUTHENTICITY OF GENDER PERFORMANCES IN A POST-POSTMODERN SOCIETY

We extend the research of Kondakciu et al. (2022) on the construction of consumers' "*authentic selves*."

It may be that in our post-postmodern society, with a renewed quest for authenticity (Cantone et al., 2019):

- A. **One cannot simply “do” gender** (cf. West and Zimmerman 1987) far away from hegemonic masculinities without raising suspicions.
- B. Traditional gender norms may **feel so natural** and internalized (cf. Butler, 1999, 2010) that we **have difficulty accepting others** that **divert** from ours.

What is an authentic identity if not a performance?

IMPLICATIONS



BEWARE OF CONTAMINATED PRODUCTS

**LABUBU DOLLS, MATCHA, TOTE BAGS SIGNAL PROGRESSIVE VALUES YET
MARK MALE CONSUMERS AS POSERS — STIGMA BY ASSOCIATION**

PLATFORM SPECIFIC POLICING AND AFFORDANCES

**FEMINIST REDDIT ENABLED NUANCE; INSTAGRAM AND 9GAG
REINFORCED HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY**

CONTESTED MASCULINITY

**MORE RESEARCH NEEDED ON THE “PERFORMATIVE MALE” STIGMA,
HYBRID GENDER IDENTITIES AND SUSPICIONS OF INAUTHENTICITY/
DISINGENUOUSNESS**



MERCI! ANY QUESTIONS? FEEDBACK?