

New soft masculinity discourse in era digital: A critical analysis of Zayn Malik's Instagram posts

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how soft masculinity is portrayed in seven Instagram posts by Zayn Malik from 2024 to 2025, using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. The analysis occurred between April and October 2025. Employing a qualitative method, the study used Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) grounded in Fairclough's model. Data gathering involved recording posts, encompassing images, text, and user engagements. Analytical methods encompassed textual and multimodal scrutiny across micro, meso, and macro scales, along with an assessment of discursive and broader social practices. Findings reveal that Zayn primarily embodies soft masculinity through casual and personal visual stances, affectionate and exposed facial cues, and language conveying appreciation, emotional honesty, modesty, and interpersonal compassion. These traits blend with lingering traditional masculine symbols (such as leather jackets, tattoos, and beards), resulting in a blended yet clearly soft form of masculinity that opposes dominant norms of control, emotional restraint, and detachment. The study argues that Zayn Malik's recent Instagram content represents a sincere challenge to traditional masculine ideals, rather than superficial or profit-oriented weakness, thus enriching modern perspectives on inclusive masculinity within online celebrity spheres.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Instagram; masculinity

INTRODUCTION

In the current digital age, social media sites like Instagram have emerged as vital arenas for people to exhibit, discuss, and transform their gender identities (Li et al., 2024; Kollyri & Milioni, 2022). On photo-centric platforms such as Instagram, this process typically unfolds via images, captions, and interactions with viewers, integrating qualities traditionally associated with femininity into how men portray themselves. Conventional views of masculinity are changing, paving the way for "soft masculinity" characterized by emotional expressiveness, aesthetic awareness, and

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supportive actions. This approach sharply differs from enduring ideals of ruggedness, control, and emotional suppression. Recent investigations emphasize how these transformations gain momentum on visual sites, set against wider conversations about gender standards (Florin, 2025; Steains, 2025; Foster & Baker, 2022)

Current research indicates that visual platforms are crucial for displaying mixed and welcoming styles of masculinity, frequently combining fragility with standard attributes through content that engages multiple modes (Scarceli & Farsi, 2024; Foster & Baker, 2022). Take TikTok analyses, for example, they uncover persistent conflicts between harmful dominant portrayals and new popular options, as content creators balance emotional honesty under algorithmic pressures (Ionescu & Licu, 2023; Dhoest, 2025). At the same time, reviews of platform material spotlight initiatives to encourage inclusive behaviors and nurturing groups centered on mental well-being (Agyapong-opoku et al., 2025; Plackett et al., 2023; Stahl et al., 2024). These trends demonstrate how platform features allow male personalities, be it stars or influencers, to defy inflexible gender rules. Overall, these discoveries highlight the intricate relationship between online capabilities and shifting masculine expressions (Li et al., 2024; Dhoest, 2025; Tanner & Gillardin, 2025).

Further research has delved into how these shifts manifest across diverse cultural contexts, particularly through critical discourse analysis of social media content. In Indonesia, for example, TikTok videos construct soft masculinity alongside "ubersexual" ideals, blending intellectual confidence with emotional warmth to challenge binary gender frameworks (Nabila, 2025). Similarly, explorations of gendered discourses online demonstrate how users employ language and visuals to negotiate societal expectations, often subverting traditional power structures in virtual spaces (Russo, 2022). Youth identities are also shaped by gender-specific network buzzwords, where critical discourse reveals processes of conformity and resistance that redefine self-perception among young people (Gu et al., 2025; Tan & Yu, 2024). Meanwhile, case studies of influential figures like Andrew Tate on TikTok unpack how representations of masculinity can reinforce or disrupt hegemonic norms, highlighting the platform's role in amplifying polarizing ideologies (Frejsjö & Birgersson, 2021). In the realm of fan cultures, micro-celebrity K-pop fanboys on Instagram actively negotiate their masculinities, balancing fandom enthusiasm with societal pressures to maintain conventional male traits (Scarceli & Farsi, 2024; Fitria et al., 2024).

Zayn Malik's Instagram page serves as a standout illustration of this pattern. Despite his outwardly typical masculine vibe, complete with a beard, tattoos, and a frequently stern demeanor, he consistently matches his photos with captions that radiate empathy and reflection. This juxtaposition of bodily image and spoken depth shows how soft masculinity can surface via words and demeanor, all the while preserving a core masculine identity. His updates from 2024 to 2025, spanning partnerships, family scenes, and thank-you messages, consistently emphasize transparency, compassion, and a move away from absolute authority.

Past studies have delved into new masculinities within online environments, with increasing focus on how sites influence gender displays. More recent efforts have charted the intricacies of inclusive and blended masculinities across social media,

amid ongoing obstacles posed by harmful elements (Dhoest, 2025). These works frequently tie such depictions to improved mental health knowledge among male celebrities (Stahl et al., 2024). Still, not many have utilized Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on the latest Instagram content from Western male stars, particularly in scenarios where visual strength meets verbal gentleness to form notable multimodal clashes (Foster & Baker, 2022).

Earlier research explored emerging masculinities in digital contexts, with growing attention to how platforms shape gender performances (Parks et al., 2022). More current work has documented the complexities of inclusive and hybrid masculinities on social media, alongside persistent challenges from toxic influences (Dhoest, 2025). These studies often link such representations to mental health literacy among male celebrities and influencers (Stahl et al., 2024). Nevertheless, relatively few have applied Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to recent Instagram activity by Western male celebrities. This is especially true for cases where visual toughness and verbal tenderness create striking multimodal contrasts (Charalampopoulos, 2024).

The present study fills this gap by employing Norman (Fairclough, 2012) three-dimensional CDA framework to examine seven Instagram posts by Zayn Malik from 2024–2025. Through analysis of linguistic choices, visual elements, and audience responses, the study evaluates whether his portrayal of soft masculinity represents authentic resistance to hegemonic ideals. It also considers if it is largely a carefully managed performance that upholds existing gender structures. Theoretically, it extends concepts of hybrid and inclusive masculinities by illustrating CDA's value in multimodal digital research. Practically, it sheds light on how celebrity social media may contribute to normalising male emotional vulnerability, with implications for understanding evolving gender dynamics online.

METHODS

Research design

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research design, utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the primary analytical framework, based on Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 2023; Obasi et al., 2025). This approach was selected to interpret the underlying meanings in both linguistic and visual elements of Zayn Malik's Instagram posts, while examining how discourses of soft masculinity are constructed and disseminated in digital environments (Tovar et al., 2023; Tsolak & Simon, 2025). Unlike quantitative methods that emphasize measurement and frequency counts, this qualitative design prioritizes in-depth exploration of social contexts, symbolic meanings, and ideological implications in multimodal content. It differs from traditional content analysis, which often categorizes and quantifies themes to focus on manifest patterns, by focusing on interpretive analysis that integrates textual, discursive, and sociocultural layers to reveal how language, visuals, and interactions collaboratively reshape masculine identities on social media.

Instruments

The primary tool was an adapted CDA checklist based on Fairclough's framework.

(Fairclough, 2023; Obasi et al., 2025). It guided analysis across micro, meso, and macro levels. The checklist covered textual features like word choice, grammar, visual layout, and multimodal elements. It also included discursive practices such as how posts are created, shared, received by audiences, and connected to other texts. Finally, it addressed sociocultural aspects, including ties to dominant ideologies, power relations, and processes of normalization. We customized the checklist for Instagram. For example, we added items on emojis and visual signs. We also included prompts for engagement metrics: likes, comments, shares. These capture how audiences respond in real time, something Fairclough's original model did not stress. A simple data logging template helped record details consistently. It noted timestamps, URLs, captions, images, and key user comments.

Data collection

We used purposive sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which the researcher deliberately selects specific cases or data based on predetermined criteria that are relevant to the research objectives (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025; Campbell et al., 2023). Seven Instagram posts from Zayn Malik's account (@zayn) were selected. They appeared between January 2024 and October 2025. The researchers picked these because they clearly showed soft masculinity, think emotional openness, gratitude, or empathy toward others. We focused on posts that mixed relaxed visuals (soft lighting, casual poses, intimate settings) with reflective captions. Promotional content was left out. Data collection ran from April to October 2025. We accessed the public profile directly through a web browser on a desktop—no special tools or login needed. Each post was captured via full screenshots. These included the image, caption, timestamp, and the top 20–30 comments (chosen for high likes or clear relevance). Background context came from public news sources. For instance, we noted nearby events like tours or collaborations. Seven posts provided enough depth. Breadth was not the goal in this qualitative work.

Data analysis

Analysis strictly followed Fairclough's three-dimensional model (Fairclough, 2023; Obasi et al., 2025). First, at the micro level: close examination of language (vocabulary, sentence patterns) and visuals (poses, expressions, colors) to spot signs of soft masculinity. Second, meso level: we looked at production choices, platform features (Instagram favors images), audience reactions through comments and shares, plus links to wider pop culture. Third, macro level: connections to larger societal ideas, such as pushing back against traditional tough masculinity or changing gender power balances. The core dimensions stayed unchanged. Still, we added iterative coding. Open coding first to find emerging patterns. Then axial coding to connect ideas across levels. Annotations were done by hand on printed screenshots and in Word files. For reliability, both researchers analyzed every post separately at first. We then met, discussed differences, and agreed on interpretations. Every step was logged. This made the process transparent and repeatable. Overall, the approach revealed how soft masculinity takes shape through combined words, images, and interactions.

RESULTS

The data analysis shows that Instagram plays a role that can influence social life, such as stigma or views of masculinity in men. Zayn's Instagram illustrates that masculinity cannot be solely determined by appearance or behavior but can be understood from various perspectives. The following summarizes the data findings on Zayn's Instagram regarding the concept of masculinity through a critical discourse analysis study.

Table 1. Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram

Data	Text Analysis			Discursive Practice			Social Practice	
	Visual	Linguistic	Multimodal	Production	Distribution & Consumption	Normalization of Soft Masculinity	Dominant Ideology	Power Dynamics
Data 1	Warm, friendly man; equal with woman (thin smile, relaxed pose, fish-eye lens)	Expresses gratitude; shows fatherly vulnerability; praises Jisoo as "legend"	Equality in photo + praise caption = mutual respect & warmth	Chose collab photo to show emotional maturity & balance "bad boy" image	Fans fully support, widely share, build community	Zayn helps normalize men thanking women & showing emotion; influences global teens	Challenges male dominance	Promotes gender equality in collaboration
Data 2	Tired but soft face; intimate selfie; masculine accessories (LV beanie, gold chain)	Deep thanks; admits reliance on fans/team; "We got there!"	Intimate selfie + gratitude = shared vulnerability after tour	Chose simple selfie for emotional connection post-hiatus	Fans call him "most beautiful man"; widely shared	Zayn normalizes men being tired & needing support; inspires teens	Challenges male independence	Promotes mutual support in career
Data 3	Sad expression; close with deceased friend; B&W photo	"Love You Bro" + whole/broken heart = open grief	Intimate pose + grief caption = male empathy	Chose B&W photo for authentic tribute despite privacy pressure	Fans grieve together, support Zayn's emotion	Zayn normalizes men showing grief & male closeness; influences teens	Challenges stoicism	Promotes emotional equality among men
Data 4	Protective soft face; carries daughter at beach; natural background	"I love you more than words"; "my life changed forever"	Caring father pose + love caption = family warmth	Shared private moment despite child privacy limits	Fans praise as "best father"; role model	Zayn normalizes caring, expressive fathers; inspires teens	Challenges fatherly authority	Promotes shared caregiving
Data 5	Big smile, joyful eyes on stage; B&W photo	"Left me speechless"; "forever grateful"; repeated "thank you"	Dynamic stage photo + overwhelmed caption = shared joy	Chose post-hiatus stage photo to build emotional momentum	Fans celebrate comeback, call him "humble & charming"	Zayn normalizes men being emotionally overwhelmed;	Challenges stage dominance	Promotes fan emotional connection

Data	Text Analysis			Discursive Practice			Social Practice	
	Visual	Linguistic	Multimodal	Production	Distribution & Consumption	Normalization of Soft Masculinity	Dominant Ideology	Power Dynamics
Data 6	Thoughtful face, direct eye contact; simple close-up	“Thank you for unwavering love”; “hope you love this record”	Authentic portrait + gratitude = intimate creative process	Promoted introspective album despite commercial pressure	Fans praise album’s emotional depth	Zayn normalizes reflective, fan-dependent artists	Challenges competition	Promotes inclusivity in music
Data 7	Calm, thoughtful face; smoking relaxed; leather jacket	“Wouldn’t be able to do this without you”	Relaxed pose + short thanks = post-release reflection	Chose calm moment to show fan dependence	Fans pray for his well-being, show empathy	Zayn normalizes thoughtful, dependent men; inspires teens	Challenges male independence	Promotes emotional support

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn’s Instagram related to collaboration and expressions of equality

This finding exemplifies constructions of masculinity through critical discourse analysis of Zayn’s Instagram posts, focusing on collaborations and expressions of equality. The result as follows:

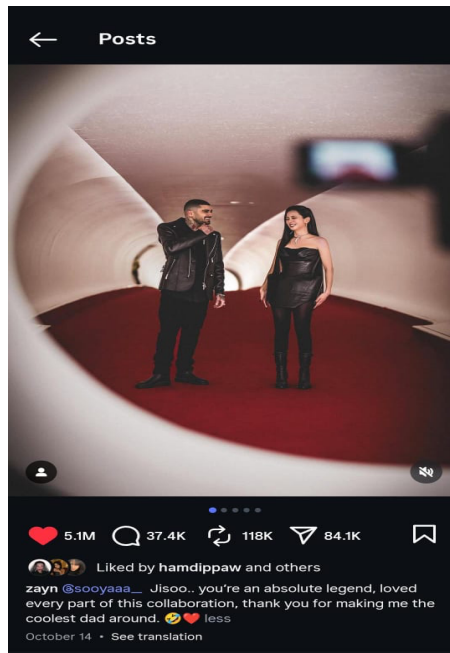


Figure 1. Zayn Malik's Instagram post featuring a collaboration photo with BLACKPINK's Jisoo for the single 'Eyes Closed' (posted October 2025), showing both in matching black outfits standing side-by-side.

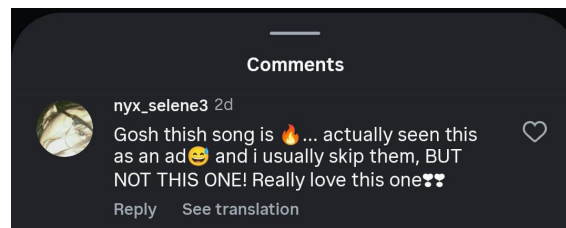


Figure 1. Comments from the post's comment section

The visual shows Zayn and Jisoo standing side by side in relaxed, equal poses with warm smiles, clearly emphasizing partnership over dominance. Zayn's black leather jacket and tattoos maintain a familiar edgy masculinity, but his open stance and gentle gaze toward Jisoo foreground emotional accessibility and collegiality. The caption uses humble, appreciative language "absolute legend", "honoured to be a part of it", "thank you" that openly celebrates a female collaborator's talent without any hint of control. Together, the balanced composition and grateful wording create a multimodal message of mutual respect and emotional generosity, distinctly softening traditional expectations of male detachment or superiority.

At the meso level, Zayn exercises agency in crafting this portrayal of humility within a high-profile cross-cultural collaboration, though commercial pressures for global appeal and his established image impose natural constraints. Instagram's visual emphasis and interactive features enable quick, positive dissemination; fan comments such as "Zayn and Jisoo slaying together" or "love this collab energy" build a supportive community that celebrates gender equality. Intertextually, it echoes K-pop trends of fluid artistic partnerships. Socioculturally, the post challenges hegemonic norms by normalising male admiration for powerful women, promoting shared power and inclusivity in global pop culture.

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to post-tour gratitude and vulnerability

As shown as Figure 3., in this selfie, Zayn looks tired yet visibly content after a performance, dressed in simple clothing and without any exaggerated or aggressive posing. The tattoos and beard continue to anchor the image in familiar masculine territory, but the unguarded expression and casual framing place vulnerability and post-exertion honesty at the centre. The caption explicitly recognises shared success "thank you for believing in me", "couldn't have done it without you" directly challenging the longstanding cultural script of the solitary, self-sufficient male achiever. The combination of an authentic, fatigued visual with language that emphasises interdependence creates a coherent narrative of communal accomplishment and emotional openness.

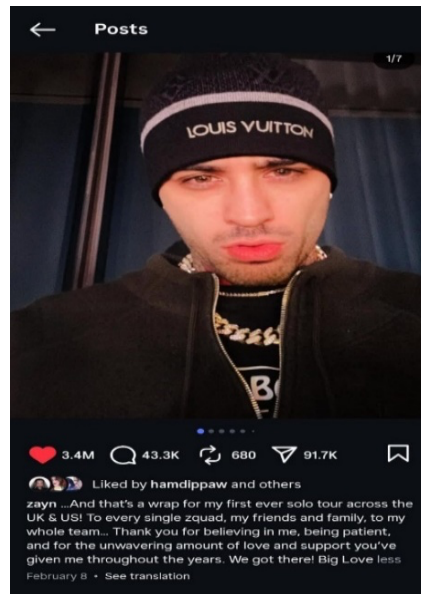


Figure 3. Zayn Malik's Instagram post featuring a collaboration photo with BLACKPINK's Jisoo for the single 'Eyes Closed' (posted October 2025), showing both in matching black outfits standing side-by-side.

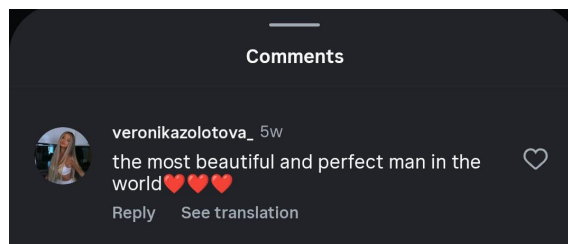


Figure 2. Comments from the post's comment section

Production choices suggest Zayn deliberately curates an approachable and grateful public self here, although the intense demands of tour schedules and the constant pressure for new content from fans impose practical constraints. Audience responses in the comments are warm and reciprocal “You were incredible, rest up king!”—reinforcing a sense of mutual support. The post fits comfortably within the growing practice among artists of sharing behind-the-scenes exhaustion and gratitude. Socioculturally, content like this helps normalise emotional reliance on others for men, gradually weakening the cultural insistence on unbreakable independence within the entertainment industry.

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to emotional tribute to friendship and loss

This finding explores constructions of masculinity in Zayn's Instagram tribute to friendship and loss through critical discourse analysis. The findings demonstrate how visual intimacy, vulnerable language, and audience interaction collectively challenge stoic masculine norms, repositioning male grief as relational, emotionally expressive, and socially validated within contemporary digital culture.



Figure 3. Projection screen tribute to Liam Payne during Zayn Malik's concert on the Stairway to the Sky tour (November 2024), reading "Liam Payne 1993-2024. Love you bro."



Figure 6. Comments from the post's comment section

The black-and-white photograph captures Zayn in a close, protective embrace with his late friend; the melancholic tone and physical intimacy convey profound grief and a depth of male emotional connection that is still relatively rare in public view. While the beard and overall aesthetic retain conventional masculine coding, the raw, vulnerable expression draws attention to relational bonds rather than individual strength. The caption matches the image with direct, unguarded language "Love You Bro", "miss you every day" that stands in sharp contrast to norms of emotional restraint among men. Together, the somber visual and the heartfelt wording produce a powerful multimodal expression of mourning and care between men.

Zayn's decision to share this moment reflects a conscious choice to display authentic vulnerability, constrained primarily by cultural expectations surrounding how men should publicly handle grief. Fan comments respond with widespread empathy "Sending you so much love, Zayn" transforming the comment section into a space of collective healing and support. Intertextually, the post connects to an emerging pattern among celebrities of using social media to model emotional honesty during

bereavement. On the macro level, it challenges the stoic ideal of masculinity, legitimizing male grief and helping to shift power toward emotional openness and relational strength.

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to nurturing fatherhood and family bonds

This excerpt examines representations of masculinity in Zayn's Instagram post highlighting nurturing fatherhood through critical discourse analysis. The findings illustrate how visual tenderness, affectionate language, and supportive audience responses collectively reconstruct masculinity as emotionally expressive, caregiving-oriented, and relationally grounded, challenging traditional authoritarian and emotionally distant models of fatherhood.

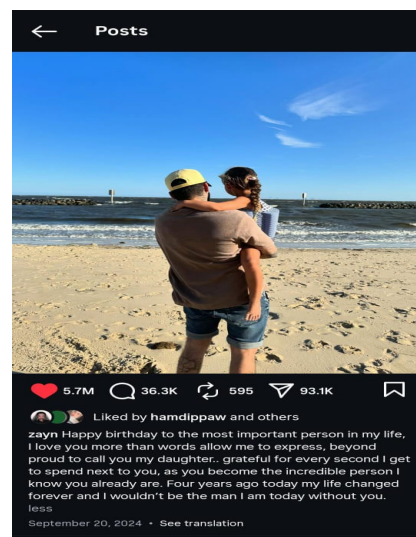


Figure 4. Zayn Malik's Instagram post for daughter Khai's birthday (posted September 2024 or 2025), showing him carrying her on a beach facing the sea.

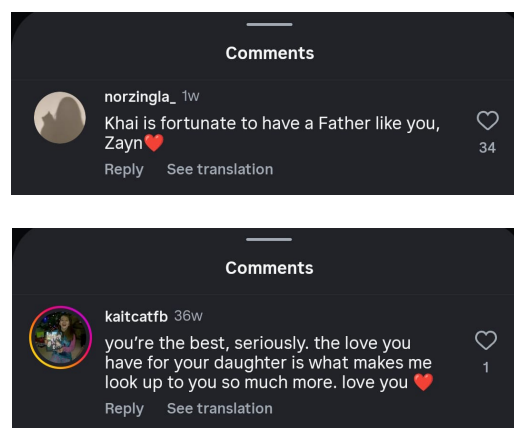


Figure 5. Comments from the post's comment section

Zayn is shown holding his daughter protectively on the beach, his gentle smile and relaxed posture conveying nurturing care rather than authoritative control. The caption expresses deep, unreserved affection "I love you more than words" in simple,

direct terms that run counter to stereotypes of emotionally distant fathers. The tender, natural scene softens traditional masculine strength into tenderness, while the wording adds unmistakable emotional depth to the role of fatherhood.

He seems to have chosen this moment deliberately to foreground this dimension of his identity, although considerations of privacy naturally shape what is shared. Fan responses are consistently warm and celebratory, praising the portrayal of engaged fatherhood. The post aligns with the increasing visibility of celebrity fathers who emphasize emotional presence over detachment. At a broader sociocultural level, it quietly contests controlling or authoritarian models of masculinity and supports more inclusive, egalitarian understandings of caregiving roles.

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to shared joy and emotional overwhelm in performance

The findings from Figure 9. describes the constructions of masculinity in Zayn's Instagram post about his return to live performance through critical discourse analysis. The findings reveal how expressions of gratitude, emotional overwhelm, and audience connection reframe masculinity as relational and affective, challenging dominant ideals of stoicism and individualistic performance-centered strength.

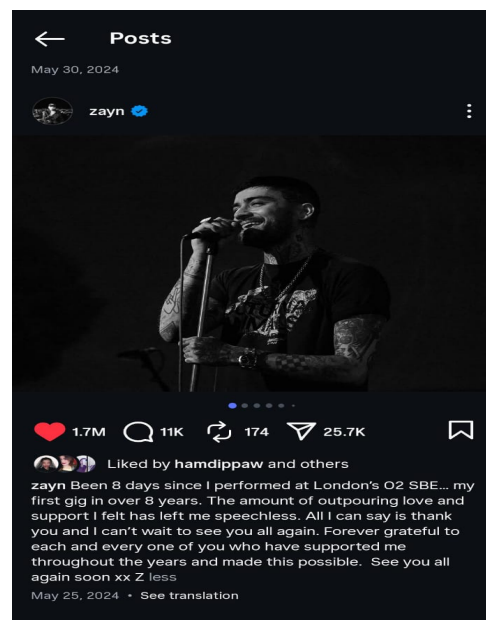


Figure 6. Zayn Malik's Instagram post reflecting on his first gig after hiatus (posted around May/June 2024), featuring a black-and-white stage photo.

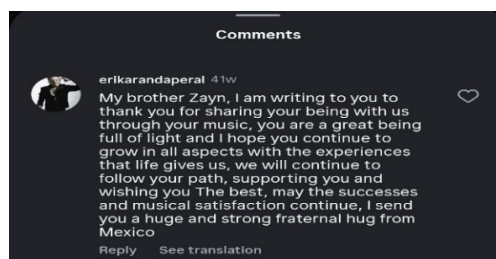




Figure 7. Comments from the post's comment section

The image captures Zayn mid-performance, interacting energetically with the crowd and radiating joy rather than dominance or aggression. The caption openly admits being emotionally overwhelmed "left me speechless" acknowledging vulnerability in the midst of the experience. The vibrant visual energy combined with words that express awe and gratitude together celebrate collective excitement over individual prowess.

Production choices foreground connection with the audience, balanced against the inherent demands and constraints of live performance. Enthusiastic fan replies in the comments amplify and extend that shared energy. The post fits naturally within concert culture's growing emphasis on mutual engagement between artist and fans. Societally, it helps normalise emotional expressiveness even in high-status, high-energy male roles.

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to introspective creativity and fan dependence in album release

An introspective close-up portrait emphasises authenticity and creative vulnerability; tattoos add edge, but the calm, reflective expression suggests inner depth. The caption conveys both joy in the work and clear dependence on others "thank you for all your unwavering love" (See Figure 11) linking artistic creation to relational support. The personal imagery paired with grateful, humble language softens the myth of the solitary genius into a more relational form of artistry.

Commercial pressures around album promotion inevitably shape the context, yet the emphasis on gratitude remains prominent. Fans respond by praising the emotional depth of the project in their comments. Intertextually, it resonates with other introspective album releases that invite more fluid interpretations of gender and self-expression. On the macro level, representations like this help normalise male artists who foreground openness and interdependence rather than isolation.

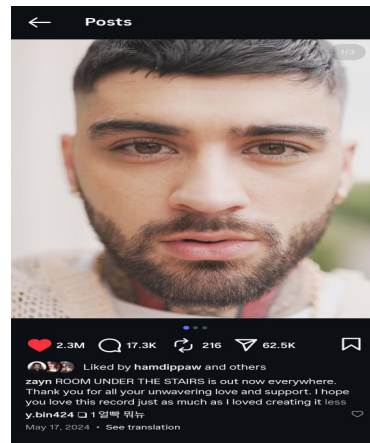


Figure 11. Zayn Malik's Instagram post announcing the release of album 'Room Under the Stairs' (posted May 2024), featuring a close-up portrait.



Figure 8. Comments from the post's comment section

Masculinity concept using critical discourse analysis in Zayn's Instagram related to reflection and reliance in new single gratitude

Zayn appears relaxed, smoking in a leather jacket against an industrial backdrop, (See Figure 13) blending calm vulnerability with familiar masculine signifiers. The caption openly acknowledges reliance "Wouldn't be able to do any of this without you" positioning achievement as a collective effort. The combination of edgy visual style and emotionally honest wording produces a hybrid soft masculinity that remains commercially attractive.

The timing after a release naturally encourages a reflective tone, though industry norms still exert influence. Supportive fan comments amplify the sense of shared empathy and connection. The post aligns with a pattern among artists who pause after milestones to recognize the contributions of others. At a broader level, it contests the cultural ideal of total self-sufficiency and promotes a more mutual, supportive understanding of success.

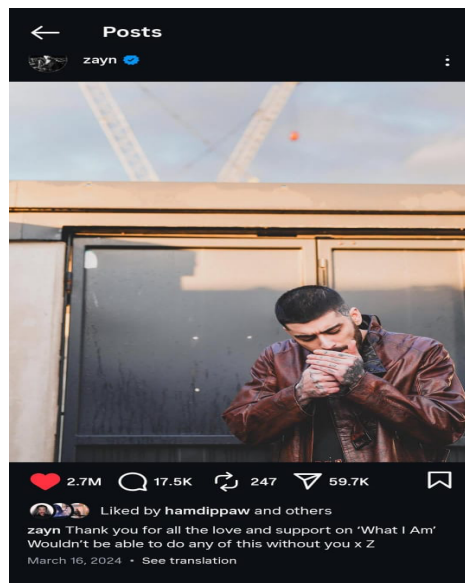


Figure 9. Zayn Malik's Instagram post thanking fans for support on a new single (posted around 2024-2025), featuring a contemplative photo with cigarette.

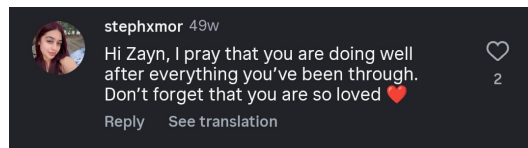


Figure 10. Comments from the post's comment section

DISCUSSION

The application of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) on seven Instagram posts by Zayn Malik from 2024–2025 consistently reveals representations of soft masculinity that integrate emotional vulnerability, gratitude, and relational empathy with visual and textual elements that maintain conventional masculine features. In Data 1, a collaboration photo with Jisoo and captions like “absolute legend” and “thank you” highlight equality and humility, contrasting with traditional dominance. The post-tour selfie in Data 2 with phrases like “thank you for believing in me” emphasizes communal success, while the black-and-white tribute in Data 3 (“Love You Bro”) promotes emotional intimacy among men during grief.

The fatherly role is evident in Data 4 through protective beach imagery and “I love you more than words,” extending to the performance post in Data 5, where enthusiastic stage visuals and “left me speechless” emphasize collective joy rather than individual dominance. The album promotion in Data 6 with introspective portraits and “thank you for all your unwavering love” highlights a creative process dependent on support, while Data 7’s reflective pose with a cigarette and “Wouldn’t be able to do any of this without you” depicts post-release vulnerability. These multimodal elements, including relaxed poses, warm emojis, and authentic close-ups, construct a hybrid masculinity that softens rigidity without fully abandoning tattoos or edgy aesthetics, such as leather jackets in Data 1 and 7.

Findings indicate that the dominant representation in Zayn's posts is soft masculinity, characterized by openness and care, followed by hybrid elements that blend sensitivity with traditional traits. For instance, when expressing gratitude in collaborations or reflections, Zayn uses verbal acknowledgments of dependence, aligning with soft masculinity's emphasis on empathy. In grief and family posts, he favors authentic intimacy, such as melancholic imagery and affectionate language, to convey vulnerability. This pattern shows how Zayn's discourse challenges rigid norms by prioritizing emotional expression, yet retains appeal through masculine symbols. This influences audience perceptions of gender fluidity, where verbal support reinforces emotional warmth (Lamer & Weisbuch, 2019). In fact, media becomes a representation for depicting gender concepts (Goodwill et al., 2019; Hassan, 2025; Trombetta et al., 2023). Thus, educators and media creators should recognize such representations to adjust strategies promoting inclusive gender views. Aligning portrayals with audience needs can enhance engagement, as suggested by prior research that understanding soft expressions influences societal acceptance on digital platforms (Potts & Stebleton, 2024)

Here, gentleness does not remove masculine appeal but creates an authentic version that unites both sides. In the **discursive practice**, Zayn's strategic curation can be seen in his choices: showing cultural equality in his collaboration with Jisoo, expressing gratitude after (Abidin, 2021) tours that highlight teamwork rather than individual greatness, and celebrating fatherhood as a source of emotional strength. In the **sociocultural practice**, this representation helps normalize *gentle male identities* globally by challenging the traditional idea that masculinity means aggression, control, or emotional restraint (Hentschel et al., 2019; Khurshid et al., 2024; Malonda-vidal et al., 2021; Malonda et al., 2023). Zayn's posts shift gender power dynamics by showing that men can be successful, attractive, and authentic while expressing sadness, gratitude, and care. This promotes emotional equality between genders and influences young people to see that vulnerability does not reduce attractiveness but actually deepens relationships (Mckenzie et al., 2018; Mehta, 2025). However, this alternative image is still carefully packaged in an edgy aesthetic to maintain acceptance in the entertainment industry showing that even though resistance to traditional masculinity exists, it still operates within limits that protect commercial appeal. In other words, male vulnerability is widely accepted only when combined with traditional masculine symbols—not just soft colors, but also tattoos and tears.

On the other hand, the relationship between soft masculinity and hegemonic norms can have varying impacts, depending on contextual factors like celebrity influence and platform dynamics (Berlin & Rollero, 2025; Hassan, 2025; Jewkes et al., 2015; Stahl et al., 2024). As in prior research, celebrity vulnerability influences perceptions if the environment supports it, especially among adolescent boys frequently exposed to online masculinity content (Caldwell & Fisher, 2025; Franssen, 2022). Thus, analysts must understand these dynamics for effective gender studies. Prior research found that to deepen insights into evolving masculinities, attention to multimodal coherence is key, playing a role in knowledge gained from digital content, such as TikTok representations challenging stereotypes through male influencers (Aloha & Gunnarsson, 2023; Dhoest, 2025; Kollyri & Milioni, 2022).

The results of this study also have implications for media practitioners to design flexible campaigns that accommodate diverse gender expressions. In addition, the findings can guide on supporting authentic resistance to norms, contributing to understanding how celebrities foster inclusive dynamics, leading to better societal outcomes. Educators and media practitioners must utilize Zayn's example to design more flexible and inclusive communication strategies. This study's findings also have implications for Instagram and TikTok platforms: use these findings as a guide to create gender equality campaigns based on real stories—fathers cooking while hugging their kids, men crying at BLACKPINK concerts, cross-cultural collaborations without dominance—not just pastel filters or feminine colors that actually reinforce stereotypes. Additionally, schools can integrate Zayn posters on bulletin boards with slogans like “It's okay to cry, still a champion” to build adolescent boys' self-confidence, while advertising agencies must shift narratives from “macho guys lifting weights” to “gentle guys lifting kids and hearts.”

The results of this study yield notable advantages for theoretical and applied fields. On a theoretical level, it advances masculinity research by delivering real-world data on how soft masculinity is shaped and depicted through celebrity social media conversations in the modern digital era. It broadens the use of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) for scrutinizing gender ideology formation on image-based platforms like Instagram, highlighting its utility in multimodal content analysis. Moreover, it deepens insights into hybrid masculinities by illustrating how conventional and non-traditional masculine attributes can blend to form novel gender expressions in today's popular culture. Practically, the study equips media professionals and creators with guidance to craft more equitable and genuine gender portrayals in online initiatives that appeal to varied demographics, especially Gen Z and millennials.

This study supplies research-backed perspectives on how celebrity narratives shape young males' views of masculinity, aiding programs that foster positive gender identity growth. Social media sites like Instagram and TikTok can apply these insights to launch campaigns promoting gender equity through real stories instead of clichés, building more welcoming online spaces. Marketing firms can gain from recognizing the market potential of soft masculinity depictions, driving a move away from domineering male stereotypes toward portrayals emphasizing emotional openness and compassion. Lastly, policymakers can draw on this information to advance efforts combating harmful masculinity and encouraging gender diversity in media and digital realms, with a special emphasis on youth-focused initiatives

CONCLUSION

Overall, the first finding of this research is that the way Zayn Malik shows male softness is the most dominant in seven Instagram posts from 2024–2025. Zayn teaches that men can cry for departed friends and can praise women as “absolute legend” while standing side by side. However, leather jackets, head tattoos, and cigarettes remain present softness doesn't erase classic masculine appeal, but rather unites it into an authentic hybrid. On the other hand, the relationship between Zayn's softness and hegemonic norms is dynamic, depending on platform and audience

context. Like previous research, male vulnerability is only widely accepted if packaged with traditional elements not just pastel colors, but tattoos plus tears. Thus, educators and media practitioners must utilize Zayn's example to design more flexible and inclusive communication strategies.

This research opens the way for future researchers to develop similar analyses on other celebrities (e.g., Harry Styles or BTS) to see how male softness influences fan behavior on TikTok. Furthermore, follow-up studies can explain adolescent audiences' adaptations to non-traditional representations like surveys on the impact of the "Eyes Closed" MV aired in a spaceship since current explanations are limited to Zayn's seven posts. Investigating real impacts on young men's self-esteem (e.g., a 30% increase after viewing soft content) will provide more actionable recommendations for the Ministry of Education and Culture and the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission in fostering inclusivity in diverse digital environments.

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR(S) CONTRIBUTION

Tibefrilia, J. D.: Conceptualization (lead), methodology (lead), formal analysis (lead), investigation (lead), data curation (lead), writing – original draft (lead), writing – review & editing (supporting), visualization (lead). **Meinawati, E.:** Conceptualization (supporting), methodology (supporting), validation (lead), writing – review & editing (lead), supervision (lead), project administration (lead).

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