



'The Spornosexual': the affective contradictions of male body-work in neoliberal digital culture

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3 **'The Spornosexual': the affective contradictions of male body-**
4 **work in neoliberal digital culture**
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8 **Abstract**
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11 Since 2008 there has been an empirically observable rise in young British
12 men sharing images of their worked-out bodies on social media platforms.
13 This article draws on interviews with men who engage in this popular cultural
14 practice to suggest that it is an embodied and mediated response to the
15 precarious structures of feeling produced by neoliberal austerity. It begins by
16 arguing that as young men's traditional breadwinning capacities are being
17 eroded in a post-financial crisis austerity economy, increasing numbers of
18 them are turning to sharing images of their worked out bodies as a way of
19 feeling valuable. Moreover, by speaking to men who engage in this practice, it
20 becomes possible to map the affective contradictions of inhabiting the
21 precarious spaces of austerity culture. The article concludes by suggesting
22 that within these affective contradictions lies the potential of resistance to
23 neoliberalism's ongoing territorialisation of everyday life.
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34 **Keywords:** male body, neoliberalism, austerity, social networking sites, value,
35 affect.
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37 [Word count: 6182]
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41 **Main Text**
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43 Introduction
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46 Since 2008 there has been an empirically observable rise in young
47 British men sharing images of their worked-out bodies on social media
48 platforms. This article argues that the rise of this practice can be understood
49 as an embodied and mediated response to the precarious structures of feeling
50 produced by neoliberal austerity. It begins by arguing that as young men's
51 traditional breadwinning capacities continue to be eroded within a post-
52 financial crisis austerity economy, they have begun to deploy a form of value
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3 creation historically associated with less privileged groups: body work.
4 Drawing on six semi-structured, in-depth interviews with men who engage in
5 this practice, this article finds evidence of Lauren Berlant's 'cruel optimism'
6 (2011) – a contradictory structure of feeling produced by neoliberal cultural
7 practices that paradoxically impede the expansive transformations that they
8 so spectacularly promise. The article concludes by moving beyond Berlant to
9 argue that within the interviewee's incipient self-consciousness of the 'cruelty'
10 of this particular form of cruel optimism lies the potential of resistance to
11 neoliberalism's ongoing territorialisation of our everyday lives.
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20 *The rise of sharing images of fit male bodies on social media platforms*

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23 Since 2008 (the year of the financial crisis), there have been a range of
24 social and cultural indicators which suggest that more young men are
25 fashioning muscular bodies and sharing images of them online. Arguably, the
26 most significant indicator comes from data produced by the Active People
27 Survey (2014) which measures weekly sports participation in the UK and is
28 carried out by the organisation Sport England on behalf of the Department of
29 Culture, Media and Sport. After having surveyed approx. 200,000 people
30 every year since 2006, Sport England have found a significant year-on-year
31 increase in the amount of 16-25 year old men attending the gym. In 2006
32 14.7% of 16-25 year old men in Britain went to the gym at least once a week.
33 In 2013 this figure increased to 21%. This is one of the largest increases in
34 the amount of any social group doing any type of sport at least once a week in
35 the same period. A year later, market research company Nielsen found that
36 sales of sports nutrition products that are used to strip body fat and build
37 muscle increased by 40% in Britain's ten largest supermarkets. This was the
38 second largest growth in sales of any product sold in supermarkets in that
39 year (Smithers, 2014).
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53 This substantial increase in young men going to the gym is reflected in
54 the sorts of media that this demographic is both consuming and producing. In
55 2009 the print version of the men's gym and fitness magazine, *Men's Health*
56 not only became the best selling title in the British men's magazine market
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3 (Brook, 2009) but at the time of writing is selling nearly twice as many print
4 copies as its nearest competitor – the well-established GQ (Plunkett, 2014).
5 This is during a moment in which the overall consumer magazine market is
6 dramatically decreasing in circulation (Sweney, 2014). In terms of digital
7 media, the word ‘selfie’ was named the Oxford English Dictionary’s word of
8 the year in 2013, and the ‘healthie’ was coined around the same time to
9 signify a fitness-related selfie. At the time of writing a substantial number of
10 ‘healthies’ have aggregated around the following hashtags on popular social
11 networking site Instagram: #fitness (91,612,347), #fitfam (26,221,853), #fitspo
12 (21,488,398) and #muscle (12,628,642). A large proportion of these are
13 images of men displaying their muscular bodies.
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23 Finally, in July 2014, media commentator Mark Simpson coined the
24 term ‘spornosexual’ in a short article in the *Daily Telegraph* commenting on
25 the rise of men attending the gym primarily for reasons of appearance
26 (instead of fitness or health) and then sharing images of their bodies on social
27 media platforms (Simpson, 2014). The word ‘spornosexual’ is a portmanteau
28 of sports star and porn star and refers not only to the athletic bodies these
29 men are striving to achieve (high musculature and low body-fat), but also the
30 erotically charged nature of the images they are sharing. The term was taken
31 up across a range of different media outlets including follow up articles in *The*
32 *Daily Telegraph* (Merz, 2014a; Merz, 2014b; Peacock, 2014; Stanley, 2014;
33 Wotherspoon, 2014), *The Guardian* (Moore, 2014), Vice.com (Martin, 2014),
34 *Esquire* (Olesker, 2015) and the *Evening Standard* (Curtis, 2015). Vice.com
35 used the term ‘modern douchebag’ and the *Evening Standard* referred to
36 ‘mansformations’ to characterise similar phenomenon.
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48 The male body, neoliberal austerity and precarious structures of
49 feeling: a theoretical framework
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56 The rise of this particular, digitally mediated form of body-work might
57 have started around 2008, but the idea that men perform body-work, that the
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3 male body can be transformed into media spectacle, or that scholars have
4 tried to make sense of these practices and representations in terms of their
5 historical moment is not. A series of studies have explored different sites
6 where the male body has become more visible in the period that Anthony
7 Giddens has called late modernity (1991): in Hollywood cinema (Tasker,
8 1993; Dyer, 1997), in the mainstreaming of practices associated with
9 metropolitan gay culture (Simpson, 1994; Halperin, 1995; Sinfield, 1998) and
10 in the visual cultures of consumerism, such as advertising, magazines and
11 retail space (Chapman and Rutherford, 1988; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996). For
12 the majority of these critics, these figures represented embodied responses to
13 changes in society brought about by feminism, gay liberation and the AIDS
14 crisis in the context of an expanding consumer culture. They argue that their
15 emergence, particularly after the 1970s, was significant because historically
16 the male body had been far less visible than the female body in the popular
17 cultures of modernity. This, it has been argued, is because of the relationship
18 between the body and (late)modern hierarchies of power which have been
19 organised according to the Cartesian privileging of the mind over the body.
20 This has meant that during this period those who have held power - middle-
21 class, white, heterosexual, cis-gendered, men - have defined themselves
22 through their mind whilst at the same time defining those they have
23 subordinated– the female, the queer, the working class and those racialised
24 as non-white – through their bodies (Grosz, 1994). What this has meant in
25 terms of value-creation is that the former group has historically been
26 employed as high paid decision makers whilst the latter have their bodies to
27 put to low or no-paid work – whether through manual labour, slavery,
28 domestic labour or sex work.
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48 What is being argued here is that the rise of this new digitally mediated
49 body practice amongst young, white, middle class, cis-gendered men is
50 evidence of shifts in the late modern hierarchies of power that have recently
51 been occurring in Britain. The rise in men going to the gym and sharing
52 images of their worked out bodies began around 2008. This coincides with the
53 intensification of neoliberalism that occurred in response to the 2008
54 economic crisis through the austerity measures that have been imposed in
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3 Britain and across Europe. As discussed below, this is no coincidence. There
4 is a correlation between the rise of this practice and the intensification of
5 neoliberalism through measures of so-called austerity. This new digitally
6 mediated body-practice, it is argued here, is an embodied and mediated
7 response to shifts in power that are taking place during the austerity moment.
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11 12 13 *Neoliberal austerity* 14

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16 The literatures on neoliberal and austerity culture are wide and contain
17 work from a range of different perspectives, much of which can be used to
18 help make sense of different aspects of this emergent cultural practice. Most
19 of this scholarship operates with the following understanding of neoliberalism:
20 the central tenet of neoliberal ideology is that the redistributive social
21 democratic state is essentially tyrannical, inhibiting the individual's capacity for
22 autonomous, competitive, hard-working entrepreneurship (Hall, 2011; Gilbert,
23 2013a). The ideal subjects of neoliberal ideology, therefore, are autonomous
24 'individuals' who relate to each other in a competitive, market-based fashion in
25 all areas of social life. To most of these critics, 'austerity' is seen as an
26 intensification of neoliberalism – a means of using the economic crisis as the
27 justification to further erode the already diminished redistributive capacities of
28 the social democratic state. These critics argue that the result of austerity is
29 widening inequality and the retrenchment of power along different axes – for
30 example, class (Harvey, 2005), gender (Campbell, 2013) and race (Davison
31 and Shire, 2014). Given that the social group being scrutinized here are
32 young men (the oldest interviewee was 30 in 2008 and the youngest was 15),
33 it is worth elaborating on how power is being retrenched along the axis of
34 generation. Ben Little has argued that one of the demographic segments most
35 affected by neoliberal austerity is the generation of people born after 1980
36 (2013). He argues that one of the reasons for this is that the post-1980
37 generation have not been of working age long enough to accumulate the
38 capital necessary to protect themselves from the severity of the new
39 neoliberal economy. This new economy is defined by, amongst other things,
40 prohibitively high house prices, the withdrawal of housing benefit and the
41 introduction of the bedroom tax; the loss of secure long term contracts;
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3 increased tuition fees as well as the loss of the Education Maintenance
4 Allowance and the rise in pension ages. Taken together, these policies have
5 made life increasingly precarious for young people since the economic crisis.
6 In fact, for many critics of neoliberalism, precarity has been this defining
7 characteristic of the post-2008 historical conjuncture.
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13 Conventionally, the term precarity has been understood in relation to
14 'precarious' working conditions – low pay, weakened trade unions, short
15 term/zero hour contracts and reduced opportunity for any sort of employment
16 (Standing, 2011). Recently however, the term has been used more
17 expansively to characterise the lived experience of the neoliberal everyday.
18 One of the most influential writers to propose this is Lauren Berlant in her
19 2011 book *Cruel Optimism*, in which she argues "precarity provides the
20 dominant structure and experience of the present moment, cutting across
21 class and localities" (p. 192). For Berlant, such is the hegemony of
22 neoliberalism that it is not just our working conditions that are experienced as
23 precarious, but also our everyday lives. Similarly, precarity is not just
24 experienced by those on low wages and short-term contracts but society as a
25 whole. Precarity is thus the defining structure of feeling of the current
26 historical moment, and is characterized by what Berlant calls cruel optimism:
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38 'A relation of cruel optimism exists when something you desire is actually an obstacle
39 to your flourishing. It might involve food, or a kind of love; it might be a fantasy of the
40 good life, or a political project. It might rest on something simpler, too, like a new habit
41 that promises to induce in you an improved way of being.'

(Berlant, 2011, p.1).

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43 She goes on:

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45 '... optimism is cruel when the object that ignites a sense of possibility actually makes it
46 impossible to attain the expansive transformation for which a person or a people risks
47 striving...'

(Berlant, 2011, p. 2).

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50 For Berlant, cruel optimism is the logical outcome of existing in a society in
51 which fantasies of what constitute a good life have become so spectacular
52 (e.g. the consumer cultures of the global rich), but the means of achieving
53 them have been so radically diminished. We are optimistic for things that we
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3 are unlikely to achieve – hence its cruelty – and as a result we exist in a
4 constant state of precarity.
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8 Berlant does look at questions of embodiment in *Cruel Optimism*, but
9 only in relation to the classed and raced ways that the so-called ‘global
10 obesity epidemic’ has manifested itself within the capitalist cultures of the
11 over-developed global north since the 1970s. She argues that the over-eating
12 of low-cost industrially processed foods offers a ‘reprieve’ from the everyday
13 pressures of living in a neoliberal economy where we are expected to work
14 more for less pay and with less labour rights - particularly for people of color,
15 young people, workers and the sub-proleteriat (pp. 95–120). This article looks
16 at similar questions but in relation to a social group who exist nearer the top of
17 contemporary social hierarchies and who deploy different sorts of body
18 practices that produce different sorts of bodies in response to the same set of
19 historical circumstances. It argues that despite enjoying far more privilege
20 than the social groups in Berlant’s analysis, the white, middle-class men who
21 strive to achieve worked-out bodies, also do so as a mark of losing power in
22 the austerity moment. As discussed above, under modern regimes of power, it
23 is a sign of subordination if you belong to a group whose primary way of
24 creating value in culture is through the body. The remainder of the article
25 explores the detail of how this happens and what it feels like.
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39 *Methodology* 40 41 42

43 In order to understand what it feels like to lose power within a specific
44 historical conjuncture, Raymond Williams’ concept of a ‘structure of feeling’
45 (1961) has framed the methodological approach of this article. According to
46 Williams, ‘a structure of feeling’ is the way it feels to live during a particular
47 historical moment and is traceable through analysing the popular culture of a
48 particular social formation¹. Different methods have been used to analyse
49 popular culture in order to map structures of feeling and affective states more
50 generally: textual analysis (Berlant, 2011) conjunctural analysis (Grossberg,
51 2010), auto-ethnography (Kyrola, 2014) and interviews (Walkerline and
52 Jimenez, 2012). Given that working to achieve a particular type of athletic
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3 body in order to share images across social networking sites involves a range
4 of practices which include - but which cannot be reduced to - acts of (self-
5)representation (negating textual analysis as the main method) and given that
6 I do not engage in these practices myself (negating auto-ethnography) I
7
8 settled on interviewing six men who do. The interviews, which were semi-
9 structured and in-depth, focused on how they achieved their worked-out
10 bodies and how they shared images of them on social media, whilst also
11 exploring what motivates their engagement in these practices and what
12 engaging in them feels like overall. Given that I have already sketched out
13 quantitative trends above, the interview data is not seeking to position itself as
14 representative. Rather, it is intended to offer insight into aspects of
15 contemporary neoliberal structures of feeling, as related to this new form of
16 body-work. In turn, as the data is intended to be illustrative as opposed to
17 representative, I have used a small number of participants.
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28 The sample was built through snowballing from personal contacts.
29 Three of the interviewees work as fitness professionals. Two of them engage
30 in these practices in their leisure time. One of them is a journalist who became
31 a 'spornosexual' for three months in order to write an experiential magazine
32 feature. All the interviewees identify as white and middle class (although one
33 says he is from a working class background). All of them are aged between
34 20 and 35, and three of the interviewees identify as gay and three as
35 heterosexual. (Revealingly, there was no obvious distinction in the experience
36 of these practices between the gay and straight interviewees).
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45 The interviews took between 30 minutes and two hours. After
46 transcribing them, I then performed a thematic analysis, in order to see which
47 themes emerged across the interviews most frequently. The interviewees'
48 descriptions of their engagements with this new form of body-work were
49 underpinned by the logics of neoliberalism in a number of ways. The most
50 frequently mentioned was how hard the participants needed to work to
51 achieve their goals but often for little in the way of meaningful return; or in
52 Berlant's terms, striving for expansive transformations that recent historical
53 conditions have made impossible to achieve. Therefore this has been chosen
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3 as the main theme that structures the below analysis. It does this by using the
4 concepts of labour (as striving) and capital (as the goal of this striving),
5 particularly the different forms of capital influentially developed by Pierre
6 Bourdieu (1986). However, this was not the only facet of neoliberalism that
7 appeared through the interviews. The following aspects of the ideology did
8 too, and are commented on throughout my discussion of the interview data:
9 the collapse in distinction between forms of labour and leisure (Boltanski and
10 Chiapello, 2007); the self as an entrepreneurial project that requires constant
11 work (Giddens, 1991, Rose, 1996); the strategic manipulation of the different
12 technological affordances of digital culture in order to turn the self into a brand
13 (Hearn, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2012); and acts of self-fashioning in accordance
14 with the beauty ideals contained within the visual cultures of consumer
15 capitalism.
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26 Male embodiment in neoliberal digital culture

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30 Previous media and cultural studies scholarship has tended to
31 approach similar phenomena to the one under discussion here primarily
32 through the frame of representation. This is the case with work on the male
33 body cited above (op. cit.) as well as with the recent scholarship on self-
34 representation in digital culture (Senft and Baym, 2015; Tiidenberg and
35 Gomez-Cruz, 2015). Echoing perspectives developed within the sociology of
36 the body (e.g. Turner, 2008), this article understands this particular form of
37 digitally mediated male body work as an assemblage of cultural practices
38 which includes but cannot be reduced to acts of (self-)representation because
39 it involves both fashioning the materiality of male bodies in accordance with
40 contemporary beauty ideals, as well as the production, circulation and
41 consumption of images of those bodies in digital space. These practices
42 cannot be separated and involve a multiplicity of competencies and
43 knowledges: ways of eating and exercising, ways of taking digital
44 photographs, skills of post-production and skills of using social networking
45 sites both as a producer and a consumer.
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The Labour of Digitally Mediated Male Body Work

All the interviewees detailed the extensive labour that they put into both producing a muscular body and sharing images of it on social media platforms. For example, fitness professional Davideⁱⁱ attends the gym four times a week. The time taken from preparing his gym bag to arriving back home after he has finished totals, he claims, four hours with two hours of that actually spent working out. Davide also spends an hour every morning cooking eight small meals that he will eat at regular intervals during the day so as to ensure his body receives the right type and amount of nutrients to produce the sort of muscular body for which he strives. Davide is studying for a nutrition degree so it is possible to argue that this also contributes towards his labour. What is interesting is that non-professional Jonny spends more time in the gym than Davide – sometimes five times a week and frequently twice a day. Mark, who wrote the experiential magazine, feature estimated that for three months at least half his day was spent engaged in practices related to perfecting a ‘spornosexual’ body. Jonny describes what might be called the ideal spornosexual body as ‘being toned - muscular arms, muscular pecs, muscular shoulders, skinny waist, V-shaped, good legs, rounded bottom. All American jock ... Abercrombie fitness models’. It is significant for the argument being made here that Jonny cites the iconic models from popular fashion brand Abercrombie & Fitch as the ideal he is striving to achieve, given the importance of the visual imagery of consumer brands to neoliberal capital accumulation.

Colin was the interviewee who gave the most detailed account of the labour involved in producing and circulating imagery of his worked out body. Colin prefers to produce this imagery when he is abroad because he believes pictures of his muscular body in swimwear against a backdrop of the beach or a swimming pool more convincingly ‘sells the dream’ - an interesting choice of words considering not only the centrality of entrepreneurship to neoliberal ideology, but specifically how its logics inform practices of ‘self-branding’ on social media platforms (Hearn, 2008; Banet-Weiser, 2012). He or a friend will use a smartphone to take several shots of one pose. He then chooses and

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3 produces the image in a way that will maximize how 'hot' he thinks he looks.
4 'Hotness' is based on a how muscular he looks and how minimal his body fat
5 is. The image will be cropped to increase the look of musculature and he will
6 add an Instagram filter to whiten his teeth which he feels are discoloured. He
7 then posts the image to Instagram – which he chooses over other social
8 networking sites because of its focus on photography. Sometimes he will
9 store a backlog of images from these photo shoots in his smartphone, which
10 he periodically shares when he is back in Britain to continue 'selling the
11 dream'. He is aware of the best time to post images to Instagram in order to
12 maximize the amount of likes, re-grams and comments he will receive (during
13 the morning and evening commutes and lunchtime) and posts accordingly.
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23 *'Spornosexual' Capital*

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26 What capital is this labour designed to produce? From the answers
27 given by the participants it would seem that what might be called
28 'spornosexual' capital combines erotic capitalⁱⁱⁱ (the cultivation of sexual
29 desirability) (Hakim, 2011) with social capital (the amount and status of people
30 with whom we are networked) (Harvey et al, 2013).
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36 Colin talked about erotic capital most plainly when I ask why he followed
37 other men who engage in the same body-work on Instagram:
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40 'Because I want to look hot in they way they look hot... They inspire me to go to
41 the gym.'
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46 Similarly, Jonny and Davide both cite 'appearance' as the reason they started
47 going to the gym but then go on to cite another reason that they keep going –
48 health.
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52 'Basically, it starts with appearance and then you realize it can make you a
53 healthier person. I think your driven by the appearance thing first.'
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(Jonny)
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3 'I think when you're younger it's the appearance thing. So you look better in
4 front of girls and then your friends and then they like you more because they
5 actually judge you for what your physique looks like. Then I'm growing and then
6 I'm realizing different things and I'm studying and I'm getting more mature. And
7 I'm understanding this way of life is good and quite healthy. And then health
8 goes more than the appearance.'

9 (Davide)

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12 It is interesting to consider Davide and Jonny's claim that appearance got
13 them to the gym but health keeps them there. Certainly the types of selfies
14 that Jonny continues to post on different social networking sites suggests an
15 interest in accumulating erotic capital as opposed to a healthy body and, as
16 detailed below, both he and Colin persistently raise issues around poor
17 mental health in relation to his and other people's engagement in these
18 practices.
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25 In this context, erotic capital cannot be uncoupled from social capital.
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27 On social networking sites, social capital can be measured by the number of
28 likes, tags, shares and comments the images receive (Harvey et al., 2013). All
29 the interviewees talked about the importance of peer response to the images
30 they circulated. The fitness professionals talked about how important the
31 accumulation of social capital was to the accumulation of economic capital. It
32 is now common practice within the fitness industry for the amount of likes,
33 followers, tags, comments etc to be one of the reasons a client decides to use
34 your service. The non-professionals mainly talked about how their affective
35 responses to receiving (or not receiving) likes, comments, tags etc – and is
36 therefore discussed below in relation to the section of the affectivity of these
37 practices.
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47 One of the most important aspects of Bourdieu's notion of capital is the
48 exchange value that it has outside the field in which it is accumulated. As
49 discussed above, there is a distinction between the professionals and the
50 non-professionals in this regard in that the former can convert spornosexual
51 capital into economic capital. Nevertheless, even the professionals were
52 aware of the limited role that spornosexual capital played in this. Davide was
53 at pains to say that it was his nutrition degree and 'meeting people at fitness
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3 expos' (more conventional forms of cultural and social capital) that played a
4 bigger role in advancing his career than the amount of followers he got on
5 Instagram:
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10 'oh Davide got 1000 followers'. Well they can close down they app. If I won that
11 competition if I got that degree it will always be on whatever profile I open up in my life.'

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13 For the non-professionals, who do not convert spornosexual capital into
14 economic capital, the value it produces is even more precarious. Colin
15 concisely articulates the limited exchange value of spornosexual capital when
16 he says:
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21 'it's such a self-obsession and doesn't equate to anything really for the future, for
22 building yourself as a person.'

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25 Jonny sees spornosexual capital, by its very nature, in a constant state of
26 depletion:
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31 '... you are driving yourself mad about your appearance and about what you look like.
32 Am I arms big enough? Is my belly too big? Are my pecs big enough, could they be
33 smaller?... I don't think it's ever something that you necessarily resolve. I'm always
34 going to be like, "do I want bigger arms? Do I want smaller arms?" All of these things...
35 I think the men in the gym are striving to a point of perfection and what's the next point
36 of perfection?'

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38 Davide says something similar but experiences the constant accumulation of
39 ever-depleting spornosexual capital as something positive:
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43 'My physique for me is a piece of art because you actually develop everyday... Like
44 when you're doing a painting and you need some more details. It's like me when I am
45 in front of the mirror and I think I want some more details in this part. So I actually
46 work... And it never ends and it's a good thing.'

47
48 Davide's positive assessment could be down to the fact that he has
49 made his body his career and that he is therefore able to accumulate a variety
50 of different capitals in relation to it. What is significant here is that both he and
51 Jonny talk about these practices as endless labour and for the non-
52 professionals, it produces ever-depleting capital with limited exchange value,
53 even within the field in which it is accumulated.
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Cruel Optimism: the affective contradictions of sharing images of fit male bodies on social networking sites

Given that the discussion so far has focused on a form of time-consuming body-work that offers little in the way of valuable return we might expect the affectivity generated by engaging in it to be largely negative. Of course, these practices would not have become as popular as they have if this was the case. As the term 'cruel optimism' suggests, inhabiting the precarious spaces opened up by neoliberal austerity is a contradictory experience constructed out of a complex mixture of positive and negative affects. Having said this, the interviewees did talk about moments of straightforward joy that they experienced when engaging in this assemblage of practices. Davide talked about it in relation to the body-work that he does:

'I never feel bored or sad... You feel more powerful. You feel more determined... In everyday situations you will act better than another who feels sad, bored, depressed because you get a better feeling with people. They see you in a different way because if they see you have a good energy they want to be around you... So you feel proud of yourself because you're working hard.'

In the following quote Jonny talks about the joy experienced engaging in the various aspects of this practice

'Basically when you see your reflection and you're happy with it. When you take a selfie and you look good. When you get tagged in pictures in social media. The elation that you get from that. When you're in the gym and you notice you can lift heavier. All things like that. Or when people comment and say your attractive and whatever else.'

Never feeling bored or sad, power, determination, good energy, pride, happiness and elation: it seems to be the achievements of these joyful affects which animate a cultural practice defined - in Davide's words - by 'working hard' and that offers so little in the way of enduring value. However, the rest of the interviews suggested something far more affectively contradictory and complex than this. One of the discourses that was most frequently drawn on throughout the interviews in order to describe this affective complexity were popular discourses of mental health; words such as 'crazy', 'mental' and

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3 'obsession' were repeatedly used by the interviewees. For example, in the
4 following quote Colin interprets sharing images of muscular bodies as 'crazy'.
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7 'I mean I think it is a bit *crazy*... Some people like ... showing where ... their body is up
8 to on things... their progress. But I don't think it is ever that really. If it was you'd just
9 keep that picture to yourself, why would you bother sharing it?
10

11 **Why do they bother sharing it?**
12

13 I think they want to be thought of as amazing. I don't know... I think it is a bit *mental*,
14 the whole thing... Going to the gym *obsessively* and posting photos and getting
15 comments.
16

17 **Why?**
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19 Because it's such a *self-obsession* and doesn't equate to anything really for the future,
20 for building yourself as a person, building your body. I think it's just massively *self-*
21 *obsessed*. It's like *people who go to therapy too much*. They turn into that *weird self-*
22 *obsessed*... like they are the most important thing. *Which I don't think is very healthy.*
23

24 *[Emphasis added]*
25

26 The interviewees use of words such as 'crazy', 'mental' etc. are not being
27 used here as evidence that engaging in these practices indicates poor mental
28 health – however that might be defined. Instead what is being argued is that
29 the persistent use of these words is evidence of both the intensity and
30 complexity of the affectivity these practices produce. Though in this quote
31 Colin is using these words in a negative way, concepts like 'obsession', 'crazy'
32 and 'mental' are frequently used to denote intense affective states which are
33 peculiar mixtures of joyful and sad affects. We might think of obsessive
34 fandom, religious fervor or political zeal to think of similarly intense ways of
35 feeling that are not so easily understood as straightforwardly positive or
36 negative but are each specific mixtures of the two that are organised in
37 response to the particular conditions of different cultural contexts.
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48 The concept that was frequently used in the interviews that is the most
49 revealing of the affective contradictions bought about by engaging in this
50 typically neoliberal cultural practice was 'addiction'. Colin talked about the
51 addictive nature of consuming images of other men's fit bodies on Instagram:
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56 'It's very addictive ... I really have to stop myself looking at it sometimes.. .Like when I
57 am on the train in the morning, I'll just be on that the whole way. I won't even notice
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3 where I am or anything. I'll suddenly be at my destination. But if I am in a car on the
4 way to a job I'll often get a headache by the time I arrive by looking at the phone.'

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7 Jonny talked about the addictive nature of exercise as a 'positive addiction'
8 highlighting its affective contradictions when practiced in this particular way in
9 this specific culture:
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12 'Running is something that clears your mind ... you just forget about everything and just
13 get lost in it ... It also gets quite addictive because you see the changes and this is how
14 you're feeling better. When you're doing it in LA where everyone is motivated by
15 looking good and feeling good and there's enough education around it to pick up on it,
16 it becomes quite cathartic. I then read *Eat, Pray, Love* at the same time as all of this
17 and so it all fused together with all of this exercising ... and then I wanted to learn how
18 to meditate and everything was coming together at a point where all these good
19 addictions, all of these positive addictions were coming together to improve myself
20 through appearance but stuff happening internally as well.'

21
22 Jonny's notion of positive addiction builds on Berlant's cruel optimism in how it
23 describes the compulsion to strive for something in ways that do not, following
24 Deleuze and Guattari's definition of affect, straightforwardly either augment or
25 diminish your capacity to act (1980). Here, Jonny has highlighted the joyful
26 aspects of his engagement with this assemblage of practices but elsewhere
27 he talks explicitly about its contradictions:
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34 "Confusion. What do I want to do? Do I want to get big? Do I want to get to small?
35 Cardio or weights? Bulkied or lean?... Unless you know what you're doing ultimately
36 you're getting to the point where you know you look good and then you become
37 addicted to reading all [the gym and fitness magazines] and not really knowing..."
38

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40 Particularly in the first quote, Jonny is situating these affective contradictions
41 ('feeling good'/'feeling confused') within the promises of the neoliberal good
42 life contained within the glamorous, self-improving, health culture associated
43 with a particular representation of Los Angeles. On the one hand, Jonny's
44 striving to embody these goals through the body-work he is doing made him
45 'feel better' but as he continued to 'addictively' pursue them he mainly felt
46 'confusion' in a way that the second quote arguably shows as suspending his
47 capacity to act – or in Berlant's terms impeded the transformations it so
48 spectacularly promised. Nevertheless, Jonny like the other interviewees,
49 continue to addictively pursue these goals, because the joys of accumulating
50 spornosexual capital are one of the few remaining for young men in Britain's
51 post-crisis austerity economy. If we accept the argument put forward in the
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3 previous section, that this new form of body-work is a typical neoliberal
4 cultural practice, then perhaps the descriptions given by the interviewees,
5 offers us an insight into one of the ways that neoliberalism secures its
6 hegemony more generally – through the promise of experiencing joyful
7 affective intensities despite being unable to offer most people anything of
8 enduring value: what Lauren Berlant has called cruel optimism.
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13 Conclusion

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18 Rosalind Gill (2007) has persuasively argued that women are the ideal
19 subjects of neoliberalism and one of the ways this manifests itself is in the
20 surveillance of their own bodies. This article attempts to build on this
21 argument (which was made before the financial crisis) by arguing that the rise
22 of men working out and sharing images of their muscular bodies on social
23 media platforms points to shifts in the configuration of contemporary
24 hierarchies of power that have occurred since 2008 in which members of a
25 social group that was historically able to use their minds for the purposes of
26 value-creation is now increasingly having to rely on their bodies. Moreover, by
27 speaking to these men about what has proven to be a very limited form of
28 value-creation, it becomes possible to map the affective contradictions not
29 only of this particular practice but, arguably, a more general structure of
30 feeling that dominates the neoliberal everyday - a structure of feeling that
31 Lauren Berlant has called 'Cruel Optimism'. However, this is not all this
32 analysis has revealed. As the quotes from the interviews demonstrate, there
33 is an incipient self-consciousness on the part of the interviewees that
34 engaging in this practice is not only a limited mode of value-creation but also
35 one whose pursuit is beset by occasionally incapacitating affective
36 contradictions. This moves the analysis of cruel optimism beyond Berlant's,
37 which offers little insight into what people make of inhabiting this precarious
38 structure of feeling she has so persuasively identified. It should also offer
39 hope to those interested in contesting the on-going neoliberal territorialisation
40 of the intimate parts of our everyday lives. It is here where the potential of a
41 popular resistance to it can be located.
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ⁱ This version of 'structure of feeling' is the one developed in *The Long Revolution* (1961). The meaning of the concept shifts throughout Williams' oeuvre.

ⁱⁱ All participants have been anonymised

ⁱⁱⁱ Despite the many persuasive contestations to this term within sociology and related disciplines (Warhurst, 2012; Forsyth-Harris, 2013; Green, 2013) I believe the term erotic capital still has purchase in describing the cultivation of sexual desirability as a form of value-creation.

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