Embodying aesthetic entrepreneurialism: Men, the body and the performing arts

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Abstract
Scholarship has identified women as the ideal neoliberal subjects of late capitalism and, it is argued, that increasingly intensified practices of appearance and visibility are critical to their new labouring subjectivities. However, there is also a small but growing body of research on the relationship between men, the body, and practices of appearance and looking. In this article, we examine the experiences of men (n = 12, ages 23–33 years) in the highly aestheticized industry of the performing arts, including theatre, dance, film and television. Drawing on feminist- and Foucauldian-informed approaches to creative and cultural industries, we gleaned two overarching themes from this research, including: the imperative to take up a particular bodily ideal and the complexities and uncertainties this entails; and the necessity to successfully emotionally manage these complexities and uncertainties. Together these two dimensions represented key performativities in the emergence of the entrepreneurial subject for men in the performing arts. We conclude with preliminary observations about men working in industry-specific contexts, such as the performing arts, and how the experiences of these men shed insight on practices of visibility and appearance of men more broadly.

Keywords
aesthetic entrepreneurialism, body image, branded self, men and masculinities, performing arts

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Introduction

Let’s go through the different [James] Bonds. You look at Sean Connery when he first came around. He’s hairy chested, he’s lean, he’s slim in his younger years, and as he ages into the role, he becomes a little more barrel chested [. . .] Roger Moore, same thing [. . .]. But now you look at Daniel Craig, just jacked to the max. [H]e’s got a killer body, you can’t help but notice him come out of the water [. . .] in Casino Royale in that tiny mankini. [The audience] want[s] that extreme actor that’s just completely shredded of fat. (Dave, 33 years old, television/theatre actor)

For some time now scholars have identified the emergence of the spectacular display of taut, muscular male bodies in media representations (see Nixon, 1997; Simpson, 2002). However, some scholars have suggested that body beautiful ideals are no longer limited to men in the mainstream media, but have increasingly infiltrated the practices of ordinary men (Elias et al., 2017; Gill et al., 2005; Hakim, 2016, 2018, 2020). As Jamie Hakim (2016) explains, this shift means increasing numbers of men are ‘direct practitioners rather than aspiring consumers’ of mediated representations (p. 87). Within this changing landscape, Dave’s quote above, which suggests the audience desires actors who are ‘completely shredded of fat’, is an ambivalent one. The most obvious reading is that audiences want to gaze at spectacular male bodies on the big screen, and indeed in mainstream media generally. However, with the proliferation of visually-based digital platforms that enable ordinary men to display their bodies, the desire to embody the ‘killer body’ ideal has both intensified and extensified. Therefore, the relationships between subjectivity, self-transformation and the body, which was once thought to position women as the ideal subjects of neoliberalism (Gill & Scharff, 2011; McRobbie, 2009), has come to be increasingly recognized in the everyday practices of men (see Hakim, 2020). Building from the important critique of the cultural politics of neoliberalism offered by feminist scholars (see Elias et al., 2017; Gill, 2019), as well as those who have taken up this critique to examine the embodied subjectivities of men (see Hakim, 2020; O’Neill, 2018), we examine the processes by which neoliberalism is embodied by men in the performing arts, paying particular attention to the bodily and discursive practices of these men as they fashion a marketable aesthetic. In this article, we bring together feminist critiques of the contemporary cultural moment, the small but growing body of research on men, the body and neoliberalism, and critical literatures on the cultural and creative industries (CCI) to provide an analysis of the new labouring subjectivities of men in the performing arts.

Indeed, there is a significant and growing corpus of literature on CCI (for an overview see Banks et al., 2013; Conor et al., 2015), with most of this literature focusing on the precarious labour conditions in CCI, with comparatively less attention to how neoliberalism is embodied at the subjective level (Gill, 2014; O’Neill, 2018; Scharff, 2015, 2018). Recent scholarship, however, suggests that precarity is no longer limited to industry-specific working conditions, but has come to characterize everyday life under neoliberalism (Elias et al., 2017). In other words, the neoliberal rationalities that are experienced by men in the performing arts are not divorced from what is happening to men in all walks of life. Rather, as we argue, the experiences of men in the performing arts reflect a broader pattern of intensification and extensification of neoliberal rationalities, whereby ordinary men are engaging in self-transformational practices as a means of accruing
value in a context that offers ever fewer opportunities for acquiring value (see also Hakim, 2020). Allison Hearn (2008, 2014) uses the term ‘branded self’ to describe the intensification of reflexive projects of the self in late modernity. Informed by mainstream media culture, and the rise of reality TV, individuals are incited to approach their body projects as a form of labour, where it is understood that the “most important work is on the self” (Hearn, 2008, p. 205). Within this context, celebrity culture becomes the normative fabric whereby all individuals are encouraged to engage in practices of self-promotion. Thus, while we focus on men in the performing arts, including film, television, theatre and dance, we are attentive to the ways in which their embodied performativities are part of a broader mediated milieu that is simultaneously reflective of, and intensifies, the desires of ordinary men.

The article is organized as follows. In the first section we overview the literatures on CCI, particularly those that are critical of policy and governmental approaches that celebrate CCI (see Florida, 2002), and follow this with a review of the emerging literature on aestheticized cultural work. These literatures provide us with a lens for looking at the body practices of men in the performing arts. In the third section we describe our methodology and follow this with our findings, which are divided into two broad themes, including embodying entrepreneurialism and managing the emotions of aestheticized cultural work. In the final section we conclude the article, offering preliminary insights on future research on men engaged in aestheticized work, both in terms of labour-specific contexts as well as everyday projects of the self.

The creative and cultural industries

Creative and cultural workers, including those engaged in ‘symbolic, aesthetic or creative labour in the arts, media and other creative or cultural industries’ (Banks et al., 2013, p. 4), have been widely exalted by industry and governments alike as ‘model entrepreneurs’ (Gill & Pratt, 2008, p. 3). According to such rhetoric, CCI workers are seen as heroically embracing risk and adapting a ‘sacrificial ethos’ in successfully responding to the ever-changing conditions of the market (Banks et al., 2013). Notwithstanding the celebratory accounts of the flexibility and opportunities afforded through the creative and cultural industries, others have argued that it is the very precariousness of the cultural and creative industries, and the flexibility required to navigate them, that lay the conditions for new modes of exploitation or ‘flexploitation’ (Banks et al., 2013; Conor et al., 2015; Morgan et al., 2013).

In the specific case of the performing arts, workers often engage in underpaid or free labour as they strive to build up the social networks and labour biographies that are crucial to success in the arts. The substantial sacrifice borne by CCI workers is often justified by the workers themselves as a passionate attachment to the idea of being a ‘creative worker’ and a commitment to the freedom of ‘doing what you love’ (McRobbie, 2002; Morgan & Wood, 2014). At the same time, however, workers have to manage the uncertainty of not knowing if they are going to get a ‘big break’ (McRobbie, 2007), not to mention uncertainty about their next paid job, all while doing so with a pleasant demeanour and a demonstrable ‘can do’ entrepreneurial spirit (Gill, 2014). The uncertainty that characterizes work in CCI means that life itself comes to be governed by work, where
Some scholars suggest that the insecure and flexible nature of work in CCI has given rise to new ‘inequality regimes’ (Acker, 2006), where work continues to be stratified along gender (Gill, 2014; Gill & Scharff, 2011; Jones & Pringle, 2015), class (Morgan & Nelligan, 2015; O’Brien et al., 2016) and racial (Friedman & O’Brien, 2017; Yuen, 2017) divisions. According to the logic of advanced capitalism, CCI workers are re-imagined as ‘free agents’ and left to fend for themselves, supposedly on the basis of their own merit, unimpeded by gender, racial and class power relations. The absence of formal employment structures, along with the erosion of widespread critical discourses to articulate broader structural power relations, combine to make inequalities both ‘unmanageable’ (Jones & Pringle, 2015) and ‘unspeakable’ (Gill, 2014). In our own research, we found that it was not just that marginalized groups of men were excluded from securing work in the performing arts, but when they did get work they were type-cast according to gender, sexuality and racial norms (Norman & Bryans, 2020). Therefore, the myth that the ‘creative job is . . . open to everyone’ (O’Brien et al., 2016, p. 118), and that success in the field is solely determined by individual attributes, is itself part and parcel of the conditions that produce inequities within CCI.

Some studies have shown that men – and men from working class backgrounds in particular – are not well-equipped to become the flexible, self-inventing subjects required of the service (see McDowell, 2003) and cultural and creative industries (see Morgan & Nelligan, 2015). As Morgan and Nelligan (2015) found in their study of Australian men in CCI, working class men carry ‘cultural baggage’ (p. 80) in the form of ‘grounded cultures of learning and labour [that] are not easily translatable into the forms of presentation of self that are required of the new economy’ (p. 79). Moreover, feminist scholars argue that women are ideal neoliberal subjects (Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009), as they are incited to manage and transform themselves – particularly with respect to their sexuality and body – as a constitutive condition of their labouring subjectivities (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Indeed, Elias and colleagues (2017) contend that ‘the link between femininity, self-transformation and the body is key to understanding the interplay . . . between gender and subjectivity in the neoliberal era’ (p. 24). However, others have suggested that the new labouring subjectivities of men are also critical to a comprehensive understanding of the complex power relations between gender, subjectivity and embodiment in the neoliberal era (Hakim, 2020; O’Neill, 2018). To get at this intersection, we see the research on aesthetic labour, with its focus on the body and labour, as well as aesthetic entrepreneurialism, with its focus on the aestheticization of everyday life, as offering especially promising directions.

**From aesthetic labour to aesthetic entrepreneurialism**

Aesthetic labour describes ‘work in which individuals are compensated, directly or indirectly, for their own body’s looks and affect’ (Mears, 2014, p. 1333). The research on aesthetic labour introduces two observations that are significant for the present study. First, although the term aesthetic labour is most often used to describe performances at work, Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) broaden the scope to include work done beyond the
labour context in preparation for securing work. Such work might include body work in the form of exercise and dieting, in order to achieve a specific bodily ‘look,’ as well as the stylization of a particular affect through, for example, social media practices, and fashion and music consumption (see Farrugia et al., 2018; McRobbie, 2009). Second, those studying aesthetic labour understand that aesthetic or glamour labour (Wissinger, 2015) is more than just physical appearance, but includes an entire presentation of self that encompasses voice, posture, gait, body language, demeanour, fashion and social media presence (see Elias et al., 2017; Farrugia, 2017; Farrugia et al., 2018; McRobbie, 2009).

Recently, Elias et al. (2017) have suggested that aesthetic and beauty studies be disentangled from specific labour contexts and expanded to account for the ways in which ‘aesthetic labour is increasingly demanded of all women (and increasing numbers of men)’ (p. 37) across all dimensions of life. Elias and colleagues use the term aesthetic entrepreneurialism to characterize the ways in which individuals are progressively subjected to new practices of ‘visibility, appearance and looking’ (p. 37; see also Gill, 2019) and, in so doing, draw connections between aesthetic practices of the self and neoliberalism. Here, the aesthetic entrepreneur is the autonomous, self-governing subject who engages in aesthetic practices of the self as a constitutive condition of their embodied subjectivity. While most of the research in this area focuses on women, there is a small, but growing, body of literature on men, the body and neoliberalism.

Although the critical men and masculinities scholarship has examined the effects of neoliberalism, most of this work views neoliberalism through an economic lens, as opposed to a cultural one (O’Neill, 2018). However, many scholars have identified that ‘neoliberalism increasingly operates through a psychological register’, not just a rational and calculating one, and thus there have been calls to attend to the ‘affective life of neoliberalism’ (Kanai & Gill, 2021, p. 18). The argument here is that neoliberalism has penetrated deep into the felt and emotional core of subjectivity and that this move is largely connected to media, and lifestyle media in particular (Ouellette, 2016). Makeover and lifestyle reality TV are pointed to as explicit cultural venues where individuals are incited to take up the position of the responsibilized, self-transformational subject (Norman et al., 2014; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). As Rachel O’Neill (2018) identifies in her ethnographic examination of the seduction industry, an industry designed to provide heterosexual men expert advice on how to ‘seduce’ women, affective and psychic dispositions are not exclusive to media of an overtly instructive character. Rather, it is the pervasiveness of messaging about intimacy, desire and seduction that gives neoliberalism its direct grip on the feelings and psychic being of heterosexual men.

Similarly, Jamie Hakim’s expansive exploration of the explosion of images of the sexualized male body on digital media offers another example of how neoliberalism circulates affectively. Hakim suggests that increasing numbers of British men in the post-2008 austerity context are using digital media to brand highly sexualized embodied subjectivities as means to ‘create value when neoliberalism creates so few opportunities for anyone except the global elite’ (Hakim, 2020, p. 3). Here, Hakim situates ‘the male body [as] . . . a site where the cultural politics of neoliberalism have been negotiated’ (p. 17). According to Hakim (2020), this explains the ‘spectacularization of the sexual male body’ (p. 1) via digital media, where both ordinary and celebrity men are showcasing their nude or nearly nude bodies. To support his argument, he points to the emergence of
the ‘spornosexual’ (Simpson, 2014), where young men use social media to display their bodies in a manner that is reminiscent of both sports star and porno actor (Hakim, 2016, 2018), which can be seen in the rise of the full male frontal nudity in modelling and the ‘leaked’ celebrity nude (Hakim, 2020).

Based on this brief overview of literature, it is evident that in the Anglo-Western context there has been a shift in how the male body is represented in the media. Recently, this representational landscape has intensified and extensified beyond mainstream media, infiltrating the lives of ordinary men, such that some scholars suggest that this is part of a broader cultural politics of neoliberalism that registers at the affective and psychic level in men (Hakim, 2020). These observations are significant because the anxieties, desires and precarity that men in the performing arts experience are not separate from men in other walks of life, but instead are characteristic of what many men in late modernity face.

We suggest that the scholarship on aesthetic entrepreneurialism is particularly relevant to the present article for three reasons. First, much of this research draws on Michel Foucault’s theorization of neoliberalism, where neoliberalism is understood in terms beyond its economic or political implications, but also for its consequences at the level of the subject (see Rose, 1999; Scharff, 2015, 2018). Within this framework, the self is understood as an entrepreneurial subject, where power is not imposed on the individual from the top-down, but rather power relations are taken up and embodied by the subject in the process of becoming a subject in the first instance. Here, the term subjectification is used to describe the process of ‘becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject’ (Butler, 1997, p. 2). In terms of aesthetic and body practices, the concept of subjectification offers the important insight that subjects are not passive aesthetic labourers, but active, creative and self-regulating subjects who go about stylizing a particular flesh. Second, aesthetic entrepreneurialism embraces the idea that self-transformation is not merely a surface project, but involves constantly re-making the whole self. In this regard, scholars using this perspective are interested in the psychosocial dimensions of body and beauty work, where it is understood that ‘contemporary injunctions to look good require not only physical labour . . . but also the makeover of psychic life to embrace qualities such as confidence, happiness and authenticity’ (Elias et al., 2017, p. 5). Third, it is recognized that aesthetic labour is increasingly demanded of all women in some form or another and that more and more men are also subject to aesthetic imperatives (Elias et al., 2017; Hakim, 2020), a recognition that opens the door for a nuanced examination of how new practices of visibility, appearance and looking govern the lives of men in the performing arts. Before turning to our methods, we situate this article within existing debates within men and masculinities studies.

Theoretically, we reject Anderson’s (2009) notion of inclusive masculinity, which holds that the cultural decrease in homohysteria, or the fear of being read as homosexual, has enabled men to engage in more expressive, softer and thus inclusive, forms of masculinity. Following the lead of others, we see such a reading as discounting how sexual politics continue to play out in so-called softer, less exclusionary, versions of masculinity (O’Neill, 2015). Here, men draw on what Bridges (2014) refers to as ‘gay aesthetics’ in producing hybridized masculinities and, in so doing, ‘distanc[ing] themselves in subtle ways from the stigmatizing stereotypes of masculinity’ (p. 59) without actually disrupting systems of inequality (see also O’Neill, 2015). Moreover, we aim to sidestep the
debates about categorical formations of hegemonic masculinity and its variations (see Beasley, 2015; Waling, 2019), instead focusing on the cultural processes by which ‘neo-liberalism gets under men’s skin’ (O’Neill, 2018, p. 19). In so doing, we do not discount constructions of masculinities, but nor do we assume they are the determining force in men’s lives, an assumption that can obscure the relational and performative becoming of subjectivity, where men in the performing arts negotiate a complexity of emotional, affective and structural conditions of possibility (Waling, 2019).

**Methodological considerations**

Once approval was secured through the University of Manitoba research ethics board, 12 interviews were conducted with men in the performing arts in the spring of 2013. Participants were recruited through postings on public performing arts websites and snowball sampling, with the recruitment poster inviting participants to share experiences about health, injuries and their body projects in the performing arts. Participants were between 23 and 33 years of age, with an average age of 28 years. In terms of citizenship, six participants identified as Canadian, three as American and three as British. Notwithstanding the diverse nationalities of the men, most acknowledged their work was part of a broader Anglo-Western cultural context as they travelled internationally for different jobs or their productions were international in reach. Eight participants self-identified as White, two as Black, one as Asian and one as Metis or of mixed European and Aboriginal ancestry. Three interviews were conducted in person, while the other nine were conducted either over the phone or on Skype, with interviews ranging between 23 and 83 minutes, with an average duration of 63 minutes. Both authors identify as Canadian, white, cis-gender men, while the first author identifies as heterosexual, the second identifies as gay. The second author, who conducted all 12 interviews, is himself a former professional actor. His experience as a former actor gave John insight into the everyday life worlds of men in the performing arts. Interviews centred around the embodied experiences of men in the performing arts, particularly themes related to their bodily projects (e.g. diet, exercise, health practices and art-specific training regimes), industry body ideals, and injury and illness experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Transcripts were analysed using a feminist-informed discourse analysis (see Cheek, 2004; Norman, 2011). Here, the participants’ narratives were not approached as reflections of reality, but as discursive utterances that performatively materialized the realities they described. This is not to discount the participants’ embodied experiences, but to pursue the direct material grip discourse has on the process of becoming a subject in the first instance. In the case of our research, we were interested in the processes by which men in the performing arts embody (or ‘fail’ to embody) an aesthetic entrepreneurial subjectivity. We identified key discourses emerging from the existing literature and then read, re-read and coded the transcripts in relation to these discourses. Throughout this process, we asked ourselves how – if at all – are these discourses deployed in the narratives of the participants in the embodiment of aesthetic entrepreneurial subjectivities? Based on this analysis, we gleaned a number of themes, including the economization of the self, never being good enough, always being prepared, managing uncertainty and
embodying ambivalence. We organized these themes into two overarching themes, which included embodying aesthetic entrepreneurialism and managing the emotions of aestheticized work.

These two themes are succinctly captured in a story shared by Rick, a 27-year-old film and television actor:

I have an acting coach in Los Angeles who said that if you’re really trying to make a go at it in this industry, there are two things you have to do: one, take away any expectations you have; and, two get in the best physical shape of your life and stay in it.

These two themes – embodying an ideal and managing emotions or expectations – are, according to the narratives of the participants, both necessary components of embodying an aesthetic entrepreneurial subjectivity in the performing arts. Although the process of subjectification is not nearly as tidy and straightforward as this two-step process might suggest, for the sake of organizational clarity, we have divided the findings according to these two overarching themes.

**Embodying the ideal**

In this section, we look at three themes that, when taken together, materialize the successful entrepreneurial subject in the performing arts. These themes include the economization of the self, never being good enough and maintaining a state of constant preparedness, each of which we expand on below.

**Economization of the self**

In talking about their bodies, the participants employed an economic discourse, referring to their bodies as ‘assets’ or ‘resources’ to not only be worked into a particular look, but also to be ‘manipulated’, ‘managed’, ‘marketed’ and ‘branded’ into a commodity that held value in the performing arts. Jeremy, a 23-year-old dancer, shared that in order to get a competitive advantage at auditions, ‘if you are more muscular you’ll wear something tighter across the chest to show off your assets [. . .because] you always want to try and show your assets’. This manner of speaking about the body as an ‘asset’ is consistent with the economization of subjectivities within the neoliberal era, where the embodied subject is increasingly understood in terms of economic value (McNay, 2009; Scharff, 2018). As we have examined elsewhere, constructing an embodied brand is crucial to the economization of subjectivity, where the ‘look’ and affect of the body represent critical dimensions of one’s brand (Norman & Bryans, 2020). Where working conditions are insecure, and performers understood that ‘you are only as good as your last performance’, there is pressure to successfully build an embodied brand for oneself that will provide some degree of success and control in otherwise precarious conditions.

[Acting is a] superficial medium. There is direct pressure to look a certain way. I mean, I’m sure other people in other professions – or just society generally – feel the need to look a certain way [. . .], but very specifically, how you look is so important for people in the performing arts. I
mean, I guess the only thing that would be akin to would be models, and that would be even worse [. . .]. We’re models who talk! (Neil, 28 years old, theatre/TV actor)

Although lack of control and uncertainty were always present in the men’s narratives, the participants’ re-framed circumstances beyond their control as factors to be managed, controlled and overcome by the creative, self-empowered subject, and not something to be overly concerned with. In so doing, the participants took responsibility for the precarious labour conditions that confronted them, foregoing a political critique in favour of a discourse of individual empowerment. Part of taming the precarious conditions of the arts involved both the intensification of their body projects (e.g. exercise and diet regimes, grooming practices), but also the extensification of labouring practices such that they expand to the point of encroaching upon all aspects of everyday life (Gill, 2014).

The extensification of work into life itself was particularly evident in how some of the participants saw fashioning an online, social media brand as an empowering, but necessary, part of being a performing artist. One participant went so far as to suggest that he was increasingly aware of representing himself as a brand, and not a person, on social media. This represents emergent processes of subjectification that are experienced by increasing numbers of people (see Gill, 2019). However, we would suggest that the imperative to brand oneself through social media is illustrative of an emergent space of subjectification, where men in the performing arts, and indeed men more generally (Hakim, 2020), are being asked to make and re-make themselves online. Such processes of subjectification are constant and ongoing, a condition that not only serves to further blur the boundaries between paid work and leisure, online and offline spaces, self and image, but also creates a sense of never arriving and thus never being good enough, which leads to our second theme.

Never good enough

For the men in this study, the embodied self was an ongoing, unfinished project. As Scharff (2015) suggests, the ‘entrepreneurial self is in a constant mode of becoming’ (p. 112) and, if this is true of CCI more generally, we would argue that it is especially so for those in the more aestheticized disciplines of the performing arts (i.e. theatre, dance, film and television). The men in these industries talked about being in a perpetual state of re-invention and improvement in relation to ever-changing bodily ideals. Although these ideals were more intense in some disciplines in the performing arts, particularly commercialized versions of dance, film and television, it was generally recognized that men in the arts were subjected to increasingly difficult to attain bodily norms. As one participant explained, it’s not good enough to be fit, ‘you actually need to have a six pack. You don’t just need to have hair, it has to be beautiful hair. . .The standards just keep being raised [. . .Y]ou need to have a certain image.’

Body size, shape and type were at the centre of the men’s self-improvement projects, where no matter how fit one was, there were ‘always things. . .to improve’.

. . .you think, ‘oh, I want bigger arms, like, I need to do this’. . .on top of whatever else you’re already doing. . .So you stay in shape, I guess, but there’s always that you still have to improve on. (Hudson, 29 years old, dancer)
The need for continual improvement established a particular relationship between the men and their bodies, shaping how they think, talk and feel.

I mean, [performing artists] are constantly thinking about the unattainable, like the perfect body [. . .]. For my own self, like looking at myself in the mirror, well, I could make different choices, or I could do more conditioning [. . .] But I’m really okay with where I am at also. (Nyles, 29 years old, dancer)

The ideals of men and masculinities circulating in broader media culture instigate emergent practices of visibility, looking and appearance that position the male body as an unfinished project in need of constant surveillance and ongoing work. Crucially, the expectation and desire to achieve a particular body were influenced by discourses of race and sexuality. As we examine in more depth elsewhere (Norman & Bryans, 2020), one participant shared that there was a disconnect between his slender, Black body and culturally constructed ideals of Black masculinity as strong, powerful and muscular. He went on to explain that he has always wanted to be bigger to meet this ideal, but has never been able to put on muscle mass. It is only recently, he shared, that he has become ‘a bit more comfortable in the body that I have [. . .and have come] to accept it for what it is’. Here, the body and bodily affect come to govern life itself, where the men are continually gazing upon, assessing and working at improving themselves both in relation to media constructions of masculinity, but also in relation to other men in the performing arts. While such bodily projects are intensifying for men in the performing arts, such projects are not exclusive to the arts.

As Justin, a 24-year-old theatre actor observed, the body beautiful imperative is ‘per-pasive’ in broader culture, and this also shapes how he understands and experiences his intimate life as a gay man. For Justin, this creates a love–hate bodily relationship, where he both would ‘love to have a rocking body’, but also ‘hates the gym requirement that is built into the whole gay thing. . .[where] you kind of need to be ripped to be. . .desirable’. Indeed, Justin sees bodily self-transformation as part of life itself, not just the arts, where men need to embody a particular ideal to be ‘. . .a “good”. . .healthy, happy, person of value’. It is evident, according to Justin and others, that self-transformational practices were not just intensifying within the arts, but extensifying across society more broadly, infiltrating all aspects of one’s emotional and affective subjectivity. In addition to feeling a constant sense of not being good enough, the men also experienced the pressure to always be prepared.

Always prepared

Closely related to the theme of never being good enough is the notion that one always has to be prepared. Being prepared in the performing arts, however, is complicated by the fact that it is never entirely certain what is expected of the performers. This uncertainty, along with the competitive nature of the industry, results in performers endlessly striving to prepare themselves for an ill-defined, and ultimately illusive, goal. As one participant explained, ‘if you don’t know what you’re up against, everyone is just pushing and pushing to be bigger and better than everyone else’ (Hudson). This sentiment is consistent
with what Morgan and Wood (2014) characterize as the labile worker, where the performer must ‘bring individualistic and competitive inclinations to working life, a readiness to improve and “rebrand” in response to change and innovation’ (p. 68). Being prepared is yet another strategy by which the men sought to exert a sense of control over otherwise uncertain and uncontrollable circumstances.

For me to play at the height of my capabilities, I have to be in great shape across the board. And I want to be ready in case I have to get in better shape [for a specific role...]. I always want to be in a state of constant readiness in case I need to go even further or if I need to scale it back for something too, right. So I want to stay in a nice area, a nice zone, in case I need to move in any sort of direction. (Rick)

Consistent across the three themes is the manner in which participants drew upon neoliberal discourses of individualism, particularly constructions of the autonomous, self-empowered and self-inventing subject, in piecing together their entrepreneurial subjectivities. Here, the participants understood and acknowledged the power relations that structured their lives, but worked to contain, if not outright disavow, these relations by speaking about their bodies as assets to be managed, disciplined and re-fashioned as ‘personal choice’, and taking responsibility for their feelings. However, these multidimensional projects of the self also had a psychic dimension, as we explore in more detail in the following section.

Managing the emotions of aestheticized cultural work

It is not enough to be beautiful on the outside, but the successful entrepreneurial subject has to work on and visibly manifest a beautiful inside (i.e. a hopeful, authentic and confident disposition) (Gill & Elias, 2014), no matter how one actually feels (Gill, 2014). In this section, we examine the psychosocial dimension of power relations, paying particular attention to the ambivalent and complex negotiations, resistances and affective attachments the participants have with work in the performing arts. However, while we focus on men in the performing arts in this article, we recognize that the precarity these men describe is neither limited to their specific industries, nor the CCI more broadly, but ever more characterizes the everyday conditions of people living under neoliberalism (Berland, 2011).

Uncertainty and anxiety

Discourses of self-empowerment, control and creative self-invention were always articulated in relation to stories of extremely precarious working conditions and the anxieties and fears these conditions elicited. The participants spoke about the instability of working conditions, such as being between contracts or waiting for the ‘big break’, feelings of being ‘replaceable’, and never knowing what casters were looking for, all of which leads to deep and intense feelings of powerlessness. As one participant shared, ‘being an auditioning actor can often feel quite powerless, and I desire to be in a position where I can make choices as opposed to having choices made about me all the time’. Far from the
neoliberal myth of the self-fashioning subject, creatively weaving their own choice biographies, the men recognized and resented the structural conditions that severely constrained their agency. Auditions in particular were characterized as anxiety-inducing experiences, where participants described feelings of insecurity, ‘humiliation’, ‘intimidation’ and, in a few instances, ‘exploitation’. Within this context, all of the work that goes into branding a particular aesthetic and preparing oneself does not guarantee the outcome. The uncertainty of casting generated confusion and frustration amongst the performers, with one participant describing it as ‘the weird alchemy of casting’, and continued, ‘who knows what the fuck they are looking for, but it seems they’re looking for fit, good looking people’. The ill-defined and elusive nature of casting has the effect of ‘playing with your head’.

I wish I could be a fly on the... wall just to hear why [casters] make the decisions they do. I’ve been down to the last two guys probably fifty times, and I’ve worked a lot since I graduated. I’ve done pretty well, but it’s maybe fifty times that I’ve lost jobs to another guy... You’re not getting every job you go out for, and I understand that. But the question is why didn’t I get it? They clearly liked me for the role if I’m getting that far in the process, but it’s like what was the deciding factor? Was it age? Was it body type? Was I not in good enough shape? So that starts to play with your head a little bit too. (Rick)

Here, the surveillant gaze is taken up and gives rise to anxieties of the self that must be effectively managed as a constitutive condition of becoming the entrepreneurial subject. After all, it would not be acceptable to show up to work or for an audition with a ‘chip’ on one’s shoulder about the working conditions in the performing arts. Rather, one has to demonstrate emotional resilience and to visibly present oneself as positive, confident and easy to work with, even when confronted with structural conditions of insecurity and the feelings associated with such insecurity. Notwithstanding the feelings of insecurity, anxiety and self-doubt, the participants were not singularly critical of the arts, but rather articulated profoundly ambivalent relationships.

**Embodying ambivalence**

The creative and cultural industries, such as the performing arts, are often described in polarizing terms. On the one hand, there are celebratory discourses that emphasize self-empowerment, creativity and passionate attachment to ‘doing what you love’, while on the other hand, critical scholars use terms such as ‘flexploitation’ to describe insecure working conditions and the psychosocial stress, anxiety and depression that can accompany work in CCI. Still others suggest this polarization does not necessarily reflect the experiences of those working in CCI, where ‘pleasures and uncertainties are inextricably intertwined’ (Scharff, 2018, p. 3). Following the latter position, we use the term ambivalence to describe the embodied experiences of our participants. In so doing, we foreground the manner that the participants simultaneously celebrated and bemoaned their work experiences in the performing arts. For example, the flexibility required in the arts was spoken about in both positive and negative ways, often in the same breath. One participant expressed his passion for the theatre, but also his worries about getting older in an industry where there is little stability and few guarantees.
...the instability always remains. And right now, the instability can drive me crazy, but it's also awesome, because it means [I can travel]. I can be in Mexico, Prince Edward Island...and Edmonton and Toronto. And that's good for me right now, but I have some brilliant, wonderful, giving mentors who are in their 50s and 60s and are still actors and I don't know if I am going to want that lifestyle. [T]he inconsistency of my profession certainly haunts me – not haunts me, haunts is a strong word. Certainly something that is with me all the time, because it’s not [pause] it’s not looked up to in society. (Leo, 24 years old, theatre actor)

Here, the performing arts both afford opportunities to travel while doing work one is passionate about at the same time that they create anxieties about one’s future lifestyle, particularly a future in an industry that is not especially kind to ageing bodies, as several participants suggested. Leo articulates a profoundly ambivalent subjectivity, simultaneously taking up entrepreneurial discourses of creativity and flexibility, as well as expressing feelings of passion, fear and anxiety. The participants also negotiated deep emotional tensions with respect to the increasingly impossible body ideals expected of them in their industry. On the one hand, the participants expressed the desire to embody these ideals (‘I would love to have a rocking body’), while on the other hand, they resented and were critical that the size, shape and look of their bodies had become so central to their respective art forms. Here, we can see that the participants were navigating the contradictions of neoliberalism and the deep emotional tensions these contradictions gave rise to, both holding out the image of the good life, yet making it nearly impossible to achieve (see also Hakim, 2020). Acknowledging the ambivalence that lies at the core of the men’s body projects is crucial as it adds nuanced understandings of body work, particularly in aestheticized cultural work, and sheds insight on how power is not imposed from the top-down, but involves a complex and self-regulatory process of subjectification.

Conclusion

With this article, we have examined how men in the performing arts are subjected to emergent practices of visibility, appearance and looking that are both intensified and extensified, meaning that the imperative to embody a particular look and affect is not only more prevalent, but that it has expanded into new domains of everyday life. We have drawn extensively on feminist literatures, particularly Foucauldian-informed feminist research on new labouring subjectivities (see Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2009; Scharff, 2015, 2018), and revealed that this body of scholarship is useful in illuminating processes of subjectification men experience in specific, highly aestheticized labour contexts, such as the performing arts. Unlike Morgan and Nelligan (2015), who found that working class men in the Australian context did not adapt easily to the modes of self-presentation necessary in CCI, the men in our study were somewhat more flexible, even if begrudgingly so, at taking up aesthetic entrepreneurial subjectivities. However, the conditions of possibility we outline in this study are not exclusive to men in the performing arts but, as others have shown (Hakim, 2016, 2018, 2020), have increasingly come to characterize life itself under the cultural politics of neoliberalism. In this regard, the words of Rick’s acting coach, who offered the advice to work hard, get in great shape, but expect nothing in return, may well capture the zeitgeist of neoliberalism.
It is also important to acknowledge that this study was conducted some eight years ago and that much has changed since that time. For example, the significance of social media has intensified and the global pandemic of COVID-19 has hit the performing arts – and the live arts, in particular – especially hard, and these factors have almost certainly exacerbated the precarious working conditions in the performing arts. Elsewhere, we have explored how self-transformational practices materialize in relation to discursive constructions of race, gender and sexuality. Here, we found that self-identified queer dancers, for example, were incited to embody heteronormativity in their routines, which involved the visible display of large muscles, strong, powerful and space-occupying movements, and hetero-affective relations with women performers. Similarly, Black actors were often type-cast according to stereotypes of Black masculinity as big, powerful and muscular, thus entrenching the construction of Blackness as an irreducible trait of the body (see also Yuen, 2017). We raise these findings here to highlight the manner in which practices of visibility, appearance and looking in the performing arts exist at the nexus of interlocking discursive relations and call for more critical research on how the cultural politics of neoliberalism plays out for differently situated men in other walks of life (see O’Neill, 2018). Finally, we are mindful that while men in the performing arts, and indeed men more generally, may be subject to what Hakim (2020) refers to as a ‘feminising axiomatic’, or emergent practices of visibility and appearance, this observation should not be made to the occlusion of the subtle and shifting ways in which sexual politics, and indeed other power relations, continue to play out within neoliberal rationalities (see also Bridges, 2014; O’Neill, 2015, 2018). After all, while men in the performing arts may be expected to engage in emergent practices of the self, from a representational vantage point, these practices reproduce – as opposed to challenge – normativities of heteropatriarchal, white supremacist and capitalist relations of privilege and marginalization (Norman & Bryans, 2020).

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