

## **Building Beauty: Exploring male body-building as a beauty practice in neoliberalism and the impact of social media**



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## **Abstract**

The research seeks to find out how social media has impacted fitness-oriented male body-projects and male body-building as a beauty practice in neoliberalism. To do this, the research triangulates the two qualitative methods of semi-structured in-depth interviews with eight males aged nineteen to twenty-six with thematic analysis of content from the Instagram profiles of four popular Irish fitness bloggers. Focusing on the topics of body-projects in modernity, beauty in neoliberalism, self-surveillance and self-impression management, and masculinity, the research argues that young males are becoming more and more subject to the continuing focus on beauty and appearance in neoliberalism. The research shows that there appears to be a trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation at work, where the successful people at the top of the fitness chain operate highly successfully and others attempt to replicate this success. Body-building as a beauty practice is one of the principal ways by which young males approach the task of becoming the active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects of neoliberalism, assisted by social media sites like Instagram.

## Introduction and Research Question

Gill, Henwood and McLean (2005) state that since the turn of the new millennium there has been a dramatic rise in the visibility of the male body in the media and popular culture. This display of the male body extends from the “from the muscular heroes of the cinematic action genre, to the ‘six-packs’ that grace the covers of Men’s Health, and the ‘superwaifs’ of contemporary style magazines” (Gill et al 2005:38). For them, this rise in visibility is about more than just an increase in display, but also a new form of representation of male bodies depicting them “in idealized and eroticized fashions, coded in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired” (Gill et al 2005:38). This statement is undeniable, evident in film, television, the media, advertising for men’s clothes, men’s grooming products and more. But one crucial element that essentially pre-dates Gill et al’s study is the rise in visibility of the male body on social media. Nowhere is the representation of idealized and eroticized male bodies more evident in contemporary society than on social media, particularly the social networking site and ‘beauty app’ (Elias & Gill 2017) Instagram, created in 2010.

When just over ten years ago research like Gill et al’s on representations of the male body in the mainstream media and popular culture were breaking ground within the field of beauty studies, the rise of social media has called for a shift in the focus from traditional media to new media – for example, seven of the eight interview participants in the research admitted to seeing pictures of idealized male bodies every day almost exclusively on social media. With this, the research asks **how has social media and the recent growth of the online fitness realm impacted male body-building as a beauty practice?** It is important to note that the term body-building in the context of the research refers to non-competitive body-building, and body-building as a beauty practice. The term body-building tends to evoke images of Schwarzenegger-built men from the 1980s wearing Speedos and coated in layers of false tan.

However, Shilling notes that body-building has grown massively in popularity where it once “used to reside on the deviant margins of the exercise industry” (2003:6). With the ever-increasing popularity of fitness gyms, body-building appears to have shifted from a more extreme form of body-modification to a much more normalized activity in contemporary society. The research is situated primarily in the context of neoliberalism which Elias, Gill and Scharff (2017) define as the invasion of market principles into all areas of life. The paper begins with a review of literature, followed by an outline of the methodological approach, and finally a discussion of findings and conclusion.

## **Review of Literature**

### ***Introduction to Literature***

The following literature review is split into four sections: the body in modernity; beauty in neoliberalism; the presentation of self; and gender and masculinity. The first section looks mainly at theory from Giddens (1991), Shilling (2003) and Bauman (2010) on the body, the self, and identity in modernity. The second section examines beauty in a contemporary neoliberal context. The following section examines Goffman's theory of self-presentation and self-impression management. And the fourth and final section looks at theory from Butler (1990) on gender performativity and Connell (1987) on hegemonic masculinity. In addition, each section looks at how this range of theory has been adopted within contemporary sociological studies of beauty and beyond. While much of the literature focuses on the female perspective, it can in many ways be interpreted and applied to the male perspective as is explained below.

### **The Body in Modernity**

Giddens states that in 'late-modernity', self-identity "becomes a reflexively organised endeavour" and the self becomes a "project" operating in a context of choices "filtered through abstract systems" (1991:5). Self-identity in late-modernity becomes something that must be "routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991:52). For Giddens, this notion extends pervasively to the body – the body, like the self, becomes a reflexively mobilized project – a 'body-project'. The body is no longer a fixed entity or a "given" as it once was, but "has become deeply involved with modernity's reflexivity" (Giddens 1991:218). Giddens accounts for this shift in the nature of the body with "the increasing invasion of the body by abstract systems" (1991:218) of late-modernity – the body becomes "a site of interaction, appropriation and re-appropriation, linking reflexively

organised processes and systematically ordered expert knowledge” (Giddens 1991:218). The body has become “fully available to be ‘worked upon’ by the influences of late modernity” and as a result, “its boundaries have altered” (Giddens 1991:218). The link that Giddens establishes between the body and identity, as well as how he highlights the shift in the role of the body in late-modernity, is clearly relevant to contemporary male fitness-oriented body modification, acting as a solid theoretical base for the bulk of literature to come.

Similarly, Shilling (2003) argues that in a ‘high-modern’ world with widespread decline of faith in religious institutions and grand political narratives, individuals are no longer “provided with a clear world view or self-identity by these trans-personal meaning structures” (Shilling 2003:2) and so the body “appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world” (Shilling 2003:2). For Shilling, the body is often viewed as an entity “which is in the process of becoming” (2003:4), operating as a project which can be endlessly worked on as a part of one’s self-identity. Shilling states that body-projects are defined by an acceptance that the shape, size and contents of the body are “potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner” (Shilling 2003:4). This does not necessarily mean a “full-time preoccupation with its wholesale transformation”, but more so involves individuals being “conscious of and actively concerned about the management, maintenance and appearance of their bodies” (Shilling 2003:4) – this reflects the significance of bodies in high-modernity; “both as personal resources and as social symbols which give off messages about a person’s self-identity” (Shilling 2003:4-5).

Shilling states that body-building is an effective example of a body-project as “the sheer size of the muscles achieved by bodybuilders challenges accepted notions of what is natural about male and female bodies” (2003:6). For Shilling, the “construction and display of ‘unnaturally’

large or highly defined bodies” allows people living in a condition of high-modernity to make strong, public and personal statements that reflect their identity. Featherstone (2000) presents a similar argument to those of Giddens and Shilling, however he chooses to focus on the context of consumer society rather than the abstract concepts of ‘late-modernity’ and ‘high-modernity’. Featherstone argues that increasingly the emphasis within consumer culture has shifted away from disguising the body (i.e. with heavy clothing and such) to revealing “the visible contours of the body” (2000:7) (i.e. through light clothing and the revealing of flesh). Through body modification then, one gains a sense of control over one’s body and this sense of control carries with it a “visible sign of identity” within the realm of consumer culture (Featherstone 2000:7).

With his concept of ‘liquid modernity’, Bauman (2011) adds to the arguments presented by both Giddens and Shilling, and Featherstone. According to Gane, the condition of liquid modernity is characterized by “among other things, the fragility and transience of social bonds; the passing down of responsibilities from the state to the individual; the emergence of new forms of disengaged, extraterritorial power and the transformation of citizens into consumers” (2012:1233). Discussing fashion, Bauman states that “in every period of history, in every territory of human habitation and in every culture, fashion has taken on the role of chief operator in the refashioning of constant change into a norm of the human way of life” (2011:22). What happens in liquid modernity then, according to Bauman, is that all of culture becomes subject to this historical logic of fashion. Bauman warns that “if you don’t want to drown, you must keep on surfing: that is to say, keep changing, as often as you can, your wardrobe, furniture, wallpaper, appearance and habits, in short – yourself” (2011:24). This notion of “changing yourself” that Bauman presents is closely linked with both Giddens’ and Shilling’s arguments, as well as Featherstone’s. All of these theories possess striking parallels with the topic of contemporary male body-building – the notion of changing yourself “if you

don't want to drown" (Bauman 2011:), the idea of the body as a "social symbol" (Shilling 2003:4) which gives off the messages about the self and the revealing of "the visible contours of the body" (Featherstone 2000:7).

### **Beauty in Neoliberalism**

Giddens also states that what might appear as a "wholesale movement towards the narcissistic cultivation of bodily appearance" in late-modernity, is in fact an expression of a concern lying much deeper to actively "construct or control the body" (1991:7). The notion of the body as a site of control is a concept explored on a much deeper level in the work of Michel Foucault. As one of the earliest theorists to emphasise the role of the body in society, Foucault developed the concept of 'bio-power' – which he defines as "an explosion of numerous and diverse techniques [initially employed by the modern state] for achieving the subjugations of bodies and the control of populations" (1978:140). As both a hallmark of modernity and an "indispensable element in the development of capitalism" (Foucault 1978:263), bio-power in its fully-realized state becomes an internalized aspect of the self and self-identity in modernity leading to widespread practices of self-monitoring and self-surveillance where bodies become sites of control and discipline. Elias, Gill & Scharff argue that beauty in contemporary society often "functions as a technology of bio-power" (2017:12-13) while Sassatelli claims "the gym epitomizes the spreading of disciplinary body techniques, previously confined to disciplinary institutions or production organisations, into leisure environments" (1999:229).

Linked to this is the concept of neoliberalism, which Elias et al (2017) define as the invasion of market principles into all areas of life. Elias et al situate the continuing focus on beauty and appearance within a "distinctive cultural moment, characterised by neoliberalism" (2017:5). Neoliberalism may be interpreted as one of the invasive "abstract systems" of late-modernity

that Giddens discusses linked to the altering of boundaries which he refers to – if the boundaries of the body have been altered, neoliberalism may invade the body and hence the body becomes neoliberalised. In this current cultural moment, the ‘force of neoliberalism’ invites, or more accurately, forces individuals to be “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017:5). Crucially, neoliberalism places full responsibility on the individual in either their success or failure in this endeavour, refusing to account for the myriad of other contributory factors and forces at work. Elias et al argue that in neoliberalism, it is mainly women who are called upon to transform themselves, “which becomes particularly visible with regard to the management of the body and sexuality” (2017:24). While this is a valid claim and does not exclude men per se, it is important to remember that the ‘force’ of neoliberalism may invade any and every body (albeit to different extents). This is crucial in gaining an understanding of male body-building as a beauty practice.

Central to the discussion of beauty in neoliberalism is the concept of surveillance – as stated, Foucault’s concept of bio-power in its fully-realized state becomes an internalized aspect of the self and self-identity in modernity, leading to widespread practices of self-monitoring and self-surveillance. Elias & Gill (2017) argue that self-surveillance and self-monitoring as a culture has intensified in neoliberalism. They argue that beauty apps such as Instagram are “transforming the arena of appearance politics” through their binding of “the contemporary focus on digital self-monitoring and self-tracking with a society structured by neoliberal and postfeminist ethics to produce an intensified surveillant and regulatory gaze upon women” (Elias & Gill 2017:17). The fact that the majority of people in contemporary Western society now carry Instagram around with them in their pockets, for Elias & Gill, intensifies this even further. Elias & Gill, adopting a postfeminist framework, focus solely on women and the ‘regulatory gaze’ that is placed upon them. Yet this, in a way, excludes a significant proportion

of the people who they claim are affected by self-surveillance in neoliberalism, men certainly use Instagram and the male body is arguably equally as prominent on Instagram as the female body. While not suited to a postfeminist framework, it is equally important to assess how neoliberalist self-surveillance culture is “transforming the arena of appearance politics” for men as it is for women.

Similarly, Banet-Weiser (2017) claims that neoliberalism has intensified – both culturally and economically – the social media beauty realm, resulting in effects which in turn spill out into wider contemporary society. She argues that the “cultural and economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism have transformed the nature of creative work, and digital media in particular, are shaped by a utopic vision that technological spaces afford possibility for anyone who wants to take advantage of these spaces” (Banet-Weiser 2017:266). She argues that for girls and women, the body has become associated with discourses of empowerment that is both cultural and economic – with beauty bloggers explicitly suggesting that viewers discipline their bodies according to the tutorial, as well as achieving this through their own bodies as they “transform their face and body for their fan base in exchange for material compensations” (Banet-Weiser 2017:275). Again, while Banet-Weiser focuses on female beauty bloggers and female bodies, her reference to how YouTube beauty vloggers offer tutorials on how to “achieve the same beauty standards” (2017:266) echoes the ethos of many male fitness bloggers or ‘vloggers’ who operate on a similar basis. Many of these men frequently upload photos of their bodies, often in conjunction with paid advertisements, all the while assuring people (other men, in particular) that they can reach this point too, if they work hard enough.

Featherstone in his examination of the relationship between body, image and affect in consumer culture, argues that “the corollary in consumer culture is that the modification and

cosmetic enhancement of the body, through a range of regimes and technologies, can be used to construct a beautiful appearance and thereby a beautiful self” (2010:195), presenting body-work as an imperative or a duty, and casting those who become fat, let their appearance go, or age before their time, as lazy and “having a flawed self” (Featherstone 2010:195). Featherstone also states that consumer culture bestows the assumption that “people with an enhanced appearance will be able to enjoy a body and face which are more congruent with their “‘true’ selves” (2010:195), both transforming themselves and upgrading themselves to a newer level “replete with positive possibilities” (Featherstone 2010:196) that correspond with the individual’s new body. This becomes all the more relevant to the male body when Frank (2014) states that in contemporary society heterosexual men are increasingly encouraged to become consumers in the beauty market, suggesting that masculinity has undergone a transformation in the last decade by which men have become increasingly focused on body image.

While Featherstone acknowledges the arguments from theorists such as Giddens and Shilling, he does not intend to understand the “process in terms of master logics, be they located in late capitalism, late modernity, post-modernity or whatever” (Featherstone 2010:194). Featherstone is more concerned simply with consumer culture, however his arguments do tie in closely with the other ideas surrounding beauty in neoliberalism. Featherstone’s claims about consumer culture are reflective of an intensification of neoliberalism where market principles, in this case in the realm of consumption, persist to invade the body of the individual. The idea that body enhancement can be achieved through the purchasing of regimes and technologies is neoliberalist in nature as it encourages people to engage with the market in order to alter their body, and thus their selves. Presenting the body and body enhancement as a form of ‘work’ and casting aside those who refuse or are unable to participate as having a ‘flawed self’ echoes principles of neoliberalism which Elias et al describe in which individuals are encouraged to

become “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (2017:5) and those who fail in this task are solely to blame.

### **The Presentation of Self**

Male body-building as a beauty practice can also be interpreted as a form of self-impression management. Erving Goffman (1959:1) states that “when an individual enters the presence of others, they commonly seek to acquire information about him or to bring into play information about him already possessed” such as the individual’s socio-economic status, conception of self, attitudes towards others, competence, trustworthiness and so on. According to Goffman then, an individual seeks to gain control over this information, control achieved “largely by influencing the definition of the situation which others come to formulate”. Goffman likened interaction in everyday life to theatre and performance, with a ‘front’ and a ‘back’ stage. It is the front, or “personal front” (Goffman 1959:14) that concerns research on male body-building. For Goffman, part of the personal front may include “insignia of office or rank; clothing; sex, age, and racial characteristics; size and looks; posture; speech patterns; facial expressions; bodily gestures; and the like” (1959:14-15). These aspects of the personal front convey signs in everyday interaction and are regularly, or sometimes meticulously, managed by the individual so that they may gain the control they seek over their self-presentation.

In Goffman’s terms, body-building as a beauty practice may be viewed as a heightened form of self-impression management. The body-building individual doesn’t simply adjust behaviour such as speech, facial expressions or posture in an interactive setting, nor does he merely engage in simple or traditional male ‘grooming’ impression management activity such as shaving facial hair or dressing well. The most dedicated body-building individual puts in hours of work at the gym on a recurrent basis so to build size, enhance attractiveness and perhaps

even to influence or manage other's impression of them on a deeper level – i.e. perhaps to convey an impression of skilfulness, capability, strength, dedication, persistency, aptitude or relatability. In looking at social media, it is important to note how self-impression management extends to the social media sphere, and perhaps intensifies even further. Guerro, Anderson and Afifi (2007) point to how Facebook pictures and content are selected in private without an audience but are presented and viewed very publicly, corresponding with Goffman's concept of the front stage and back stage. While Bouvier (2012) exhibits how Facebook users select nationalist, lifestyle and biological ethnic identity categories for self-presentation in the context of globalisation, deterritorialisation and the rise of lifestyle consumer society. Self-impression management theory is crucial, both on and offline, to an examination of male body-building as a beauty practice.

### **Gender and Masculinity**

Challenging previous distinctions made between sex as biological and gender as socially constructed, Butler (1990) argues that both sex and gender are socially constructed but gender however, is 'performative'. This means that the ways in which we speak, act and behave produce a series of effects that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman. For Butler, everything we do is a gender performative act, however some acts can be more performative than others producing more conspicuous effects. Earlier, Connell (1987) had coined the term 'hegemonic masculinity' to describe the dominant form of masculinity, or the roles and characteristics assigned to men in society and the ways in which they are expected to behave. Hegemonic masculinity is competitive and reflects a tendency for males to seek to dominate other males and subordinate females. In some ways, body-building may be interpreted as a gender performative act linked to hegemonic masculinity. Examining male body-projects, Gill et al (2005) argue that men are constantly "actively engaged in constructing

and policing appropriate masculine behaviours and identities” – what they call “regulating normative masculinity” (Gill et al 2005:37). They state that normative standards of masculinity are often maintained by men contrasting themselves with other men as examples of what not to become (fat, for instance). Interestingly, Gill et al (2005) suggest that participants never referred to any specific external pressures or cultural ideals associated with the male body, which for them is “all the more remarkable in the context of interviews in which a central focus concerns the existence of ‘new’ pressures on men, for example, in relation to images of the exemplary body” (2005:57).

For Wienke (1998) the muscular male body represents the ‘dominant cultural ideal’, with “muscularity symbolizing stereotypical notions of masculinity” (Weinke 1998:255). According to Wienke, men negotiate this cultural ideal through the construction and creation of a variety of individual coping strategies – which he lists as the reliance strategy (men who rely on the bodily standards of hegemonic masculinity, either consciously or unconsciously, for organizing their experiences of their body, their ideals, and their self-perception); the reformulation strategy (men who modify the cultural ideal to fit their own standards rather than the standards of hegemonic masculinity), the rejection strategy (men who view the cultural ideal as problematic and seek new models for understanding their bodies based on a medical or holistic approach). Unlike Gill et al (2005) however, Wienke (1998) suggests that nearly all participants were found to either “desire a well-proportioned, muscular body or [at least] acknowledge its hegemony and desirability” (1998:279) regardless of their adopted coping strategy. For Wienke (1998), individual men certainly possess the ability to reformulate, reject or resist the dominant cultural ideal, they are still not necessarily immune from the pressures of hegemonic masculinity.

## **Conclusion of Literature**

There is clearly a vast array of theory and literature relevant to the topic of male body-building as a beauty practice. The first section indicates how an activity like body-building may be linked to male's identities and concepts of the self. The second section shows how the powerful force of neoliberalism has altered and continues to alter the contemporary appearance arena. The third section suggests that male body-building may potentially operate as a form of self-impression management, while the fourth and final section highlights the potential importance of gender and the role that masculinity may play in a male fitness-oriented body-project. It appears that a lot of the more significant literature places the focus solely on women, feminism and post-feminism, and the male gaze, while the male perspective remains relatively unexplored. With the seemingly rapid rise in growth of men engaging in aesthetic labour through body-building, there is an amplified rationale to explore the topic of male body-building as a beauty practice. To do so, a series of semi structured face-to-face interviews were carried out with young males who attend the gym, lift weights etc. as well as thematic analysis of the content of four male popular fitness bloggers' Instagram profiles. The conclusions are limited due to the small sample number and the results are not generalizable to the larger male population.

## Methodological Approach

### Choosing the Research Method

The research explores how male body-building as a beauty practice operates for young men in contemporary Irish society – particularly in relation to social media in the context of neoliberalism. My main objective was to investigate the impact for young straight males of the ever-increasing presence and circulation of images of the idealised male body on social media and elsewhere. To do this, it was important for me to explore young men’s experiences, motivations and engagement with body-building as a beauty practice in contemporary society. Adopting an explanatory research design, which “seeks to identify causes and effects of social phenomena and to predict how one phenomenon will change or vary in response to variation in another phenomenon” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:10), with an exploratory dimension, the research in question asks: **how has social media and the recent growth of the online fitness realm impacted male body-building as a beauty practice?** My approach to this question is within a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm – meaning that I believe that there are multiple understandings of social reality defined by human subjectivity, which can be best understood through in-depth analysis of subjective experience. With that, I felt that the most appropriate and most suitable methods to incorporate into my research were qualitative methods.

Qualitative methods are “designed to capture social life as participants experience it rather than in categories the researcher predetermines” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:200). Qualitative methods suited both my research topic and my research paradigm as they typically involve “exploratory research questions, inductive reasoning, an orientation to social context, and a focus on human subjectivity and the meanings participants attach to events and to their lives” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:200). The research uses method triangulation – that is, “the use of two or more methods to study one research question” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:76) –

performing in-depth, face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with eight males aged 19-26 involved in non-competitive body-building, alongside thematic analysis of the photographs and captions of four popular Irish ‘fitness bloggers’ Instagram posts. Given that social media appears to play such a crucial role in the contemporary fitness realm, I felt that the two methods would be complementary to one another in the final analysis and provide different forms of insight into the field. By doing this, I am confident that extensive research was conducted and for that reason, there is more reliability in my research results. While I was aware that my choice of qualitative methods would ultimately create a situation of low generalizability within my research (in the sense that the analysis derived would be based on fewer cases from a very limited area), I feel that the data gathered is finely-textured and rich in information.

I truly never considered quantitative methods as a feasible option for my study. I set out to explore how young males construct and give meaning to their own experiences in body-building as a beauty practice, how they feel about themselves and their bodies as a result, and how they feel about the seemingly rapid growth in the presence of images of idealised male bodies on social media and elsewhere. Given that the research focused heavily on the neoliberal context, I also felt it was important to explore the discourse and dimensions surrounding male body-building on social media. For me to undertake survey research or quantitative content analysis, while the data gathered may have been more generalizable, it would have lacked the deeper insights that I have gathered from my qualitative research and delving into respondents’ thoughts, feelings, experiences and engagements with body-building. I also feel that the data gathered, particularly from the face-to-face interviews, is more valid as I was able to look beyond just the words of my respondents, but their body language, their expressions etc. to construct a more grounded analysis. This would not have been possible with survey research.

## Selecting the Sample

The research adopts a purposive sample, defined as “a nonprobability sampling method in which elements are selected for a purpose, usually their unique position” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:105). I tried to keep the criteria for element selection as noncomplex as possible – for the face-to-face interviews, respondents had to be under the age of 30, be relatively active on social media and be involved in body-building (regardless of their level of experience) at the gym either currently or within the last six months. In the beginning, snowball sampling – that is the method by which “sample elements are selected as successive informants or interviewees identify them” (Chambliss & Schutt 2016:105) – was used, however I chose to widen the sampling selection roughly halfway through as I felt that it was impacting upon generalizability. In addition, the thematic analysis looks at the Instagram pages of four popular, Irish, male ‘fitness bloggers’.

### Interviewees

Name	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation
James*	23	Male	Straight
Luke*	22	Male	Straight
Peter*	23	Male	Straight
Simon*	21	Male	Straight
Nathan*	26	Male	Straight
Ben*	23	Male	Straight
Aidan*	21	Male	Straight
Aaron*	19	Male	Straight

\* - indicates pseudonym

### Instagram Profiles

Name	Status (Self-Declared)	Username	Followers	Gender
Rob Lipsett	‘Public Figure’	roblipsett	411 k	Male
Glen Gillen	‘Public Figure’	glennfitness	44.1 k	Male
Kyle Mullen	‘Public Figure’	kylemullen_	26.2 k	Male
Wayne Ryan	‘Public Figure’	_wayneryan	10.5 k	Male

Initially I had considered to focus solely on ‘fitness bloggers’ yet I found this to be an incredibly difficult field to access. I reached out to many fitness bloggers on Instagram, Twitter and by email yet I received almost no response and those who did reply declined to participate in the research. While the data and analysis from this would have been from prominent members of the contemporary fitness arena, I also felt that it would represent the meanings and attitudes of only a small proportion of men involved in the body-building practices. Rubin & Rubin (1995) state that it is important for respondents to be both knowledgeable of the cultural arena being studied, as well as representative of a range of points of view. For that reason, I felt that talking to males with different levels of experience would paint a clearer picture of the complexities of male body-building as a beauty practice in neoliberalism.

### **Conducting the Research**

I began my sample with a close friend of mine who is a highly dedicated body-builder, personal trainer and fitness blogger or ‘vlogger’ on Instagram and YouTube, who I thought would be a solid key-informant within my field of research. He then referred me on to two of his clients who were obviously less experienced than him but still provided valuable and insightful data. I also spoke to another friend of mine who is too a dedicated body-builder. Being friends with some of the sample, there was a slight fear that the validity of results would be tainted or biased as respondents may have held back on some information to avoid embarrassment or even over exaggerated answers to accommodate the research question, so it was important for me to be aware of this. I chose not to continue snowballing from my first interviewee to avoid my results being confined to a closed group of people. I reached out to an acquaintance of mine from my area, outside of my close friend group, who I knew had a keen interest in the gym. I also reached out to people in my area via Instagram if I saw them post any fitness-related content – this proved a success as a number of the interviews were scheduled this way.

Most of the interviewees were from my area and all interviews took place in my home – this was cost-efficient and afforded me more control over the interview environment, allowing me to create a safe and comfortable space for interviewees. I asked questions from my interview guide. All questions were open-ended allowed interviewees to answer them in their own words. I also incorporated different follow-up questions there and then based on interviewees’ answers to other questions. This was important as I felt that to adopt a rigid interview structure would have been more like a face-to-face survey rather than in-depth interview, and it was vital for me to gather in-depth, personal data from the interviewees. Somewhat unexpectedly, the majority of men interviewed spoke very openly and were more than comfortable to talk about their bodies, which I feel had a positive impact on the validity of the research. The thematic analysis involved scouring Instagram for several days in search of the relevant and appropriate data. For the sake of ethics, I was only willing to use the Instagram profiles of men who identify as ‘public figures’ which limited my search slightly. I was also only willing to look at Irish ‘vloggers’ for the fact that my research is situated in an Irish context. When I had chosen the four men for the thematic analysis, I went through each of their profiles and screenshotted the photos and posts I felt were most relevant to the research.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because the interviews required delving into the somewhat personal subject of the body, a number of ethical issues were considered. Firstly, every interviewee was made fully aware of the nature of the research. I expressed that there would be no physical or psychological harm in participating and that the research would be non-exploitative. All interviewees were granted complete confidentiality and anonymity, I assured each of them that no one would have access to the transcripts other than myself and my supervisor. All interviewees were made fully aware that the interview must be recorded; no one was deceived in any way. Each interview was

recorded on my personal phone (locked with a lock-code that only I know), transcribed as soon as possible following the interview with names, places of residence and other personal information omitted, and the recording permanently deleted from my phone. Each interviewee was made aware there was no obligation to take part before granting full consent. Consent forms were signed by each interviewee, but I made sure to inform everyone that signing did not mean they were obliged to answer every question could choose not to answer any of the questions asked. All questions had been approved in advance by my supervisor.

The thematic analysis also raised a number of ethical questions. Instagram profiles and the like tend to blur the traditional distinction between public and private information – raising questions about confidentiality and consent (Andreasson & Johansson 2013). Instagram allows anyone with an internet connection can access another person's account once the user has their privacy setting set to 'public', however this does not constitute a free-for-all with regards to the use of public Instagram pages in research. According to Boyd & Crawford (2012), researchers should not deem their actions as ethical simply because the data was easily accessible. When informed consent cannot be directly obtained as is often the case with the use of social media content, it is important to assess whether there is a reasonable expectation of privacy on behalf of the social media user. Given that the four men whose Instagram accounts were used in this research have thousands of followers, self-identify as 'public figures' and frequently engage in self-promotion, I concluded that they have no reasonable expectation of their personal privacy needing to be normatively protected (Grodzinsky & Tavani, 2010:45).

### **Data Analysis**

To organize the interview data, I created individual files of each interviewee's transcript. Each transcript was printed off and colour-coded based on themes from the literature to identify

similarities across each interview and begin establishing themes for the final discussion. The thematic analysis involved a similar process: I uploaded each photograph from my phone to my laptop and created individual Word document files for each profile displaying the photos and their accompanying captions. I then colour-coded these digitally in a Word document based on the same themes from the interviews. I organised the findings from each method into four sections: the male body as a project; male bodies in neoliberalism; self-surveillance or self-presentation; and 'doing' masculinity. Choosing what to include was difficult, I tried to find the most appropriate quote from one or two of interviews which would best describe each finding, to which I would then try to match with an Instagram post from the thematic analysis which for the most part, was doable. In some cases, there were no suitable matches between the interviews and thematic analysis in which case the interview quote or piece of thematic analysis data was used on its own to describe the finding.

## Discussion of Findings

The following discussion is split into four sections: the male body as a project, which draws on theory from Giddens (1991) and Shilling (2003) to highlight the significance of male body-building as a type of body-project in modernity; male bodies in neoliberalism, which looks at the link between male body-building and neoliberalism; self-surveillance or self-presentation, which draws on theory from Foucault (1978) and Goffman (1959) to look at how these two processes operate in the context of male body-building in neoliberalism; and masculine bodies, which examines the masculinity dimension of male body-building. The fundamental argument of the research is that the bodies of young males who engage in body-building as a beauty practice have become subject to neoliberal ideals, which is exacerbated by social media, in this case Instagram, in the current “distinctive cultural moment of neoliberalism” (Elias et al 2017:5).

### The Male Body as a Project

The research is highly supportive of ideas from theorists such as Giddens (1991) and Shilling (2003) who posit the body as a ‘project’ of modification or change in ‘late/post/high modernity’ (Gill et al 2005) linked to identity and the self.

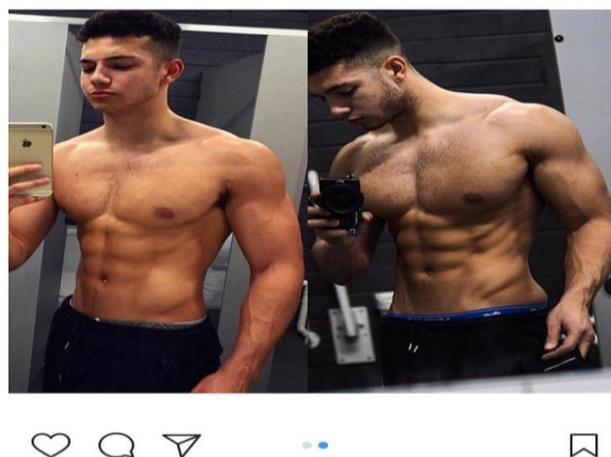


*Figure 1: kylemullen\_ via Instagram*

CAPTION: “Our bodies can change drastically! More than most realise. It’s a continuous process not a quick fix. Just put in the time and put in the work!”

Figure 1 is a patent example of Giddens' concept of the late modern body-project – each picture displays drastic differences in terms of muscle size, visibility and definition; fat; the size of arms, pectorals and abs; and even the ways in which different poses are used to accentuate different areas of the body, all corresponding with Giddens' (1991) argument that in late modernity, the body is no longer a fixed entity or a “given” as it once was. Kyle's caption states that body modification via body-building is a “continuous process” that involves putting in time and work – consistent with both Shilling's statement of the body as “a process of becoming” (2003:4) Giddens' statement that the body in late modernity has become “fully available to be ‘worked upon’ by the influences of late modernity” (1991:218), in this case the influence being fitness-oriented body modification or body-building.

While the Instagram post from Figure 1 – which features 8 different photos of the same body at various stages of training – is highly illustrative of the male body as a project, similar posts were actually quite difficult to find. What was much more prevalent in the research however was the ‘transformation picture’ – a before and after where two photos are placed side-by-side to highlight any ‘progress’ made on one's body through fitness-oriented body modification.



*Figure 2: kylemullen\_ via Instagram*

CAPTION: “January 2016 vs January 2018...”



*Figure 3: \_wayneryan via Instagram*

CAPTION: “11 days between photos...we putting in work!!”

Posts like this were rampant in the research and are further examples of the male body as a project – Figure 2 highlights a noticeable transformation in the body over a two-year period, while Figure 3 shows how the male body may undergo an, albeit subtle, transformation even in an incredibly short space of time. Again, the caption for Figure 3 refers to the “work” that has been put in to achieve this, as per Giddens (1991). The influence of Instagram posts such as these was clear from nineteen-year-old- Aaron, who just joined the gym in the New Year:

...since I started in the gym in the new year I’ve been tracking my progress and kinda like documenting it on my phone with pictures and stuff so I think when I get to a point where I’m really happy with my body and I feel like I’ve made a visible transformation, I’ll probably put up a transformation picture on Instagram. Like I said it’s nice to show people the work you’ve put in, especially when you’ve given so much to something.

The prospect of uploading a ‘transformation picture’ in the future also came up in twenty-one-year-old Simon’s interview:

I wouldn’t have a problem in the future putting up a picture, it would all depend on how much progress I make. Like I’m doing so well now if it really turns out to be a dramatic transformation say in the next few weeks, I would like to put up a transformation picture on Instagram or somewhere to show off (laughs) what I’ve done like. Like as I said, we shouldn’t care about what others think but we do so it would be nice to show off that I am looking better than I was at the start of the year...

Aaron and Simon’s statements point to how the everyday circulation of photos like the ‘transformation picture’ appear to be providing males with a new motive to join the gym or engage in a fitness-oriented body-project – a motive that extends beyond health and fitness, but that is based on the building or constructing of a new body and self, and broadcasting this transformation on social media.

The ways in which the majority of interviewees talked about their own bodies and their engagement with body-building and the gym, demonstrated that they themselves view their bodies and the work that they put into them as a ‘project’. Shilling (2003) argues that body-projects are a result of a world with widespread decline of faith in religious institutions and grand political narratives, in which individuals are no longer “provided with a clear world view or self-identity by these trans-personal meaning structures” (2003:2). It is at this point where a body-project “appears to provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self in the modern world” (Shilling 2003:2). Twenty-six-year-old interviewee Nathan supported this in his answer to a question asking if he considered the gym a pastime:

Yeah...like I think today, less and less people seem to have like actual hobbies - well people my age anyways. You grow up and you stop playing sport or doing whatever things you did for so long as a kid and then before you know it you could be left with nothing, besides work and like drinking with your friends. That was never me because I was in the gym from such a young age, but you know it could have been, it could be anyone like. And nowadays, not to sound like a grandad or anything, but everyone seems to just be on their phones and stuff like no one *does* anything anymore I feel. Maybe that’s a bit extreme but whatever, the gym is a great way to actually *do*

something these days when no one seems to be doing anything. It's a thing to do on the weeknights and weekend mornings when you're doing nothing else you know?

Here Nathan shows how engaging in a body-project can “provide a firm foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self” (Shilling 2003:2). The idea of being left with “nothing” as one moves from a childhood/adolescence to adulthood in contemporary society appears to be a legitimate fear here, however the body-project has provided Nathan with a way to combat this anxiety of modernity.

Shilling importantly notes that in terms of a body-project, the body is often viewed as an entity “which is in the process of becoming” (2003:4) which is endlessly worked on as a part of one's self-identity, as opposed to a project with a specific end-goal. Shilling states that body-projects are defined by an acceptance that the shape, size and contents of the body are “potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner” (Shilling 2003:4). This does not necessarily mean a “full-time preoccupation with its wholesale transformation”, but more so involves individuals being “conscious of and actively concerned about the management, maintenance and appearance of their bodies” (Shilling 2003:4). This was an idea most present in interviewee's discussions of their ‘goals’ – twenty-three-year-old Ben talked about his goals when asked about what keeps him motivated in the gym:

I'd say kinda just like working towards a certain goal, em...definitely like the enjoyment I get when I reach like mental milestones I've created for myself...it could be like an increase in weight or it could be like “oh I wanna be able to like hold a plank for like 10-15 seconds longer”...I'm content with my body but there's always room for improvement. I think I've worked to get to a certain point, and I'm happy with the point I'm at now, but there's definitely always room for improvement.

Ben's “goals” reflects his awareness that his body is “open to reconstruction” (Shilling 2003:4) in line with his own designs, and the fact that when these goals are reached, they turn into “mental milestones” and new goals are established. Ben's belief that there is always “room for improvement” despite being “content” with his body highlights the nature of the fitness-

oriented body-work as an endless “process of becoming” (Shilling 2003:4). The body being in an endless process of becoming is reflective of the reflexive nature of identity and the self in modernity that Giddens (1991) and Shilling (2003) refer to – where the body acts as a representation of one’s identity through the work that they put into it.

Giddens argues that “what might appear as a wholesale movement towards the narcissistic cultivation of bodily appearance is in fact an expression of a concern lying much deeper actively to ‘construct’ or ‘control’ the body” (1991:7). Aaron again offered a statement which seemed to reflect Giddens’ argument:

Well obviously, it was a New-Year’s resolution thing, but I suppose the real reason was that it was really just about me taking control of my body. Like I eat a lot, a lot a lot a lot so I really need to be exercising to be honest. But for me going running or something wasn’t really what I wanted to do like you can go running to stay fit and healthy but like it’s a very limited form of exercise, and it’s hard to stay motivated to do it because the benefits are more internal like you’re fitter – and that’s it. But with the gym you literally transform your body inside and outside, you can see all these changes all across your body, your arms, your legs, your abs.

Although Aaron expresses a need for changes in his body to be visible which could be interpreted as narcissistic, he also directly refers to joining the gym as way of “taking control of” his body, which allows him to eat a lot without that affecting his bodily appearance. Like Giddens, I argue that male fitness-oriented body-projects are less about a movement towards narcissism and more about a concern to control the body – it is also my argument that this desire or need to take control of the body has been and is being intensified by the current “distinctive cultural moment, characterised by neoliberalism” (Elias et al 2017:5).

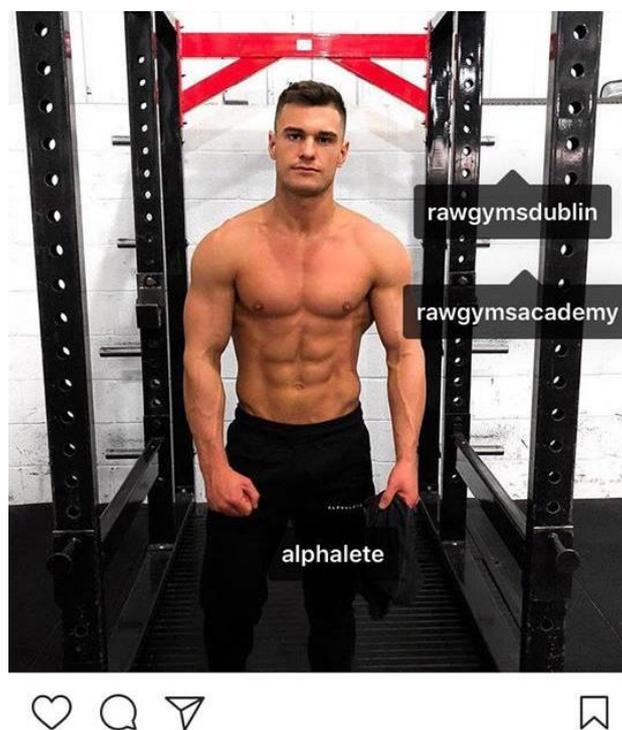
### **Male Bodies in Neoliberalism**

Elias et al (2017) define neoliberalism as the invasion of market principles into all areas of life, situating the continuing focus on beauty and appearance as a symptom of this distinctive moment of neoliberalism, while Giddens (1991) argues that in late-modernity, the boundaries

of the body have altered and are subject to invasion from the abstract systems of modernity. This altering of the boundaries of the body then facilitates the invasion of the body by neoliberalism. Neoliberalism forces individuals to be “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017:5), placing full responsibility on the individual in either their success or failure at this task. From the research, it was clear that neoliberalism has had a significant impact upon fitness culture on Instagram resulting in the body being used as a tool on social media to assist young males in the task of becoming the “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017:5) of neoliberalism. Importantly, I argue that there appears to be a trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation at work, where the successful people at the top of the fitness chain operate highly successfully and others attempt to replicate this.

Rob Lipsett is undoubtedly Ireland’s most successful male fitness blogger or ‘vlogger’ and one of its most successful micro-celebrities. Lipsett has over 410,000 followers on Instagram and 361,000 subscribers on YouTube. He is a shareholder in the chain Raw Gyms and Raw Academy, a brand ambassador for online clothing brand Boohoo and high-street retailer Primark as well as for large supplement/sportswear brands MyProtein and AlphaLete. He has also worked previously in conjunction with other brands such as men’s grooming brand Lynx, low-calorie drinks brand VitHit and high-street sportswear retailer Lifestyle Sports. Lipsett even appeared in a brief stint on Season 3 of ITV’s ‘Love Island’ in the summer of 2017 which had an average series viewership of 2.52 million viewers in the UK alone. As a successful and significant public figure of the online fitness sphere, Lipsett’s Instagram profile is a powerful example of how social media has been impacted by neoliberalism, and how a continuing focus on beauty and appearance for males is being maintained. Almost all of Lipsett’s Instagram posts feature some form of bodily exposure, be they topless pictures which display the entire upper body or clothed pictures in which still reveal or accentuate areas of his body.

Crucially though, Lipsett’s posts almost always feature tags and promotions for the companies he is involved with. Discussing beauty bloggers, Banet-Weiser (2017) argues that the body has become subject to messages of empowerment linked to the economic and cultural relationship between bloggers who explicitly suggest that viewers discipline their bodies according to the tutorial so to “achieve the same beauty standards” (Banet-Weiser 2017:266), as well as them achieving this through their own bodies as they “transform their face and body for their fan base in exchange for material compensations” (2017:275).



**Figure 4: roblipsett via Instagram**

CAPTION: “Stop focusing on what can go wrong and instead get excited over what can go right. Joggers: AlphaLete”

Interviewee James, a relatively small-time fitness ‘vlogger’ with an Instagram following of over 8,000 people, said that he uploads topless pictures to “enthrall” people or “catch people’s eye” for the purposes of self-promotion. Figure 4 is a clear example of this being done by Lipsett – but as well as displaying his “eye-catching” body, Lipsett uses this post to promote AlphaLete for which he is a brand ambassador and Raw Gyms and Raw Academy for which

he is a shareholder. In the caption from Figure 4, Lipsett’s message of ‘empowerment’ to his followers is to “stop focusing on what can go wrong” and “get excited over what can go right”. This is a clear example of what Banet Weiser (2017) talks about in which the cultural and economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism creates a social media space in which the body is bound up with messages of empowerment in conjunction with material or financial compensations. While Banet Weiser (2017) focuses on beauty bloggers women, Lipsett’s posts are an example of how this process too extends to men within the online fitness realm.



**Figure 5: roblipsett via Instagram**

CAPTION: “Greetings from Koh Tao @newhorizonescapes”

Lipsett’s posts sometimes go further beyond the material or financial compensations that Banet-Weiser (2017) refers to. Lipsett recently went on a lengthy trip to Thailand in association with a company called New Horizon Escapes who offer what they call ‘fitness retreats’ to Thailand, Bali, Sri Lanka and Kenya – during which Instagram posts like Figure 5 were uploaded by Lipsett every day. It is not clear whether Lipsett was financially compensated for

the promotion of this trip or given the trip for free in exchange for promoting the company. What is clear from this though is how Lipsett uses his body not just as a method of promoting brands, products and services, but also as a way of promoting a particular type of lifestyle, one that encompasses engaging with all of the things that Lipsett promotes – purchasing the gym membership to work on your body, buying the sportswear, supplements and protein, travelling to Thailand for the fitness retreats. It is clear from this that in the current cultural moment of neoliberalism, the male fitness realm seems to be less so about health and fitness and more so about the act of consumption and engagement with the market as a way to “construct a beautiful appearance and thereby a beautiful self” (Featherstone 2010:195)



**Figure 6: roblipsett via Instagram**

Twenty-three-year-old interviewee Ben jokingly called himself as a “fool” when talking about buying products that have been promoted by social media personalities of the fitness realm:

I will literally buy something because someone I like or follow talks about it. I’ve been a fool (laughs), I’ve fallen for it so many times...when I see people online, on Instagram

or whatever, I'm like "aw they like it so I'm gonna try it." ...I think one time I bought a flowerpot, I only bought it because it had been endorsed by somebody and when it came to my door I was like "why did I actually buy this?" like it doesn't hold any value to me...But I think sometimes they kinda just pick anything just to endorse it, and I'm the sucker who falls for it you know?

Ben's flowerpot anecdote is both an example of the potential influence of social media influencers of the online fitness culture, but also of the shift away from health and fitness towards consumption and neoliberal capitalism.

Banet-Wiser also argues that neoliberal capitalism has impacted the social media realm in another way, stating that its cultural and economic conditions have "transformed the nature of creative work, and digital media in particular, shaped by a utopic vision that technological spaces afford possibility for anyone who wants to take advantage of these spaces" (2017:266). In other words, social media is depicted as the perfect platform for people to become the "active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects" (Elias et al 2017:5) that neoliberalism calls on them to be. And while technological spaces can indeed be taken advantage of by anyone who wants to do so, the idea that doing this opens up all sorts of possibilities and leads to economic and cultural success for all is an impossibility and a false reality. This facilitates the previously mentioned trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation – where someone like Rob Lipsett has achieved great success, other young males now seem to be attempting to replicate this.

Figure 7 is taken from the Instagram profile of Glenn Gillen or 'glennfitness'. Glenn is twenty-one-years-old, has over 44,000 Instagram followers, runs a small online personal training and coaching business, and has affiliations with some smaller sportswear and supplement brands such as Machine Fitness and Bulk Powders (tagged in Figure 7). Figure 8 is taken from the Instagram profile of Kyle Mullen – Kyle is twenty-two-years-old, has over 26,000 Instagram

followers, runs an online personal training and coaching business, and too has affiliations with smaller sportswear brands (tagged in Figure 8). Glenn and Kyle are pinnacle examples of both Banet-Weiser’s “utopic vision” of digital media and the trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation. Through taking advantage of the technological space that is social media, they have achieved some success in terms of their followers, partnerships with other brands etc. But the likelihood of them reaching the level of economic and cultural success and micro-celebrity as someone like Rob Lipsett is at this stage, quite slim regardless of how hard they work – in contrast to the neoliberal ideal that would place responsibility on them as individuals for not achieving full success in the task of becoming “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017) because they didn’t work hard enough.



*Figure 7: glennfitness via Instagram*



*Figure 8: kylemullen\_ via Instagram*

This trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation was also evident in many of the interviews – two of the interviewees (James and Aidan) were personal trainers with their own fitness-themed

Instagram profiles with hopes to use their bodies combined with the “expert knowledge” (Giddens 1991:218) they have acquired to achieve economic and career success. Aidan, a final-year Arts student and non-practicing personal trainer, provided great insight into this:

... I’m a personal trainer now but I haven’t really done much work in it yet. I’m hoping that when I finish college I can get going with it. ‘Cause I’m only studying English and that’s not really useful at all so I’m glad I have this now, I’m good at it and when I finish college I’ll start dedicating more of my time to marketing myself on Instagram so I can get clients and stuff and hopefully make some money off it. I don’t know how it’s gonna go but that’s my plan...

In terms of “marketing” himself on Instagram, Aidan spoke about using his body as a marketing tool:

...you need to show people what you’re capable of and what you can do for them and the best way to do that is to show them your own body and the hope is that if it’s impressive enough they’ll ask you to be their PT or they’ll buy your plan or something you know?

Personal trainer and blogger James also spoke about this method of “marketing” oneself:

And the point of them pictures, for me anyway, is to catch people’s eye. So em...I kinda realised a while ago, so I started off on Instagram being quite informative and not really posting pictures of myself. But I realised that you know em...people rather see pictures of other people as opposed to maybe an infographic or something like that. So, I kinda use it to catch people’s eye...once I started posting pictures of myself, I just found that that’s probably just what people wanna see. My engagement went really far up, I got more followers, start[ed] getting more comments on my pictures, em more likes, and stuff like that.

While Shilling (2003) argues that construction and display of ‘highly defined bodies allows people make strong, public and personal statements that reflect their identity, Aidan and James’ statements move beyond the construction of identity in a cultural sense towards the construction of identity in an economic sense. This means that the male body can be used as a marketing tool to assist in the task of becoming the “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing” (Elias et al 2017:5) subject of neoliberalism.

## **Self-Surveillance or Self-Presentation?**

There was somewhat of a contradiction within the research between the ideas of self-surveillance and self-presentation. Foucault (1978) and Goffman (1959) differ in the sense that the former is concerned with the internal and internalised aspects of self-discipline and self-surveillance, while the latter is concerned with how the self is worked-upon and then presented unto others. Male fitness-oriented body-projects can be interpreted through both theories. In terms of self-surveillance, many of the interviewees spoke about the differences between playing a team-sport such as soccer or Gaelic football – as most of them did when they were younger – and training at the gym by themselves, bringing forward significant findings in relation to self-surveillance in a male body-project. Peter, who played soccer as teenager stated that when “you look in the mirror and you see your achievements yourself, it’s much more personal and it’s great knowing that you did it all on your own” while Luke made a very similar but more revealing statement:

I think the equivalent of winning something in a team sport, if you were to translate it to the gym and yourself, would be just looking in the mirror and noticing the changes in your body that weren’t there before, like maybe abs coming out, or your chest getting a bit bigger or something. But yeah, it’s very personal you don’t celebrate it as much obviously but yeah that’s the equivalent of it I think.

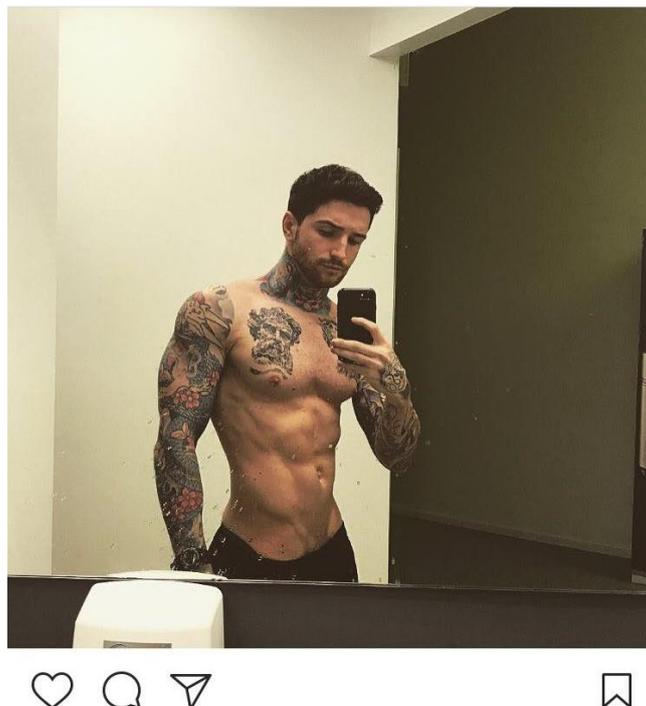
This process of “looking in the mirror” that Peter and Luke mention epitomizes self-surveillance and highlights its importance within the overall context of their body-projects – tracking changes of the body through self-gazing and self-surveillance is done in private, by the individual and for the individual, and is clearly a highly motivational factor for them.

The introduction of social media however, both complicates and intensifies the process of self-surveillance. According to Elias & Gill (2017), the culture of self-monitoring has intensified in neoliberalism, assisted largely by apps such as Instagram which are “transforming the arena of appearance politics” through their binding of “the contemporary focus on digital self-

monitoring and self-tracking with a society structured by neoliberal...ethics” to produce an “intensified surveillant gaze” (Elias & Gill 2017:17). While Elias & Gill (2017) focus solely on women and postfeminism, interviewee and fitness Instagrammer James’ detailing of the “process” of preparing for, taking, editing and uploading a body-picture to Instagram indicates how this intensification of self-surveillance in neoliberalism because of apps like Instagram extends too to men:

I suppose when you’re taking the picture there would need to be good lighting if it’s gonna be a good picture, because in good lighting it kinda brings out your muscle definition. You might look bigger, you might look more lean under the right light. So, you take the picture and then you upload it to Instagram and on Instagram there’s loadsa filters and stuff like that which might make you look more tanned, look a bit more defined, or change the lighting to make it even better, and make you look better. And then that’s probably when you publish it.

James’ account of the “process” of uploading a body-picture to Instagram is supported by Figure 9 below – where something as mundane as lighting becomes embroiled within this complicated process of self-surveillance on social media, as “good lighting” must be searched for and assessed in order to present on Instagram the best possible version of the body.



*Figure 9: [\\_wayneryan](#) via Instagram*

CAPTION: “Figuring out the good lighting in the new gym...”

Equally, there were elements of the research in which male body-projects corresponded with Goffman's theory of self-presentation. Perhaps the most notable element of this came from the many interviewees who spoke about their engagement in body modification as a way of standing out and presenting a specific impression to potential employers as a way of getting ahead in a competitive labour market. Interviewee Nathan, who works at a large recruitment agency based in Dublin provided an inside look at this:

It's something that I'd put on my CV, and I remember when I did the interview process for [his workplace], every interview I did I was asked about it and it was something I could talk about for a while, and with passion. And even now I know from working in recruitment myself and interviewing people that it's very beneficial. I've done a few interviews with lads, and girls, who've talked about it and it always comes across well. I think people use it nowadays because these days it's never enough to just say like "I have this degree in this" or "I worked here" like the big companies like [his workplace] are always looking for innovation or 'passion projects' is what people call them sometimes. And so, if you can show that you're devoted to something that's not work or college it does look good...I think it says that you've got your life together basically...most companies or most employers are looking for people who work hard you know? And if you have a body that shows that then there you go.

Most of the interviewees talked about using the gym as a form of impression-management in the way that Nathan describes, best summed up by trainee-accountant Simon:

...it's about dedication as well. If you're going for a job interview or something and you can sit down and tell the person who's interviewing you that you dedicate a certain amount of your life to this – it gives off a good impression. You're showing that you're a person who's dedicated to the work they do. You also look better in an interview physically like, obviously there's nothing wrong with being overweight but if you go in to a job interview somewhere and you're dressed well and you look good physically you're gonna give off a better impression than maybe someone who's overweight...there's a difference between someone who just comes home from work and throws on the TV and just has a microwave meal or whatever and someone who goes to the gym for a few hours after work and then comes home and cooks nutritionally balanced meals for the next few days – I've been in both situations so I know. But yeah in terms of like going for a job or something, those kinds of impressions that you give off are really important. The interviewer knows that you have a good plan and routine set out, you're dedicated to your body and dedicated to the gym.

Simon's outlook here is class impression-management (Goffman 1959). As someone who has "been in both situations", Simon demonstrates a strong personal belief in the idea that someone who works on their body in terms of fitness has a much better chance in impressing employers,

advancing in a competitive labour market and achieving career success. Twenty-two-year-old graduate scientist Luke actually recounted a real-life example in which he used his body-project to his advantage in a recent job interview:

Even in a [job] interview last week, the interviewer kinda disregarded my achievements in football and GAA because she said they're very common and she sees them on a lot of CVs. But on my CV, I had said that I had a keen interest in the gym and human nutrition, basically just that I work out a lot and that track my macros - my proteins, my carbs and my fats, and that I've been doing so for the last four or five years in conjunction with going to the gym. And she found that very interesting because she said that she had joined the gym recently and was wanting to start doing the same with her nutrition, and I think she found it a lot more interesting than your normal football and Gaelic hobbies.

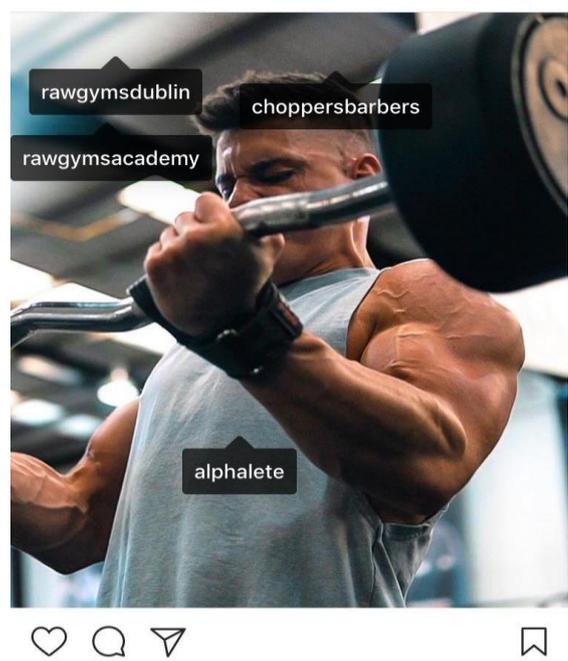
The fact that Luke would even put his engagement in a body-project on his curriculum vitae reflects how advantageous an activity it has become as part of the cultural and economic conditions of neoliberal capitalism, and also relates to the trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation mentioned in the previous section in the sense that Luke is using his body in an attempt to achieve career success. More and more, male body-buildings appear to be moving beyond being a pastime or being about health and fitness in the way that “normal football and Gaelic hobbies” are, and have almost become a marketable skill, helping young males to continue building themselves to be the “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017) of neoliberalism.

Male body-projects, particularly in the context of neoliberalism, seem to blur the lines between self-surveillance and self-presentation. Guerrero et al (2007) liken the selection of Facebook pictures and content to Goffman's concept of the ‘back-stage’ and the publishing of said pictures and content to the ‘front-stage’. However, the publishing of body-pictures on a site like Instagram calls for much more intense levels of self-surveillance. And so, in these cases, the ‘back-stage’ becomes a site of intense self-surveillance. It is my argument that rather than being contradictory to one another as stated at the beginning of this section, self-surveillance

and self-presentation in the context of male body-projects in neoliberalism are in fact complementary to one another. Where self-surveillance has always been closely linked to beauty in neoliberalism, it is clear that the presentation of self and self-impression management also has a significant role to play in the continuing focus on beauty and appearance in neoliberalism, in this case in the context of male body-building. For the young males involved in the research, it is clear that the processes of self-surveillance and self-impression management operate side-by-side as part of the trickle-down effect of neoliberalisation.

### **Masculine Bodies**

The research, particularly the thematic analysis, featured prominent patterns of performative (Butler 1990) hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987). For Butler (1990), gender performativity refers to how the ways in which people act, speak and behave produces a series of effects which consolidate being a man or a woman, while Connell's (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity refers to the dominant mode (Gramsci [1971]2005) of masculinity in a given culture i.e. the ways in which men are expected to behave.



*Figures 10 and 11: roblipsett via Instagram*

Figures 10 and 11 are clear examples of performative masculinity in action – both pictures capture Lipsett engaged in a hyper-masculine activity (i.e. the lifting of a large tyre in Figure 10 and the lifting of a seemingly heavy weight in Figure 11) with his muscular tensed arms and veins on clear display. Weinke states that muscularity symbolizes “stereotypical notions of masculinity” (1998:255) and so photos like this which feature not just displays of muscularity, but also activities which exhibit muscular strength and ability, which are then displayed very publicly on Instagram are clear instances of performative masculinity. Again, Lipsett has tagged various brands and companies to which he has financial ties, showing how performative hyper-masculinity on Instagram can also be used as a marketing tool in neoliberalism.



*Figure 12: kylemullen\_ via Instagram*

CAPTION: “From boy [to] man #GetYourDickOutForTheGram”

Figure 12 above is very striking instance of gender performativity. Kyle’s semi-pornographic ‘transformation picture’ is highly reflective of the shift that Gill et al refer to by which male bodies have come to be represented “in idealized and eroticized fashions, coded in ways that

give permission for them to be looked at and desired” (2005:38). The fact that this was uploaded to Instagram is a clear performance of masculinity, while the “boy to man” caption points to how the building of the muscles of the body is often associated with “becoming” a man and “stereotypical notions of masculinity” (Weinke 1998:255). Of course, Kyle’s hashtag in the caption which alludes to his penis is again a clear performance of masculinity.

Connell (1987) states that hegemonic masculinity is competitive and facilitates the subordination of women and other men. Some of the interviewees spoke about the sometimes-competitive nature of male body-building. Interviewee James’ description of “ego-lifting is one example:

...so there’s this thing called “ego-lifting” where people think they can lift more than they do, they might be tryna impress other people in the gym so they lift like a really heavy weight, and as a result they get injured...so for example, someone might try and deadlift way more than they actually can [and] as a result they use really bad form to try and get the bar up and suffer an injury as a result.

As a long-time gym enthusiast and personal trainer, James remarked that this phenomenon of “ego-lifting” was not uncommon. As well as highlighting the role of hegemonic masculinity in body-building, a phenomenon like “ego-lifting” also highlights the risk associated with an eagerness to display a hyper-masculine, muscular body. This, in a way, parallels Dosekun (2017) who discusses the “risky business of postfeminist beauty” for women in neoliberalism, which includes foot pain from the wearing of high-heeled shoes, pain and hair loss from the wearing of hair-weaves and other risky elements of “hyper-femininity”.

Twenty-two-year-old interviewee Luke also spoke about competitiveness in the gym when he trained with his GAA team:

There was a certain element of competition between us or whatever which wasn’t really positive, it was just people tryna lift more than the last person like it was always in a friendly way but it still wasn’t exactly positive or like motivational.

While twenty-three-year-old interviewee Ben, while discussing the pressures associated with body-building, spoke about how he can sometimes become competitive in the gym just from looking at the people around him:

In certain gyms...there is that kinda egotistical lifting where people are just lifting because the person next to them is lifting heavier, and then they try lift heavier that's a pressure that I find...I try not to but I have kinda fallen victim to it. I've definitely seen someone in the gym and in my head I'm like "aw I guarantee I can lift more than them" or something. Or I could be doing legs and they're doing chest and then I start doing chest, you know what I mean? I try not to do it but sometimes you just do.

"The element of competition" in the gym amongst Luke's teammates speaks to how an activity like body-building, especially in a group setting, may facilitate the subordination of other men and foster hegemonic masculinity. Ben's experiences of competitiveness in the gym, and the idea of trying not to be competitive yet still being competitive reflects Weinke's (1998) statement that in the pursuit for the masculine, muscular body, few men are immune from the pressures of hegemonic masculinity.

## Conclusion

The sociological field of beauty is dominated by studies on women, but this research opens up what is arguably becoming the most popular beauty practice for men – body-building, working out at fitness gyms etc. The research highlights the ways in which neoliberalism invites men to work on themselves in this way, similar to the ways in which it invites women to work on themselves in many ways. The first section of the findings shows how fitness-oriented male body-projects operate in contemporary society, and how body-projects facilitate the invasion of the body by the abstract systems of modernity (Giddens 1991) – in this case neoliberalism. The second section highlights the extent of the invasion of neoliberalism on the male body in contemporary society, the shift away from actual health and fitness towards neoliberal ideals and the ways in which social media facilitates this. The third section shows how self-surveillance and self-impression management, both on and offline, operate side-by-side in neoliberalism to produce an intensified surveillant gaze (Elias & Gill 2017) on men. And the final section provides a look at the influence of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1987) on contemporary male fitness-oriented body-projects, and how body-building operates a heightened form of gender performativity (Butler 1990) both on and offline. Overall, the research shows that young males are becoming more and more subject to the continuing focus on beauty and appearance in neoliberalism (Elias et al 2017). It appears that body-building as a beauty practice is one of the principal ways by which young males approach the task of becoming the “active, entrepreneurial, self-optimizing subjects” (Elias et al 2017:5) of neoliberalism, assisted by social media sites like Instagram.

There were some difficulties that arose during the course of the research. Only two out of the eight interviewees were personal trainers, highly dedicated to body-building. The other six ranged from being highly-dedicated to having little dedication. Levels of interest varied greatly

across each interviewee and was essentially not measurable through qualitative analysis which made it difficult to secure a common thread across the sample. However, I feel that the rich and finely-textured qualitative data gathered through the in-depth interviews made up for this and every interviewee brought something important to the research findings. Again, because only two out of the eight interviewees were personal trainers with their own fitness Instagram profiles, it was often difficult to compare the data gathered from the interviews with the data gathered from the thematic analysis of the Instagram profiles. However, I almost always managed to find common threads between the two, and where this could not be done I allowed the piece of data to stand alone within the findings. There were some topics that I had expected interviewees to talk about which they didn't, in particular the importance of having a beautiful body in relation to women and their sexual relationships. I included a question on this but most of the interviewees navigated around the question, while some of them gave brief answers. I think that this was due to them being embarrassed to talk about the topic rather than the topic not being important, especially since many of the interviewees were either friends of mine or known to me and vice versa. I would imagine that this is actually an important motivation for many males, particularly single males, engaged in body-building as a beauty practice. However, it is not reflected in the data.

In terms of future study, I would argue that a wide-scale quantitative study to assess the actual number of males participating in body-building as a beauty practice, how they approach it, and their motivations for doing so is first necessary in order to find out how popular this phenomenon truly is. At a glance, especially from looking at sites like Instagram, it appears that almost every young male is doing it – however, to judge popularity on this basis is obviously inaccurate and generalizable numbers need to be accurately quantified. I would recommend qualitative studies which focus on class and race in the context of male body-

building, motivations and experiences. There is also rationale to qualitatively compare the experiences and motivations of young males who go to the gym with the experiences and motivations of older males who go to the gym, as well as qualitative study to compare men's experiences and motivations with women's experiences and motivations. Most importantly however, I would recommend qualitative research comparing straight male's engagement with body-building with gay male's engagement with bodybuilding. Unintentionally, all participants involved in this research were straight. But based on previous research, such as McArdle & Hill (2007) who found body dissatisfaction to be higher amongst gay males than straight males, I expect that a qualitative comparative analysis of gay and straight males involved in body-building as a beauty practice would produce interesting and important results related to masculinity and subversive masculine identities in the context of male beauty in contemporary society. Overall, I predict that male body-building will be the focus of many future studies within the sociological field of critical beauty.

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## **APPENDICES**

APPENDIX 1: Interview Consent Form

APPENDIX 2: Interview Guide

APPENDIX 3: Interview Transcripts

## APPENDIX 1: Interview Consent Form

### Interview Consent Form

Thank you for agreeing to take part in my Sociology Research Project for SO303 Special Topics at Maynooth University. My research is designed to explore the sociological implications and effects associated with the recent surge in male participation in body-building, looking at it as a beauty practice or a form of aesthetic labour for males.

This interview will take up to one hour and with your permission I would like to tape record the conversation. A copy of the interview tape will be made available to you afterwards if you wish to hear it.

All of the interview information will be kept confidential. I will store the tapes/notes of our conversation safely. Your identity will be kept confidential and I will use a code number/pseudonym to identify your interview data. Neither your name nor private information will appear in the final research project.

Your participation is voluntary. You are free to refuse to take part, and you may refuse to answer any questions or may stop at any time. You may also withdraw at any time up until the work is completed.

If you have any questions about the research, you may contact me at:

Phone: \*\*\*\*\*

Email: \*\*\*\*\*

“I have read the description above and consent to participate.”

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## **APPENDIX 2: Interview Guide**

1. When did you start "working" on your body?
2. What inspired or drove you to start?
3. What motivates you to keep going?
4. How do you feel about your body currently?
5. What does it mean for you to participate in these practices?
6. Do you enjoy it?
7. Do you consider it to be hard work?
8. How does it make you feel in your daily life?
9. What are the main pros/cons associated?
10. What does going to the gym do for your confidence or self-esteem, if anything?
11. Have you ever sustained an injury/illness that you believed was a result of participation in these practices?
12. Do you think that participation in these practices have benefits that extend individual physical and mental wellbeing? E.g. for yourself or others in the labour market, at work, day to day interactions, social relationships, sexual relationships or other areas?
13. Can you identify any disadvantages in these areas? E.g. financial costs, social costs?
14. Is the gym something that you will continue with for the foreseeable future? Would you ever choose to stop? What would it mean to you if you were, for some reason, forced to stop?
15. How often would you say you are exposed to images of the male body?
16. What type of male body do these images usually depict?
17. What effect would you say they have on you?
18. Have you or would you ever post a picture of your body online or on social media? Why/why not? What kind of reaction did you get/would you expect?

### APPENDIX 3: Interview Transcripts

#### INTERVIEW 1 – JAMES\*

**Interviewer:** Have you ever sustained an injury or even an illness that you believed was a result of your working out?

**James:** Em yeah, a few, well I've never em...So em...Yea so I have sustained a few injuries but to be honest one of the main reasons, or one of the other reasons, that I started in the gym was because I used to play football and I used to always get injured. I used to always kinda sprain my ankle, so a good reason for me to join the gym was I knew that the risk of sustaining this injury again would be decreased. But, yeah, I have sustained other injuries as part of going to the gym. Like some lower back injuries, I've had some slight shoulder issues, and there might have been some other minor ones in there but nothing you know really really catastrophic. At all.

**Interviewer:** Ok and what about people that you've trained or even just worked with at the gym or saw at the gym?

**James:** Eh yeah, I've seen you know maybe people – maybe not my friends – but I've seen some people you know it is possible to sustain a really bad injury em...from the gym – just like all sport. You know, there's always a risk of injury in all sort of like em activity. But you know you really have to make sure – especially when you're using heavy weights – that you have the right form, the right technique, or you know you will get injured. There's been cases of maybe during a squat for example. So, a squat might be considered as a bit of a high-risk exercise, em if you compare it to other exercises, especially when you're using a heavy weight. Em so, yeah, I've seen like people using like a really heavy weight, not being able to control it, and you know you might break your leg or something like that. So I've seen that a couple of times. But that really is kinda rare, it's a very rare occurrence. Usually people would kinda sustain more like minor injuries, like mine like a lower back.

**Interviewer:** And so, do you think these injuries normally happen to people who maybe have like a lack of knowledge of what they're doing? Or what they should be doing even?

**James:** Yeah so there's this thing called “ego-lifting” where people think they can lift more than they do, they might be tryna impress other people in the gym so they lift like a really heavy weight, and as a result they get injured...so for example, someone might try and deadlift way more than they actually can [and] as a result they use really bad form to try and get the bar up and suffer an injury as a result.

.....

**Interviewer:** What kind of preparation goes into taking and uploading these photos?

**James:** I suppose when you're taking the picture there would need to be good lighting if it's gonna be a good picture, because in good lighting it kinda brings out your muscle definition. You might look bigger, you might look more lean under the right light. So, you take the picture and then you upload it to Instagram and on Instagram there's loadsa filters and stuff like that which might make you look more tanned, look a bit more defined, or change the lighting to make it even better, and make you look better. And then that's probably when you publish it.

**Interviewer:** And what do you think posting these pictures does for you, and for your followers?

**James:** Em...so...I try and be as informative as possible. Eh personally, so just say I was posting a picture of my back, looking like really defined and stuff like that. Underneath that my caption would probably be something about how to build a bigger back. Generally, anyway. I think they are quite informative. And the point of them pictures, for me anyway, is to catch people's eye. So em...I kinda realised a while ago, so I started off on Instagram being quite informative and not really posting pictures of myself. But I realised that you know em...people rather see pictures of other people as opposed to maybe an infographic or something like that. So, I kinda use it to catch people's eye, they might look at it and think: "Oh I want a back like that." And then they'll read my caption, and they'll read how to get a bigger back. So that's kinda em I think it would positively affect my followers, because it's you know informing them at the end of the day, it's educating them.

## **INTERVIEW 2 – LUKE\***

**Interviewer:** Now do you think there are benefits to it that extend beyond individual physical and mental wellbeing?

**Luke:** Yeah, well I think if people know that you're active or if people see you in the gym all the time, they'll notice that...they might think that you're a hard worker or that you're dedicated, them kinds of traits. Even in a [job] interview last week, the interviewer kinda disregarded my achievements in football and GAA because she said they're very common and she sees them on a lot of CVs. But on my CV, I had said that I had a keen interest in the gym and human nutrition, basically just that I work out a lot and that track my macros - my proteins, my carbs and my fats, and that I've been doing so for the last four or five years in conjunction with going to the gym. And she found that very interesting because she said that she had joined the gym recently and was wanting to start doing the same with her nutrition, and I think she found it a lot more interesting than your normal football and Gaelic hobbies.

.....

**Interviewer:** So as some who's participated in both the gym and team sports, what would you say you prefer about each?

**Luke:** Well like obviously with the gym like just being on your own, you're missing that whole aspect of like celebrating wins and achievements with your team or whatever, that's definitely not there. I suppose there's powerlifting you can win trophies if you get into that...em you could do that if you really felt a need for that feeling of winning something and being rewarded for your results – that would be the best place to get a trophy out of it. But I think the equivalent of winning something in a team sport, if you were to translate it to the gym and yourself, would be just looking in the mirror and noticing the changes in your body that weren't there before, like maybe abs coming out, or your chest getting a bit bigger or something. But yeah it's very personal you don't celebrate it as much obviously but yeah that's the equivalent of it I think.

### INTERVIEW 3 – PETER\*

**Interviewer:** So you said you used to play soccer and you don't play anymore. Do you notice any difference between playing a team sport and doing the gym? I mean being on a team versus being on a team?

**Peter:** Yeah well some people go to the gym with someone else but I just prefer to go alone 'cause I just do my own thing I don't like to...you know, have to do what other people are doing and stuff. But then on a football team, you're a unit like you're in a team like you have to work well with others but in the gym you're just working against yourself. Which is ok. But I suppose working in a team you develop better characteristics I think probably like you're working with others, you're communicating, you might not get on with someone but you have to learn how to get on with them kinda like in real life. But the gym you're just by yourself.

**Interviewer:** And what about celebrating achievements in a team versus by yourself?

**Peter:** Yeah well like you look in the mirror and you see your achievements yourself. It's much more personal and like it's great knowing that you did it all on your own.

### INTERVIEW 4 – SIMON\*

**Interviewer:** Would you ever post a picture of your body on social media?

**Simon:** I wouldn't have a problem in the future putting up a picture, it would all depend on how much progress I make. Like I'm doing so well now if it really turns out to be a dramatic transformation say in the next few weeks, I would like to put up a transformation picture on Instagram or somewhere to show off (laughs) what I've done like. Like as I said, we shouldn't care about what others think but we do so it would be nice to show off that I am looking better than I was at the start of the year...

.....

**Interviewer:** Do you think there are benefits to the gym that aren't just about the physical and mental?

**Simon:** Yeah if you think about in your working life, it's about dedication as well. If you're going for a job interview or something and you can sit down and tell the person who's interviewing you that you dedicate a certain amount of your life to this – it gives off a good impression. You're showing that you're a person who's dedicated to the work they do. You also look better in an interview physically like, obviously there's nothing wrong with being overweight but if you go in to a job interview somewhere and you're dressed well and you look good physically you're gonna give off a better impression than maybe someone who's overweight...there's a difference between someone who just comes home from work and throws on the TV and just has a microwave meal or whatever and someone who goes to the gym for a few hours after work and then comes home and cooks nutritionally balanced meals for the next few days – I've been in both situations so I know. But yeah in terms of like going for a job or something, those kinds of impressions that you give off are really important. The

interviewer knows that you have a good plan and routine set out, you're dedicated to your body and dedicated to the gym.

### **INTERVIEW 5 – NATHAN\***

**Interviewer:** Do you consider it a pastime?

**Nathan:** Yeah...like I think today, less and less people seem to have like actual hobbies, well people my age anyways. You grow up and you stop playing sport or doing whatever things you did for so long as a kid and then before you know it you could be left with nothing, besides work and like drinking with your friends. That was never me because I was in the gym from such a young age, but you know it could have been, it could be anyone like. And nowadays, not to sound like a grandad or anything, but everyone seems to just be on their phones and stuff like no one *does* anything anymore I feel. Maybe that's a bit extreme but whatever, the gym is a great way to actually *do* something these days when no one seems to be doing anything. It's a thing to do on the weeknights and weekend mornings when you're doing nothing else you know?

.....

**Interviewer:** Do you think there are benefits that extend beyond physical and mental wellbeing?

**Nathan:** Yeah well like it's something that I'd put on my CV, and I remember when I did the interview process for [his workplace], every interview I did I was asked about it and it was something I could talk about for a while, and with passion. And even now I know from working in recruitment myself and interviewing people that it's very beneficial. I've done a few interviews with lads, and girls, who've talked about it and it always comes across well. I think people use it nowadays because these days it's never enough to just say like "I have this degree in this" or "I worked here" like the big companies like [his workplace] are always looking for innovation or 'passion projects' is what people call them sometimes. And so, if you can show that you're devoted to something that's not work or college it does look good...I think it says that you've got your life together basically...most companies or most employers are looking for people who work hard you know? And if you have a body that shows that then there you go.

### **INTERVIEW 6 – BEN\***

**Interviewer:** So what keeps you motivated?

**Ben:** I'd say kinda just like working towards a certain goal, em...definitely like the enjoyment I get when I reach like mental milestones I've created for myself...it could be like an increase in weight or it could be like "oh I wanna be able to like hold a plank for like 10-15 seconds longer"...I'm content with my body but there's always room for improvement. I think I've worked to get to a certain point, and I'm happy with the point I'm at now, but there's definitely always room for improvement.

.....

**Interviewer:** Ok great. Now, what pressures are there for you associated with it? If any?

**Ben:** Em... I think definitely like body image I'd say is a big thing. And then in certain gyms, well I'm kinda lucky at the moment because my gym is just me half the time, but there is that kinda like egotistical lifting where people are just lifting because the person next to them is lifting heavier, and then they try lift heavier that's a pressure that I find. And then just body image like people might think like "oh I've been lifting for so long, why don't I look like this person?" or something but obviously that's not how it works but I think people get those ideas in their head, so that's definitely a pressure of it.

**Interviewer:** So would you say that you put pressure on yourself in those ways?

**Ben:** Em I try not to but I have kinda fallen victim to it. I've definitely like seen someone in the gym and in my head I'm like "aw I guarantee I can lift more than them" or something. Or I could be doing like legs and they're doing chest and then I start doing chest, you know what I mean? I try not to do it but sometimes you just do. The pressure kinda comes from myself rather.

.....

**Interviewer:** Earlier on you mentioned buying things that you saw from brand endorsements on social media, how do you feel about those kind of brand endorsements and partnerships between social media personalities and businesses?

**Ben:** Hmm...well like depending on what the product is, I think one time I bought like a flowerpot, I only bought it because it had been endorsed by somebody and when it came to my door I was like "why did I actually buy this?", like it doesn't hold any value to me. But when it's actual good products like, I remember before I seen Roz Purcell was like promoting some kind of healthy chocolate, and I bought that and that was a great buy! Like I'd still buy it to this day because of that. But I think sometimes they kinda just pick anything just to endorse it, and I'm the sucker who falls for it you know? (laughs)

## **INTERVIEW 7 – AIDAN\***

**Interviewer:** Ok and so today what motivates you to keep going?

**Aidan:** Well like I'm a PT now and I post like fitness things on my Instagram page and stuff so that's motivational in a way, I obviously don't wanna be a hypocrite like (laughs) so I need to stay in shape. But obviously it's not just about that like I want to look good and I suppose the main motivational thing for me is just seeing progress in my body all the time, looking in the mirror after two weeks of training or something and seeing positive changes. That's the best motivation for me.

**Interviewer:** Ok and how do you feel about your body currently?

**Aidan:** Well I'm quite lean and pretty toned so I'm happy with the way I look – but the whole idea of being in the gym or being a lifter is kinda that there's always room for

improvement. So like I might look good now but I still have a lot of progress to make in terms of like building my body. It's not just about getting to a certain point and then maintaining that like you put your body through certain stages kinda with the way you work out and the way you eat and all that. So yeah I've been happy with my body pretty much since I started in the gym but it's kinda like my hobby now to put my body through the different stages that I was talking about.

**Interviewer:** What does it mean for you to participate in these practices?

**Aidan:** Well it's kinda like my number one hobby so I love it like. But obviously I'm a personal trainer now but I haven't really done much work in it yet. I'm hoping that when I finish college I can get going with it. 'Cause I'm only studying English and that's not really useful at all so I'm glad I have this now, I'm good at it and when I finish college I'll start dedicating more of my time to marketing myself on Instagram so I can get clients and stuff and hopefully make some money off it. I don't know how it's gonna go but that's my plan.

**Interviewer:** Ok and what do you mean put more effort into marketing yourself on social media? How will you do that?

**Respondent:** Just like start putting up more posts, more workout videos, maybe even set up a website where people can purchase work-out plans that I've made and what not.

**Interviewer:** Ok and will the posts involve displaying your body?

**Aidan:** Yeah definitely, like that's what I'll be trying to show people like if you wanna look like me, hire me as your personal trainer (laughs). Nah but it's the truth like you need to show people what you're capable of and what you can do for them and the best way to do that is to show them your own body and the hope is that if it's impressive enough they'll ask you to be their PT or they'll buy your plan or something you know? I haven't got all the logistics of it totally organised yet but that's the jist. I'll probably do like sponsored posts on Instagram and maybe Facebook – so that's where you like pay the social media platform X amount and you say who you want to target based on like their age, gender, location and interests and then they'll promote your posts on people's feeds for a certain amount of time. I did it when I first got certified but then I kinda realised I didn't really have time then to actually take on clients so I stopped – but I'll do it again when I'm done college.

## **INTERVIEW 8 – AARON**

**Interviewer:** Ok so what inspired you to join the gym?

**Aaron:** Well obviously like it was a New-Year's resolution thing but I suppose the real reason was that it was really just about me taking control of my body. Like I eat a lot, a lot a lot a lot so I really need to be exercising to be honest (laughs). But for me going running or something wasn't really what I wanted to do like you can go running to stay fit and healthy but like it's a very limited form of exercise, and it's hard to stay motivated to do it because the benefits are more internal like you're fitter – and that's it. But with the gym you literally transform your body inside and outside, you can see all these amazing changes all across your body, your arms, your legs, your abs. And then as well as the visible aspects, you become fitter, stronger, more agile – well me anyways. So yeah. And I had seen so many people joining the

gym and doing really well, and looking great and they all seemed to have their lives together so (laughs). I was like “here, I better get cracking” (laughs).

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**Interviewer:** How often would you say you’re exposed to or see images of the male body?

**Respondent:** Ah every day...definitely. On Instagram. Like between some of my friends who are in the gym and put up pictures and stuff and then like fitness people on Instagram too. It’s definitely a craze like people love putting up pictures of their body, not just boys but girls too. It makes sense though like if you’re gonna be putting in all this work in the gym that people put in you’re definitely gonna wanna show it off like.

**Interviewer:** Ok so do you think it’s only acceptable for people to put up pictures like that if they’re in the gym?

**Respondent:** Em...well not that it’s not acceptable but like I don’t really see the point in putting up a picture of your body if it’s not something that you’ve worked on – so yeah it’s not really about what your body looks like but how much work you’ve put into it, but anyone who’s worked hard on their body is gonna have a good body like. So I think that’s it, like why would you post a picture of your body if it doesn’t like reflect the work you’ve put in you know?

**Interviewer:** Yeah and is it just Instagram and social media that you see pictures of the male body or is there anywhere else where it’s prominent?

**Respondent:** Well like I suppose there’s like ads on TV and shit but I don’t really watch that much TV, you’d probably see it in movies too. But I think social media is the main place where you’d see it like people don’t really watch that much TV anymore, I just watch Netflix like. So yeah, mainly social media, especially Instagram.

**Interviewer:** And do you think they have any effect on you?

**Respondent:** Em...yeah maybe. Like not massive.

**Interviewer:** Is it positive or negative?

**Respondent:** Em...probably positive like I find them motivational. If I see a picture of a lad who’s like ripped it reminds me of what I have to do at the gym and what my goals are like I wanna be ripped too one day so.

**Interviewer:** Ok so have you or would you ever post a picture of your body on Instagram or other social media?

**Respondent:** Eh, I haven’t but I definitely would. Like since I started in the gym in the new year I’ve been tracking my progress and kinda like documenting it on my phone with pictures and stuff so I think when I get to a point where I’m really happy with my body and I feel like I’ve made a visible transformation, I’ll probably put up a transformation picture on Instagram. Like I said it’s nice to show people the work you’ve put in, especially when you’ve given so much to something.