

Austerity linked to rise of the 'spornosexual'

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The economic crisis and austerity are having an unexpected consequence: more young men striving for gym-fit, photo-perfect bodies that they use to create a social media brand.

That's according to new research from the University of East Anglia (UEA), which suggests traditional routes to success and power have been eroded in 'Austerity Britain', causing [young men](#) to seek value instead through their bodies.

Since the 2008 financial crash, there has been an empirically observable rise in young men sharing images of their worked-out bodies on social media platforms, said the study's author, Dr Jamie Hakim. His paper, 'The Spornosexual: the affective contradictions of male body-work in neoliberal digital culture', is published today in the *Journal of Gender Studies*.

Dr Hakim, a lecturer in media studies in UEA's School of Film, Television and Media Studies, said: "One of the most interesting aspects of this development is the power-shift of a segment of society who have historically defined themselves through their mind, whilst at the same time defining those they have subordinated - women, gay and working-class people - through their bodies. The former group has historically been employed as high-paid decision-makers, whilst the latter have had to rely on their bodies for low- or no-pay work, such as manual and domestic labour, slavery and sex work.

"Austerity has eroded young men's traditional means of value-creation so

they have become increasingly reliant on their bodies as a means of feeling valuable in society. In theoretical terms, so-called 'spornosexuality' is an embodied response to material changes brought about by neoliberal austerity."

The term 'spornosexuality', a portmanteau of 'sports star' and 'porn star', was coined in July 2014 by media commentator Mark Simpson, in an article in The Daily Telegraph about the rise of men attending the gym primarily for reasons of appearance, rather than for health or fitness.

Dr Hakim examined data from Sport England that showed a significant year-on-year increase in the amount of 16 to 25-year-old men attending the gym between 2006 and 2013. Meanwhile, the market research company Nielsen found that sales of sports nutrition products that are used to strip body fat and build muscle increased by 40 per cent in Britain's 10 largest supermarkets - the second-largest growth in sales of any product sold in supermarkets in 2014.

Likewise, Dr Hakim found that this demographic is both consuming and producing print and digital media that relates to body building. The print version of Men's Health magazine became the best-selling title in the British men's magazine market in 2009, selling nearly twice as many copies as its nearest competitor, the well-established GQ magazine. At the same time, the overall consumer magazine market was dramatically decreasing in circulation, while fitness-related hashtags on social media sites numbered in the multi-millions.

The research shows that young men have become increasingly adept at building a social media brand based around their worked-out bodies and similarly savvy about marketing themselves through social media.

This involves a significant amount of work but offers very little reward. Large amounts of time and constant labour are necessary to maintain

both body and brand, but the pleasures yielded are only fleeting. But with little else of enduring value available in the current economy, these men feel compelled to continue to pursue these activities.

Dr Hakim said: "The rise of men going to the gym and sharing images of their worked-out bodies began around 2008, coinciding with the intensification of neoliberalism that occurred in response to the 2008 economic crash and the following austerity measures. This is no coincidence.

"There is a correlation between the rise of young men fashioning muscular bodies and sharing them online, and the austerity measures experienced by their generation. These economic tactics are widening inequality, especially for those born after 1980, with prohibitively high house prices, the loss of secure long-term contracts, tuition fees and other hurdles to economic security.

"The projection of what constitutes a 'good life' has become so spectacular even while the means of achieving home ownership, a prestigious career and a high income are radically diminishing."

Through interviews with young British men who regularly use the gym and have built a [social media](#) 'brand' based on their worked-out bodies, Dr Hakim found each man talked about the importance of peer response to the images they circulated.

Dr Hakim said: "They continue to addictively pursue these fitness goals because the joys of accumulating spornosexual capital are one of the few remaining for young men in Britain's post-crisis austerity economy. This is an embodied and mediated response to the precarious feelings produced by neoliberal austerity."

Provided by University of East Anglia

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