Consuming and Producing Bodies: Exploring the Embodied Practices of the Irish Male Model

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Stage of Doctoral Research: Early

Conceptual Domain

This research focuses on embodiment within Consumer Culture Theory and hinges on the shift in conceptualisation from a body for use to a body for display. In probing the new frontiers of CCT and the body, the research embraces the study of practice amongst male models. Via a practice theory lens, this research extends the scope of the concept of embodiment by examining what men must do in order to prepare this body for display.

Methodological Domain

An ethnographic method is utilised to explore these practices. The most efficient way to capture the instinctive and learned practices of those being studied is to immerse oneself in their habitual environment. Additionally, narrative interviews are used to uncover the reminiscenced experiences of male models as they create a body for display through practice. An amalgamation of both approaches allows the researcher to understand and theorise the doings and sayings of this alternate demographic.

Substantive Domain

This research advances research on embodiment by studying bodily practices. Most research on embodiment in consumption studies has focused on what bodies mean. This research aims to extend the breadth of this substantial topic by focusing on how bodies come to mean.
Introduction

The field of fashion modelling is inextricably linked to the rapid development of consumer culture (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Shifts in our understanding of brands from bundles of attributes to bundles of meanings (Levy 1959), and concomitant shifts in the nature of competition from that based on the physical properties of products to the realm of image and aesthetics, saw models take on an important role as progenitors of consumer desire. As Wissinger (2009: 277) notes:

The role modelling played in the post Second World War boom, in which newly available glossy magazines put slick advertising images into the hands of targeted consumers was significant. The glamorous images found in Vogue, Harper’s Bazaar, Life and Look magazines showed the way toward the commodification of more and more realms of contemporary life, seducing the public into believing that hope could perhaps be found in a jar, and true love and happiness might be possible if one just made the right purchases.

The modelling industry is unique in that access to employment is based purely on bodily aesthetics. The “many are called, few are chosen” (Paramieter and Fischer 2007: 25) motif of the industry characterises the on-going struggle to conform to an ephemeral ideal. The model’s job is to effectively portray a future self to the consumer and become by their very definition, someone worthy of imitation. Male modelling, in particular, did not begin to expand until the emergence of the new man in the 1980s, when men were encouraged to cultivate and increase their degree of embodied capital through consumption. The emergence of male modelling thus coincided with the expansion of the male grooming market (Nixon 1996) and heralded a new era of consumer goods for which men were the prime target. Allied to this movement was a shift in our understanding of the male body from a body-for-use to a body-for-display (Benson 1997).

However, with some recent exceptions (e.g. Ostberg 2010; Patterson and Elliott 2002; Schroeder and Zwick 2004), the degree of attention paid to male bodies by researchers within CCT has paled significantly in comparison to work on female embodiment and its representation. One explanation for the lack of focus on male embodiment may be the myth that masculinity remains somehow unconstructed (Holmlund 1993). As Nash (1996: 153) argues:

...to continue to study the representation of women without considering the representation of men elides the cultural investment expended in display of the male and reinforces the apparent effacement of masculinity as a social construction.

This research takes up this challenge on a number of fronts. Not only does it foreground the importance of embodied masculinity within consumer culture, it also moves debate beyond what bodies mean to address the question of how bodies come to mean. In short, this research examines the practices through which male models forge bodies for display; bodies worthy of imitation and capable of exciting consumer desire. Extant research (e.g. Entwistle and Wissinger 2006; Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin, 2005) has identified these practices as aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour and it is to these that we now turn.
Aesthetic Labour

Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) extend our understanding of the labour required in the production of bodily aesthetics, or aesthetic labour. Their starting point is the research of Anne Witz and her colleagues on the ways in which workers come to embody the desired aesthetic of the organisation in which they work (see Nickson, Warhurst, Witz, and Cullen 2001; Warhurst, Nickson, Witz, and Cullen, 2000; Witz, Warhurst, and Nickson, 2003). Aesthetic labour, in this sense, commodifies embodied dispositions (Witz et al. 2003). Bourdieu (1990: 69-70) defines embodied dispositions “as durable ways of standing, speaking, walking and of feeling and thinking”. Thus, through performance, these dispositions are made to materialise brand meaning which is then sold to and embraced by consumers in the marketplace. For Entwistle and Wissinger (2006: 776-777) aesthetic labour endures beyond the working day and incorporates the manufacture of an aesthetic bodily surface under fluctuating conditions, and the production and projection of a particular ‘personality’. Aesthetic labour is thus pivotal to the iconography of desire in an economy which increasingly views aesthetics as the product rather than a frivolous feature on the periphery of the practice (Entwistle 2002). Moreover, as Entwistle and Wissinger (2006) contend, for models, aesthetic labour is not just about creating a superficial surface that can be discarded upon leaving the studio. Immersed in an on-going process of constructing and maintaining an identity to be sold as a lifestyle on the high street, models are unable to escape the aesthetic product because it is their embodied self.

The materialisation of brand meaning though embodied dispositions suggests that models must adopt a chameleon like persona in order to portray varying and often contradictory brand identities at fashion shows or editorial photo-shoots (Witz et al. 2003). Agency is thus crucial to value creation as according to Entwistle and Wissinger (2006: 774); “the successful models are usually the ones who can take on the responsibility of managing their bodies, becoming ‘enterprising’ with respect to all aspects of their embodied self”. Thus, in addition to aesthetic labour, models also exert agency by promoting their look at exclusive events catered by the elite in society, otherwise known as the scene.

Entrepreneurial Labour

Entrepreneurial labour is characterised by fluidity and autonomy; the workplace is relatively unstructured, there are few management norms, and entry requires a high degree of cultural capital (Neff et al. 2005). In this sense, “models are less mannequins than they are the CEO of their own corporation” (Wissinger 2007: 255). Entrepreneurial labour is a constant in the life of the model, and hinges crucially on self-investment and the production of relationships (Neff et al. 2005; Wissinger 2007). It is performed in an effort to ameliorate the risk and uncertainty associated with modelling work and to maintain connections with a ‘hot’ industry. This highly competitive industry is defined by its winner-takes-all motif. Obtaining a coveted job in one instance is no indicator of future success. Models, therefore, must continue to invest in aesthetic labour. Moreover, models are attracted by the autonomy, creativity and excitement of the fashion industry and strive to maintain their role within it despite the attendant risks (Neff et al. 2005).

Entrepreneurial labour for models revolves around four main practices; test shoots, castings, fashion shoots, and fashion shows. Both test shoots and castings are examples of the initial phases of entrepreneurial labour as the model as yet does not have a job but is merely
competing. Test shoots are performed at the model’s expense in a bid to augment his portfolio with disparate images which signal his ability to inhabit alternative brand identities. Upon attending a casting, the model then supplies the client with a copy of his portfolio in the hope of obtaining employment at a photo-shoot or fashion show. Having spoken to several models already, they admitted the odds were not on their side due to the sheer degree of competition. However, if the model is to remain appealing to prospective employers, he must treat modelling as a vocation and display the results of his aesthetic labour “in the street, going shopping, or en route to a photo shoot or fashion show” (Wissinger 2009: 285).

Limitations to Current Research

Dominant understandings of embodiment and body projects within Consumer Culture Theory (CCT) would have models characterised as cardboard cut-outs (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006), roundly failing to acknowledge that they “promote consumption in far more complex ways than merely smiling for the camera” (Wissinger 2009: 273). Such an understanding of body projects reproduces mind/body dualisms that position the body as an instrument of the mind. However, aesthetic labour has an emotional element to it, incorporating “the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display” (Hochschild 1983: 7). According to Entwistle and Wissinger (2006: 786), a complete embodied account of aesthetic labour:

demands attention to the combined effort of body/self in the production of an appropriately attractive appearance for work. It involves seeing the body as both externalised object to be worked on by the self, as well as an integral aspect of the self, and recognising the effort required to keep up appearances is very much emotional and feelingful as well as physical and aesthetic.

Consequently, the approach taken within this research is to move from arguments about what particular bodies mean to how particular bodies come to mean. Such a move necessitates a focus on the practices of models around aesthetic and emotional labour. This research is thus inspired by the emergent body of literature on practice theory and its application to the study of consumption. Practice theory draws attention to the performative character of social life (Halkier and Jensen 2011) and understands consumption as a moment in almost every practice (Warde 2005). Schatzki (1996) identifies a twofold conception of practice. This involves practice as a coordinated activity, a nexus of sayings and doings, and practice as a performance, the carrying out of practices (Warde 2005: 134). This is captured in Reckwitz’s (2002: 249-250) definition of practice as:

a routinized type of behaviour which consists of several elements, interconnected to one another: forms of bodily activities, forms of mental activities, ‘things’ and their use, a background knowledge in the form of understanding, know-how, states of emotion and motivational knowledge. A practice – a way of cooking, of consuming, of working, of investigating, of taking care of oneself or of others, etc. – forms so to speak a ‘block’ whose existence necessarily depends on the existence and specific interconnectedness of these elements, and which cannot be reduced to any one of these single elements.

According to Schatzki (1996: 55): “the body is an entity that in its doings, sayings and sensations manifests and signifies psychological states”. Reckwitz (2002) argues that at the core of practice theory lays an alternative way of viewing the body. A practice is therefore a
skilful performance of the body, it having been trained to ‘do’ this practice in a particular way. The routinised actions inherent in the performance of a practice are bodily activities which at the same time incorporate mental activities as utilising various objects or resources requires mental knowledge in the execution of social practices (Reckwitz 2002).

Methodology

In pinpointing an adequate methodology for which to study practices around modelling, this research accepts Hopwood’s (2010: 11) challenging question:

What better way is there to capture the material and embodied nature of practices than to be immersed in material environments and to be about embodied beings as they go about their daily practices?

In this regard, the current research employs an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is considered the most suitable methodological approach for this study, as it offers an in-context insight into the everyday practices of models. Ethnography is not just a form of data collection (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994), but involves an investigation of consumer practices within the context of their culture. It aims to clarify the ways culture (or microculture) simultaneously constructs and is formulated by people's behaviours and experiences (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). It not only establishes the context and subjective significance (emic) of experience for particular groups, but also seeks to convey the comparative and interpreted (etic) cultural significance of this experience (Denzin, 1989).

Four basic principles are involved in doing ethnography (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994; Elliott and Jankell-Elliott, 2003). First, ethnography gives primacy to systematic data collection and recording of human action in natural settings; “getting the seat of your pants dirty … in the real world, not the library” (Fielding, 1993: 157). Second, no adequate knowledge of social behaviour can be developed without an understanding of the symbolic world of those studied. This is achieved through immersion by the researcher in a specific cultural context (Arnould and Wallendorf, 1994). Third, ethnography produces interpretations of behaviours that the persons studied and the intended audience finds credible (Lincoln and Guba, 1984). Ethnographic credibility is most likely to be achieved by generating verisimilitude (Denzin 1997). Finally, ethnography involves incorporating multiple sources of data to generate varying perspectives on the behaviours and context of interest.

The methodology also encompasses a narrative component which seeks to uncover the reminisced experiences of male models as they engage in aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour. This is in line with the conception of practice as a coordinated activity (discussed in the previous section) formed by doings and sayings, which suggests that research must examine “both practical activity and its representations” (Warde 2005: 134). Polkinghorne (1988) argues that narratives are the most important method by which an experience is made meaningful while Schriffin (1996: 167) further emphasises its relevance:

The stories that we tell about our own and others’ lives are a pervasive form of text through which we construct interpret and share experience: we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative.
Following Wengraf (2001), the method begins with a single question intended to elicit a lengthy, uninterrupted narration from the interviewee. This question and the corresponding reply offer a path into the model’s world and seek to uncover the experience of male models. Thus the use of narrative interviewing facilitates an understanding of the models’ “subjectivity and motives for action” (Coles 2008: 236) as they engage in the labour demanded by their career.

**Conclusion**

To date, this research has noted that the model in working on his body adopts a commercial mentality and views his body as a business. He engages in aesthetic and entrepreneurial labour in a bid to valorise his embodied self (Entwistle and Wissinger 2006). Success within this field requires the model to adopt a chameleon like identity. He must adopt several (and sometimes contradictory) traits in order to remain successful. An aesthetic and entrepreneurial study of the body with ethnography and practice theory lens will produce conclusions which do not replicate the continuous theme of what bodies mean but will advance research on embodiment within CCT and answer the question of what do bodies do?
References


