Hollow femininities: The emerging faces of neoliberal masculinities

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Abstract

Through the latter half of the 20th century, the commodification of men's lifestyles has grown apace, such that men's lifestyles in the global North are routinely sold for the various ways they present alternative forms of masculinity. Simultaneously, men's growing participation in the service sector, as well as an emphasis on cultures of care in office work, suggest that men's labour has faced similar changes. Drawing on one interview and two focus groups with men aged 18-30 in England, as part of a larger study, we argue that these phenomena are best placed in the context of neoliberalism and examined for the ways in which masculinity continues to adapt to the demands of neoliberal subjectivity. We deploy Bridges and Pascoe's concept of hybrid masculinities to argue that neoliberal masculinities adopt a series of "hollow femininities". These undermine femininity by conflating it with otherness through a process of commodification of feminine modalities, simultaneously recuperating both patriarchy and neoliberalism. This paper explores three of these key modalities: men's *absorption of otherness*, *feminine or feminised bodily discipline*, and, finally, men's performative *rejections of the gender binary*.

Keywords: femininities, neoliberalism, hybrid masculinities, commodification, labour

Introduction

Masculinity and men are not static; what it means to be a man in one time and in one place is substantively different from what it means in another. In the latter half of the 20th century, this flux has entailed a greater commodification of men, men's bodies, and men's lifestyles. For example, Neale (1983) clarified filmic masculinity as spectacle, and Wernick (1991) examined the trend for men to become objects of the consumer gaze. Meanwhile, men's growing participation in the service sector, as well as the decline of manual labour and growth

of office work (Enderstein, 2018), suggest that some forms of men's labour have been feminised. Bridges and Pascoe (2014, p. 58, emphasis added) argue that much of such change can be interrogated through the notion of "hybrid masculinities", defined as "men's selective incorporation of performances and identity elements associated with marginalised and subordinated masculinities and *femininities*". This article directly addresses the more under-explored aspect of this definition of hybrid masculinities, examining the notion that hybridisation often occurs through adoption of marginalised and subordinated femininities by heterosexual, cisgendered, white and largely middle-class men.

We argue that certain forms of male femininities arise when men adapt to neoliberal subjectivity. These femininities and resultant hybrid masculinities are assessed from a critical perspective (Hoskin and Taylor, 2019); specifically, we suggest they can be characterised as "hollow femininities", that is, hollow in two senses: first, they appear as performative modalities that appropriate feminine otherness for its marketable, commodifiable aspects relating to neoliberal subjectivity, and, second, they thereby undermine both feminine and female experience by strengthening the bonds between capitalism and patriarchy.

The main body of the article is taken up with addressing, analysing, and characterising three hollow feminine modalities through extracts from three interviews with men in England. First, *absorption of otherness*, and its conflation with femininity is critiqued, before examining, second, how a *feminine or feminised bodily discipline* is articulated, addressing how such hollow femininities are imbricated in men's performances of labour, and, finally, apparent *rejections of the gender binary*. The political implications surrounding neoliberalism, patriarchy, and gender politics are then explored.

Men and hybrid masculinities

Masculinities are now considered plural (Connell, 2005), contextually contingent configurations of practice made intelligible within existing gendered regimes of power. Masculinity is therefore a contextually achieved act, rather than a state of being. As such, men and masculinities have always been hybrid, dependent particularly on socio-economic orthodoxies, and the ways in which material shifts interact with gendered structures. Indeed, shifts in dominant understandings of masculinity have been a key driver of debates engaged in by scholars of men and masculinities (Christofidou, 2021). Many images of men through the 20th century saw labour inscribed onto the body, tied to notions of sacrifice and manual labour (Morgan, 1992). As the global economic model shifted from the 1970s in the global North, so did understandings of what men are to be. Following a long series of narratives around the "crisis in masculinity", a widespread narrative of scepticism towards masculinity has arisen. In the press, popular media, and online, something called "toxic masculinity" is decried, while the detrimental effects of masculinity are critiqued, and feminist moments such as #MeToo and #timesup often question the structural dominance of men. Concepts of caring masculinities, meanwhile, perhaps undermine some gendered assumptions (Eisen and Yamashita, 2017; Elliott, 2016; Hrženjak et al, 2006), studies of postfeminist masculinity have found recent media portrayals of men as more nurturing and respectful of individual women (Dow, 2006) and notions of "inclusive masculinities" suggest some men are less interested in the more negative parts of being men (Anderson, 2009).

Many have questioned how substantive or structural these changes are (Christofidou, 2021; O'Neill, 2015). The concept of hybrid masculinity deals with these issues, identifying and describing how "masculinity that occupies the hegemonic position at a given historical moment is a hybrid bloc that incorporates diverse and apparently oppositional elements" (Demetriou, 2001, p. 349). Such theories show masculinities to have always contained a diverse and contradictory selection of discourses in order to remain hegemonic, evident in everyday

practices such as men's homosocial interactions (Arxer, 2011). Bridges and Pascoe (2014) highlight three distinct consequences of the hybridisation of masculinities. First, much literature finds that men who adopt hybrid masculinities use "discursive distancing" to reject some form or aspect of hegemonic masculinity, while subtly aligning themselves with hegemonic masculinity. We argue that in a neoliberal context such discursive distancing is indicative of a normative neoliberal individualism. Second, hybrid masculinities engage in "strategic borrowing" from othered groups and discourses for the recuperation of masculinities – here, a hollow version of femininity is the othered discourse that recuperates masculinities. Finally, hybridity ensures that such masculinities "fortify boundaries" of existing gender power structures – not only patriarchies, but neoliberal capitalism and subjectivity, too.

Neoliberal-ising men

While we are primarily interested here in aspects of neoliberal culture and subjectivity, these elements of neoliberal ideology are imbricated with a range of free market economic models embodied by institutions and policies that vary transnationally (Venugopal, 2015). In the UK, neoliberal political economy grew in part from critique of mid-20th century "welfarism", a dominant economic consensus for several decades after World War II which encouraged public spending, nationalisation of key industries, and economic planning. In the 1970s, the emerging school of neoliberalism argued for a "monetarist" economic model in which inalienable individual rights should be extended to the economic sphere, resulting in a set of policies involving deregulation, retrenchment of the welfare state, and the exaltation of private finance (Hay, 2006), even whilst the value of central government receipts as a percentage of GDP grew 1979-1990 (Albertson and Stepney, 2019). This political provenance

explains the liberal in neoliberalism: "free markets, in this classical view, were a corollary of political liberty, and not the other way around" (Tribe, 2009, p. 75).

Different economic models interpellate differing forms of subjectivity: in pre-neoliberal economics, the ideal subject is often theorised as the 'homo economicus', a rational, profit-driven and materially accumulative individual who works productively and effectively as part of a given production line. Neoliberal capitalism develops this subject in radical directions, primarily by shifting responsibility away from the production line and onto the individual (Foucault, 2008), resulting in neoliberal subjects who are "entrepreneurs of themselves" (Brown, 2006). McGuigan (2013, 2014) argues that such radical self-responsibility constructs the neoliberal subject as a 'cool-capitalist', an individual who rejects outside influence in favour of total self-determination, keen to take on and adopt counter-hegemonic or subversive discourses, albeit within certain limits.

This complex relationship with otherness has led some to argue that the neoliberal subject has been "feminised" in some important aspects (Gill, 2007; Gill and Scharff, 2011) – though they are still profit-driven and rational, the terms of profit and rationality have changed. The growth of freelance work, now over 15% of workers in the UK (Jepps, 2019), the importance of teamwork, the increasing relevance of aesthetic and emotional labours (Nickson and Korczynski, 2009), capacities for cooperation, teamwork, care, and flexibility (Enderstein, 2018), and the decline in manual labour all (over)determine a new kind of neoliberal subject who is coded, at least in part, feminine. Such material changes are not incidental, as Morini (2007, p. 46) points out: "women are more appreciated precisely because of the qualitative/adaptive characteristics they are assumed to guarantee".

Femininities thereby often play an uninterrogated role in much existing research about working-class men employed in service work (Nixon, 2009; Pettinger, 2005). Such literature

has found that participants develop strategies to negotiate their masculinities in light of "the so-called 'soft' skills required in this type of service work … deemed to be 'naturally' feminine". (Nickson and Korczynski, 2009, p. 291). Other research on male hairdressers has argued that "reformulations [of masculinity] are also interwoven with enduring conformity to traditional sets of gendered expectations" (Robinson et al, 2009, p. 47). This feminisation of labour cuts across class boundaries, too, such as jobs in the neoliberalised technology sector that eschew manual labour, which have been found to encode hybrid masculinities. For example, formations such as "techno-masculinity" (Bell, 2013; Poster, 2013) strategically borrow from formerly marginalised and emasculated geek and nerd masculinities (Kendall, 2011).

The plethora of men's lifestyles often associated with middle-class men that have also emerged in recent decades are arguably a response to these circumstances. While hipsters adopt a fashion and aesthetic consciousness combined with a progressive politics and insistence on being other(ed) in some way (Buerkle, 2019), the metrosexual and spornosexual combine bodily discipline, fashion consciousness and being objects of a gaze (Hall, 2014).

We therefore argue that a more thorough examination of femininity begins to contextualise the intersections between masculinities and neoliberalism, which have not received as much attention as they could have (*pace* Cornwall et al, 2016; Garlick, 2020; Walker and Roberts, 2018).

Feminising men?

The concept of 'hollow femininities' deals specifically with the recuperation of masculinity via femininity, and not forms of femininity that undermine or subvert masculinity, such as drag or camp (although, as we will see, there can be some crossover). This notion does

bring to light, however, an interesting dichotomy between femininity as a mode of disciplining the female body (Bartky, 1998), against femininity as a subaltern, subversive voice (Cixous, 1976).

To this end, we adopt a critical approach to the study of both masculinities and femininities. The emerging field of critical femininities examines and problematises the ways in which femininities may be constructed as heteronormative (Hoskin, 2019; McCann, 2018), racialised (Hoskin, 2017), classist (Enderstein, 2018), and amenable to patriarchal norms (Hoskin and Taylor, 2019). Importantly, debate on critical femininities emphasises that femininity should be analysed beyond being "other" to masculinity. It is in this sense that the femininities of neoliberal men can be defined as hollow, in that they perform modalities of the feminine that are epistemologically built on the notion of femininity as otherness, and little else.

Methods

Focus groups and interviews were carried out by the first author, as a part of his doctoral research, over 12 months in 2016-2017, which explored how men and masculinities may hybridise under neoliberalism and potentially adopt certain forms of femininity. 16 men aged 18-30 were recruited, to restrict the study to those men whose formative years, in particular their experiences with labour, had been discursively shaped by neoliberal hegemony. Of these 16, 5 individuals appear in this paper (though the words of one participant in one focus group is not quoted). These men were recruited based on criteria identified in past studies, many of which are outlined in the previous sections, that explore men in a range of what we identify as neoliberal contexts. All of the criteria, listed below, were either a specific gender performance or type of employment:

- men who identified as feminine;
- men who used cosmetics;
- men who had been called or identify as hipsters or metrosexuals;
- men who worked in service sector jobs;
- men who worked in ways or spaces that mix work and domestic spheres, such as bloggers.

A full breakdown of participants included in this paper is given in table 1, with those included in this paper italicised:

Table 1

Focus group/ interview cluster	**Location**	**Age**	**Recruitment criterion**	**Ethnic identification**	**Class identification**
Service workers focus group	*South-west*	*30*	*Service work*	*White*	*Working-class*
		19	*Service work*	*White*	*Middle-class*
		18	*Service work*	*White*	*Middle-class*
Recruited via university	North	27	Hipster/metrosexual	White	Middle-class
		20	Hipster/metrosexual	White	Middle-class
		25	Felt feminine	Black	Working-class
Hipsters focus group	London	28	Hipster/metrosexual	White	Middle-class
		19	Hipster/metrosexual	White	Middle-class
Technology workers focus group	*London*	*28*	*Technology worker*	*White*	*Middle-class*
		22	*Technology worker*	*White*	*Middle-class*
		26	Office worker	White	Middle-class

Office workers interviews	South-west	21	Office worker	White	Middle-class
		29	Office worker	White	Middle-class
		24	Office worker	White	Middle-class
Bloggers interviews	*London*	25	Blogger	British-Asian	Middle-class
		24	*Blogger*	*White*	*Middle-class*

Participants hailed from three locations in the north, south-west, and London, and were recruited through a mixture of opportunity and snowball sampling. For example, leaflets were dropped in cafés and shops in parts of London associated with hipster culture, while the three clusters of participants from workplaces snowballed from an initial contact with one person. While the larger study initially aimed to carry out focus groups only, to examine the processes of masculinity in homosocial interaction beyond the researcher-participant power dynamic, due to issues with recruitment, and reticence among some otherwise-keen participants to engage in focus groups with other men, interviews were carried out, too. Interviews were largely in person, though some were online for organisational ease (though none of these are discussed here). As with previous research that shows that non-hegemonic positions are often more readily available to relatively more privileged men (O'Neill, 2015), the majority of recruits identified as middle-class. Such a class positioning is also likely to be indicative of the costs of the lifestyle choices for men, as recruited through most of the sampling criteria, even if that indication was less applicable with regard to men in service work. In short, hipster and metrosexual masculinities are not cheap (Buerkle, 2019). All the participants identified as cisgendered and heterosexual[1].

[1] Trans and non-heterosexual men may tend to have more particular relationships with femininity based on notions of passing and external policing (see Pfeffer, 2008; Zimman, 2013), and such relations are worthy of further research.

Ethical approval was gained from [anonymised] ethics committee., All participants were fully informed about the research and consented to their data being used. All the focus groups and individual interviews were transcribed verbatim, to include pauses and other significant moments, such as laughter, and thereafter subjected to detailed fine-grained discourse analysis. All names used are pseudonyms.

The fieldwork was carried out by the first author, whereby his appearance and identity as a white man in his 20s created both hindrances and advantages within the research process (Cassell, 2005). As an interviewer, the first author's background and experiences were relatively similar to the participants, providing opportunities to adopt a familiar style with them, and partially mitigate the power relations produced by the interview scenario. The aims of the research were not hidden, both to satisfy ethical requirements, and create a safe environment in which confession and honesty were made possible despite the potential threat of emasculation considering the power relationship (Schwalbe and Wolkomir, 2001).

Due to space limitations, this article examines two focus groups and one interview; and due to the framing of neoliberalism, the following extracts focus on the talk of participants who were recruited due to the form of labour their job required. These extracts are used to illustrate and critically discuss the three dominant modalities of femininity – *absorption of otherness, feminine or feminised bodily disciplines,* and *rejection of the gender binary*. In the two focus groups included here the participants knew one another, though this was not true for all the focus groups in the wider dataset. The interviews and focus groups presented were selected for their illustrative strength and effectiveness at demonstrating the three modalities mentioned above.

The analysis of the extracts presented here draws on discursive psychology (DP), which analyses the deployment and negotiation of discourse in social interaction, and particularly the

positions taken up by individuals as they construct and articulate a certain image of themselves (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Wetherell and Edley, 1999). In line with DP, the approach taken is constructivist, where speech and talk are understood to construct realities, not simply reflect them. As such, any given statement from participants is not treated as a reflection of reality, but rather as a construction of a given reality. Though the analyses of the extracts are used to reflect on what they might say about masculinity, femininity and gender discourses on a wider scale, the actual analyses involve an in-depth reading of discursive negotiation in practice, with a particular focus on how subjects use discourse to position themselves and achieve identities.

It should be noted that every participant was asked, "would you describe yourself in any way as feminine?". As will come apparent in extract 5, Robert is noteworthy for being the exception, as no other participant, of 16 men, responded clearly in the affirmative, with a good number finding a halfway point between yes and no, not wanting to call themselves masculine, but wary of femininity as a label. Thus, this research was in keeping with the idea that hybrid masculinities are not a challenge to wider masculine structures, driven by an ongoing fear and othering of femininity (Craib, 1982). As such, we introduce hollow femininity as a framework to describe a set of gendered actions that the participants themselves were largely unwilling to account for.

Absorption of otherness

The first extract is from a focus group between Iggy and John in London, who both worked at the same technology company. Iggy was 28 at the time, working in a senior role in the company, while John was 22, both white, middle-class and heterosexual. Throughout, the two participants used the concepts of geekiness and nerdiness to construct their masculine

identities as “othered”. The following two extracts came midway through the focus group, as part of a passage triggered by asking them if they consider themselves masculine.

Extract 1

1	John:	I guess I do think about it what it means to be a man. I guess it's changed
2		recently, hasn't it? Recently, not like last week but recently over the years.
3	Iggy:	I think I think, I think about it in the context of my relationship, my long
4		term relationship with my girlfriend, and how there are aspects of it that
5		probably do fit in with it and aspects that don't with fit in with this sort of,
6		this kind of entrenched idea of masculinity, like. I put up some pictures
7		yesterday, which meant I had to nail some stuff to walls—
8	John:	(laughs)
9	Iggy:	I, you know, measuring it out and stuff, and I thought, oh this is quite kind
10		of "ooh, this doesn't happen very often”, this is quite a thing but then I'll find
11		that we both have we both have full time jobs and she's extremely successful
12		and—
13	John:	Yeah, it’s—
14	Iggy:	--it's just like stupid stuff like, I probably iron more than she does. I kind of
15		weirdly enjoy it.

The extract begins with John indicating some awareness that the social understandings surrounding “what it means to be a man” have changed, which Iggy subsequently places in the context of his relationship with his girlfriend, asserting that his gender role both does and does not match an “entrenched idea of masculinity” (line 6). He demonstrates the latter by inverting

normally gendered chores: it is both unusual (line 10) that he recently put up some pictures, and usual that he does the ironing (line 14). On the other hand, the "entrenched" element of his masculinity, as he calls it, comes from his full-time job (line 11), although even here, Iggy minimises such "entrenchment" by simultaneously acknowledging his girlfriend's career. Thereby, Iggy positions his masculinity as liminal, halfway between new and old, parsing some form of hybrid masculinity.

What characterises the "performances and identity elements associated with marginalised and subordinated masculinities and femininities" (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014) that are hybridising masculinity here? There are two gendered binaries at play – public/domestic, and success/failure – and though these two can be analytically separated, Iggy uses them in conjunction. Iggy's talk uses the first to associate himself with the domestic sphere, attempting to feminise or even emasculate himself. The novelty of his putting a picture up on the wall recalls the ways in which hipster masculinities may repurpose manual labour for middle-class men as a fun "hobby" in distancing themselves from masculinity (Albrecht, 2018), and instead use that distance to perform a type of domesticity previously associated with femininity.

The second binary of success and failure is used to construct Iggy's girlfriend's femininity as "very successful", echoing now relatively well-established neoliberal and postfeminist conceptions of femininity (Lazar, 2009), and positioning himself as supportive of his girlfriend and her career. However, as Adamson (2016) points out, these ("successful") femininities do not challenge existing gender structures, as opposed to reconstructing femininity in line with neoliberal forms of subjectivity. Indeed, Halberstam (2011), and Hoskin and Taylor (2019), suggest that a political focus on failure could subvert patriarchal norms. By making himself and his girlfriend exceptions to the rule, Iggy re-essentialises both binaries through constructing himself as a "weird" exception. So, while attempting to feminise himself by reversing two gendered binaries, he instead reinforces both. Indeed, a lack of challenge to

existing structures becomes perhaps even more apparent when geek and nerd masculinities are made explicit, as in Extract 2, triggered by a question about to what extent they consider themselves masculine.

Extract 2

1	John:	Well I guess an obvious example with me then, would probably be am I
2		a man or a geek (laughs).
3	Interviewer:	Right. Okay.
4	Iggy:	Yeah.
5	John:	There you go, and that's a yeah, so
6	Iggy:	You nail colours to the mast of a certain identity, don't you? I think I
7		certainly was, I certainly identified with being part of a subculture when
8		I was a kid
9	John:	Mmm.
10	Iggy:	Not dissimilar to the idea of being a geek or something like that, I was
11		quite proud of the fact that I didn't typify kind of what you might think
12		as masculine.

In Extract 2, John makes explicit the link between geek masculinity and the work that he and Iggy do, asking whether he should be considered a man or a geek, thereby constructing the two as mutually exclusive. Iggy identifies similarly, and while distancing himself from being a geek explicitly (line 11), expressing some pride that he did not "typify kind of what you might think as masculine". We might ask, what gender are male geeks if they are not men? As John and Iggy suggest, removal of associations with sport, lack of manual labour, and association

with atypical hobbies, may suggest that nerds and geeks are in some way emasculated (Kendall, 2011).

Bell (2013) argues that geeks partly emerge from the formation of new jobs in the city, and therefore tend to represent explicitly middle-class professional masculinities, rather than something disruptive. Geek and nerd masculinities therefore combine a claim to a maligned masculinity with a relatively new formation of a neoliberal middle-class labouring subject, producing a gendered performance that remains well within the boundaries of masculinity, interested only in a cosmetic form of otherness. Iggy constructs such a performance here, arguing both that he does not typify masculinity, while reinforcing domesticity as feminine, and rejecting the label of femininity, too.

Bodily discipline

The next extract is taken from a focus group carried out with three men who worked together in a men's clothes shop in a town in the southwest of England. They were recruited to explore links between service work and affective, potentially feminine, labours (Nickson and Korczynski, 2009; Nixon, 2009). These responses come from Freddie, a 19-year-old white assistant manager, and Riley, the 30-year-old white manager, both identifying as heterosexual and middle-class, despite performing what might be seen as working-class labour. In this extract, they were asked about how they conceive of the relationship between masculinity and appearance.

Extract 3

1	Interviewer:	How do you feel appearance kind of interacts with being a man? In
2		what sense is being a man today focused on your appearance?
3	Freddie:	It's not so much anymore. I mean it's— things are changed.
4	Interviewer:	Right, okay.
5	Freddie:	Uum. Yeah, you have the stereotypical view of a man which is what I
6		was saying, like big, and doesn't really care too much about their
7		appearance, but a lot— well most men nowadays seem to actually care
8		about what they look like.
9	Interviewer:	Yeah. Wait so you are saying there's more care in appearance, or there's
10		less?
11	Freddie:	More. Umm; hence why people go the gym basically.
12	Interviewer:	Right.
13	Freddie:	'Cos they're actually caring about their appearance.

In Extract 3, Freddie seems to contradict himself – he begins by saying that being a man is unrelated to appearance (line 3), before going on to state (lines 7-8) that men care more about their appearance today. This is best read as Freddie distinguishing between two different types of relationships with appearance. The first image he produces is described as "stereotypical", "big, doesn't really care too much about their appearance" (line 6). In the second, he constructs a slightly more feminised version of masculinity, discussing the possibility that men are "actually caring about their appearance" for the sake of it. Where in the past men's bodies were a by-product of labour, today men's bodies are constructed through artifice, or through "the gym basically".

This relationship between men's bodies and artifice recalls Jamie Hakim's (2016) argument that, faced with the increasing lack of capacity for being the "breadwinner", many

men are constructing new neoliberal forms of masculinity defined by a bodily discipline formerly the reserve of both non-white men, and, importantly, women. He argues that the amount of labour involved in the construction of these men's bodies is directed at the accruement of "erotic capital" (see C. Hakim, 2011) – or, as the former Hakim defines it, "looking hot". The use of erotic capital here echoes various articulations of femininity as a bodily discipline, such as Sandra Bartky's (1998) application of Foucault, or Iris Marion Young's (2005) essay "Throwing Like a Girl". As such, Hakim argues that neoliberalism contains a "feminising axiomatic"; following Bridges and Pascoe, Freddie's newer version of masculinity strategically borrows feminine bodily disciplines, because of the demands made by neoliberalism, showing such a feminising axiomatic at play.

Significantly, the conversation in Extract 3 is among a group of service workers, a sector notable for often requiring capabilities for affective labours. This context was acknowledged shortly after the extracted conversation, with the participants questioning to what extent their masculinity was determined by their work (Extract 4).

Extract 4

1	Riley:	I worked in a kitchen, for example, although you do get a lot of women
2		in the kitchen now. When I used to work in a kitchen. I'm not saying
3		that I'm that old. I worked in a primarily man kitchen. It's very full-on,
4		grrr, fucking this, blinding. Although we do at work, though it's literally
5		like, it's what you'd imagine if you were like down the pub. They're
6		kind of just having pub conversations, like extreme in your face, proper
7		laddy lad lad kind of manliness.
8	Freddie:	Yeah

9	Riley:	Whereas we, I don't know, we are slightly camper, not gonna lie, guys.
10		(Laughs) We're not the meniest of men, if that makes sense, we--
11	Freddie:	Yeah, well—
12	Riley:	We could be! (Laughs) It's fine Freddie.
13	Interviewer:	Do you disagree Freddie?
14	Freddie:	No. No.
15	Riley:	I don't mean to insult you in any way, I do apologise
16	Freddie:	No, it's just that I, like, it hasn't really changed me that much.

Here, Riley first compares service work to the more manual labour of a kitchen, described as a "proper laddy lad lad kind of manliness". In comparison, the clothes shop is characterised as having "slightly camper" workers. By "camp", Riley appears to mean non-masculine, as suggested through his subsequent description of them as "not the meniest of men". Susan Sontag reflected that "all camp objects, and persons, contain a large element of artifice" (Sontag, 2009 [1964], p. 278), drawing on the same notion as Freddie (Extract 3) that contemporary masculine bodies are the product of artificial construction. Sontag, though, did not consider camp gendered *per se*, remarking that "the androgyne is certainly one of the great images of camp sensibility" (p. 280). Camp can relate to gender but is not explicitly masculine or feminine. Riley's use of camp is contrasted against an almost violent "fucking this, blinding … extreme in your face" construction of manhood (lines 1- 6).

"Camp" is used here, therefore, for a qualified repudiation of masculinity that Freddie is reluctant to make. His "yeah, well" (line 11) indicates some uncertainty at Riley's assertion that he is camp. Riley, noticing Freddie's reticence, responds (line 15), "I didn't mean to insult you", interpreting Freddie's reticence as offence and offering an apology for suggesting Freddie is "not the meniest of men" (line 10), and presenting a value judgement that calling

into question another man's masculinity is an insult. On line 15, when Freddie says, "it hasn't really changed me that much", he is referencing a previous conversation in the interview in which they responded to being asked whether they felt that working in retail had changed them as men. Freddie does not believe it has had any effect on him, whereas Riley thinks it has made him at least less masculine.

Though Riley and Freddie have differing views of whether retail has changed them, they both construct this form of bodily discipline as emasculating – Freddie through constructing a changed notion of masculinity in which the body is artificially constructed (Extract 3), and Riley through contrasting campness against masculinity (Extract 4). Feminine modalities, such as Freddie's notion of taking care in one's appearance (line 11, Extract 3), through to Riley's theorising on campness, are strategically borrowed throughout to adapt their performances of masculinity to the neoliberalised labour the two undertake.

Rejection of gender binary

The final extract (Extract 5) is taken from an interview, carried out via online video, with 24-year-old Robert, who was also white, and identified as middle-class and heterosexual, and who at the time worked at a small food company, but whose greater aspiration was to make his food blog financially viable. The extract contains an interactive exchange that came towards the end of the interview, during which Robert had spoken about the ways in which he did not consider himself masculine; here, he is asked if he would therefore consider himself feminine. In what follows, Robert negotiates a tension between producing an othered, feminised masculinity, and a rejection of gendered discourses.

Extract 5

1	Interviewer:	Umm, would you describe yourself in any way as feminine?
2	Robert:	(pause) Yeah. I get on with females I think a lot better than males.
3		Umm I've been, people have thought like (laughs) even through work—
4		actually, it's quite funny. I saw this girl for a while and then I knew her
5		ex-boyfriend through work, and when she told him about, 'cos they're
6		still mates, when she told him about me, he was like, "wuh? What, I
7		thought he was *gay*," and I was like, that's not the first time someone's
8		said that to me. Umm, so yeah, I suppose so. Umm I'm quite
9		flamboyant, but for me that's just, that doesn't make me… feminine or
10		masculine, that's just really who I am to be honest.
11	Interviewer:	Right.
12	Robert:	Like, feminine I'm, I'm not loud in a bad way, but I'm very confident.
13		Umm yeah I suppose I just get on with females more than I do males,
14		when I think about it. And maybe that labels me more feminine than
15		male, but I personally don't believe so, but then, yeah, I think people
16		have called me gay. It's not, you know, it's not a shock to my guy
17		group, when they're like, ah it's so you, when I do something that's,
18		inverted commas, a bit gay. Umm but yeah. I don't really see— no, I
19		don't think I'm more feminine than anyone else. Just me I suppose.

The pause between the researcher's question and Robert's answer was substantial, indicating some uncertainty, before settling on a definitive yes. Robert characterises his feminine character by suggesting he shares more of a comparable subjectivity with most women he meets than men: he "gets on" with women better than men (line 3) and is more

interested in what women have to say than men. Like Iggy and John, he distances himself from masculinity; unlike them, Robert does, albeit with hesitation, initially identify with femininity.

The conversation then takes an interesting turn. Contradicting existing literature that has found that homophobia is deployed by men to construct and regulate boundaries of masculinity (Pascoe, 2005), Robert thinks it is “funny” to be mistaken as gay (line 4). One reading of this is that Robert associates gay male identity with femininity, and therefore being mistaken for gay indicates he is feminine. However, it is also possible that he is instead rejecting masculinist notions that being labelled as gay is emasculating or feminising. Where lots of men fear the association of an outwardly gay appearance with feminisation, Robert is not just indifferent to, but amused by, such comparisons; he rejects masculinity’s formation through “fear of femininity” (Craib, 1982).

There are reasons to be sceptical here. Robert notably recollects this story after saying “I saw this girl for a while” (line 4). While we cannot take this on its own as confirmation of heterosexuality, it at least establishes he is not gay. Similarly, the exact reason for his being mistaken as gay seems to lie in some sort of camp aesthetic, through him describing himself as “flamboyant” (line 8), which becomes a synecdoche for both feminine and gay aesthetics. The combination of the heterosexual context and the lack of clarity of what exactly makes him seem homosexual indicates hybridisation with flamboyancy, femininity and homosexuality.

The second part of Robert’s answer, beginning line 12, however, appears to reject the premise of everything he has said so far, pondering on the relevance of the gender binary to him, concluding that he does not “think [he is] more feminine than anyone else. Just me I suppose” (lines 18-19). Robert not only positions himself as an effeminate outsider to masculinity, here, but as an outsider to the gender binary, emphasising a form of neoliberal individualism (“just me”) in the process. His embrace of gender fluidity over masculinity is a

finding in line with previous research that men's fluid gender performances tend to be more accessible to white, middle-class, heterosexual men (O'Neill, 2015), linked to a "[belief] that female gender deviance is much more tolerated than male gender deviance" (Halberstam, 1998, p. 5), despite much evidence that both are heavily policed. Yet, Robert's flamboyance (line 9) is not from a defiant love of wearing dresses, as opposed to a flowery shirt with a 1970s style collar. McGuigan (2013; 2014, p. 234) describes a neoliberal "cool-capitalist way of life that does not appear to insist upon conformity and even permits a limited measure of bohemian posturing, personal experimentation and geographical exploration". One might reasonably wonder whether, in the context of his non-gay yet mildly camp male identity, both the pleasure Robert takes in being mistaken for gay combined with his assertion he is "just" him might, considering the contradiction between the two, indicate such bohemian posturing. In this reading, Robert's borrowing from femininity does not conflict with his rejection of the gender binary, but both are symptomatic of a wider individualism in which identity is the product of a self-determined yet feminised neoliberal subject.

The lure of hollow femininities

So far, we have established three modalities that are adopted by men in three different situations in response to the demands, indeed the lure, of neoliberalism. In this section, we explore the political implications of these modalities, notably how their commodification undermines the extensive history of femininity and womanhood. While the idea that hybrid masculinities recuperate existing gender structures (or, patriarchy) is not novel, the concept of hollow femininities also makes a secondary argument, which is that they also serve to directly recuperate and serve neoliberal ideology.

So, there are two ways in which hollow femininities are hollow: first, they conflate otherness and femininity, and, second, they rely on patriarchal femininities. While all participants apart from Robert rejected the opportunity to call themselves feminine, they deployed tropes of femininity to hybridise their masculinities through a form of otherness. Iggy's domestic work here is a prime example, or Riley's use of the word "camp". Feminist theorists have long observed that women and femininity are conceived as "other" (de Beauvoir, 2010 [1949]), yet it does not follow that feminist theorising conflates women and femininity with otherness (McCann, 2018) – rather that critiquing how these links constructed within patriarchies may assist their dismantling (Hoskin, 2019; Hoskin and Taylor, 2019). In constructing hybrid masculinity/ies, participants reached for images long associated with femininity, such as domesticity, adorned and admired bodies, or greater gender fluidity. In hybridising, then, there was a tendency to assume both that otherness looks feminine, and femininity is largely defined by patriarchal norms, as in the 'patriarchal feminine' (Hearn, 1982).

Following a similar vein of thought, Hoskin and Taylor (2019) make a distinction between femininity and femme, arguing that the latter presents an assemblage of performances that refuse to approximate the norms of patriarchal femininities. Patriarchal femininities, they argue, are an already out of reach ideal against which women are judged, and which abide by standards and disciplines that aid and abet patriarchy. Conversely describing "femme identities" as between margins, subjective, and experiential, Hoskin and Taylor argue that femme sows the seeds of discord, upsetting patriarchy where patriarchal femininities cannot.

Some participants made some tentative steps reaching for something approaching this latter form, an inversion of femme onto cisgendered male bodies, resulting in a hybrid masculinity that attempts to challenge heteropatriarchy, such as Iggy's love of housework, or Robert's pleasure at being mistaken for gay. When femininities inhabit or interact with the

‘wrong body’, as might be a fair application of femme theory, the participants presented themselves as profeminist and anti-patriarchy. The performance of gender as distinct from the body recalls Butler’s discussion of drag; if drag is to be subversive, it must parody or invert the idea that an original performance of femininity exists, such that it “deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalised or essentialist gender identities” (Butler, 1990, p. 188). The femininities performed in the five extracts included do not do this: love of housework does not question essentialist gender assumptions, but ‘adopts’ or incorporates otherness by conflating it with patriarchal feminine tropes. This, as articulated here by Robert, does not challenge the general notion that domesticity is feminine, but reinforces a patriarchal femininity (Hoskin and Taylor, 2019). In not questioning the association of flamboyancy and gay male identity, but using it to hybridise masculinity, Robert both reinforces and undermines it. Earlier the ways in which neoliberalism stunts political progress were discussed, in the individualising and nullifying adoption of a cool bohemian posture and the language of liberatory collective movements. Here, it is performing the same commodification of identities.

Hennessy (1995), for example, argues “the gender flexibility of postmodern patriarchy is pernicious because it casts the illusion that patriarchy has disappeared”. Examining the visibility of queer culture in late capitalist culture, she points out that the queered commodity aimed at the non-queer public is not good visibility, but rather undermines queer progress. The same is happening here with the adoption of hollow femininities, where a variety of feminine modalities, useful for neoliberal subjects as commodifiable skills, are now eminently visible. Though often celebrated (Anderson, 2009) the visibility and, importantly, desirability of femininity within neoliberalism means that progressive politics is undermined. Research into postfeminism (Gill and Scharff, 2011) has examined how this takes place with femininity on female identified bodies.

Lazar (2009) argues that femininity is refigured under postfeminism through an individualist focus on pleasuring the self, through the celebration of feminine stereotypes, and the encouragement of a "youthful discipline" into women's old age, thereby refiguring the meanings and modalities of womanhood to adapt to neoliberal culture and economics. Rights to consume respond to neoliberalism's consumption drive, realigning womanhood towards neoliberalism's ontological individualism. Similarly, for men, Robert's rejection of the gender binary is indicative of neoliberal individualism – the idea that any outside influence of pre-existing structures might influence Robert's gender performance is rejected. At face value, there is a possibility that neoliberal men are producing something beyond the binary. Yet, neoliberalism has certainly not heralded the end of patriarchy. Indeed, Garlick (2020) argues the radically individualist self-determination of the neoliberal subject presents a form of masculine rationality. Though this potentially looks at odds with the assertion that the neoliberal subject is gendered feminine, it does not necessarily contradict this. Rather, it demonstrates the ways that neoliberal subjectivity can incorporate gendered positions that serve production. Hollow femininities thwart the subversive potential of femininities (Hoskin and Taylor, 2019) by making normative patriarchal forms of femininity, via a process of commodification that simultaneously normalises neoliberal subjectivity. These complimentary processes are structured in tandem by both neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy, thus assisting in the strengthening of both, as well as the bonds between them.

Concluding with commodification

Marx argued that commodity fetishism falsely creates the impression that the value of a commodity appears as a property of the commodity, obscuring the reality that its value really lies in the social relations that form it. Baudrillard (1994 [1981]) extended this critique to the process of signification, arguing that contemporary capitalism makes the nonphysical

commodifiable; the commodity is also now defined by prestige or cultural meaning, its sign-value, and is a product of the same social relations as the physical commodity. Baudrillard (1994 [1981]) also argued that under contemporary forms of capitalism, signification is hollowed out to the extent that signs increasingly lack any relation to an original form. Baudrillard calls this a "simulacrum", a copy of a sign that no longer represents any original, becoming a copy of nothing; it is in this sense that hollow femininities are hollow. While Butler (1990) has already argued that the performativity of gender means it comprises a series of copies lacking an original, these copies are still reliant on a contingent yet real and material history. West and Zimmerman (1987, p. 126) make this point, too, that gender is a social and politically contextual act that "involves a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of masculine and feminine 'natures'". As such, hollow femininities do not completely lack meaning, but the way that neoliberal men adopt them imitates a form of femininity that makes specific assumptions about a gender performance constructed via this complex, contingent history. However, this process also goes beyond signification and into the commodification of femininity, thanks to the intense discipline required of neoliberal subjectivity.

From this perspective, the sign-value of hollow femininities, then, rest in their relations with neoliberal subjectivity. Harris (2017) argues that neoliberalism has encouraged a full generation to labour more and more, for less and less material reward, convincing them they need to simply do more labour. Indeed, labour has developed to the extent that skills, as well as personas and behavioural data, are commodities themselves, now literally purchasable. As the neoliberal subject is to some extent coded as feminine, femininities have become commodifiable neoliberal skills. The notion of a commodified femininity further speaks to the fact that the sample of men in this paper, as well as in the wider study, overwhelmingly (though not exclusively) identified as white and middle-class, and who could afford the lifestyles that

hollow femininities produce. It would not be untoward to suggest that the complicity of hollow femininities indicates, in an ongoing sense, that it is more likely to be masculinities at the margins that offer substantive change to masculinities (Goedecke, 2018; Roberts, 2018).

Hollow femininities are therefore not just about the undermining of anti-patriarchal politics, but also anti-capitalist politics, as these performances of hollow femininities legitimate the neoliberal subject and neoliberal capitalism. As Hennessy (1995, p. 162) argues, "when the commodity is dealt with merely as a matter of signification, meaning, or identities, only one of the elements of its production – the process of image-making it relies on – is made visible". Hollow femininities, presented by neoliberal men as matters of identity or meaning only contribute to an enmeshment between the structures of capitalism and patriarchy, making them harder to pinpoint and prise apart.

Hollow femininities hybridise masculinities when neoliberal subjectivity requires certain skills and capacities of men that have long been considered feminine. These take the form of certain modalities that undermine existing femininities and womanhood through the conflation of otherness with femininity, and through the process by which they are commodified. As a result, these hollow femininities not only recuperate masculinity and men's dominance, but also work to recuperate neoliberal capitalism – and perhaps the concept of hollowness might inform other social hierarchies and power relations. Rather than denaturalisation or de-essentialisation, then, the apparent gender mismatch of hybridised neoliberal masculinities further enmeshes and jumbles the relations between capitalism and patriarchy, mystifying and strengthening both structures.

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