

Reconfigurations of illness and masculinity on Instagram

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Abstract

In this article, we explore how men's experiences of living with illness are mediatized on Instagram, thus understanding social media platforms as "sociotechnical affordances" that support and modulate how everyday lives are lived (Paasonen, 2018). The article zooms in on four Danish Instagram profiles (with approximately 2,000 followers each) that centre on experiences of living with different diagnoses, including morbus chrohn, hip dysplasia, chronic pain, and mental illness. By applying the concepts "biological entrepreneurship" (Stage, 2017), "bodywork", and "spornosexuality" (Hakim, 2019), we examine how masculinity becomes reconfigured as a resource, rather than an opposition to health. The content on Instagram emerges as entrepreneurial by extending the body: Situated within the larger framework of the profiles' content and their place in the platform economy of attention, illness is transformed into a narrative and an affective source, whether on the politics of gender, visibility of illness, monetary gain, or self-help.

Keywords

Instagram, illness, masculinity, bodywork, affect, vitality

Social media has come to play a central part in relation to illness as a source of information, support, community-making, as well as self-expression (e.g., Stage, 2017; Page, 2012). With more than 1 billion users (Statista, 2021), Instagram is one of the most-used social media platforms worldwide and a growing forum for discussing health-related topics (Utter et al., 2020). Women are featured more frequently than men in online communication on illness (e.g., Kim, 2015; Baik et al., 2019), and this seems to apply to Instagram as well (Sendra, 2020; Utter et al., 2020). Also, research tends to examine women's use of social media in relation to conditions we often associate with women, e.g., fibromyalgia (Berard & Smith, 2019), breast cancer (Gurrieri, 2019), contested illness (Groenevelt, 2022), or pregnancy sickness (Eagle, 2019).

Led by this lack of knowledge concerning men, illness, and social media, this paper explores how men's experiences of living with illness are mediatized on Instagram with the following research question: How does masculinity become reconfigured in the locus of illness and social media? Specifically, we zoom in on four Danish Instagram profiles centring on experiences of living with different diagnoses, including morbus crohn, hip dysplasia, chronic pain, and mental illness in order to avoid conditions related to a specific illness. We draw on contemporary research on social media and masculinity to explore how masculinity and illness are assembled in four selected Instagram accounts and how the ill body is used as a narrative and affective resource for personal empowerment, raising awareness and generating personal and social value. We examine similarities and differences of the profiles in relation to concepts such as capacity/debility (Puar, 2017), biological entrepreneurship (Stage, 2017), and bodywork (Hakim, 2019), and we analyze the ways in which the precarity of illness is navigated through the mediatization of embodied affective states.

Thus, we argue that the mediatization of illness on social media can reconfigure masculinity in ways that do not necessarily stand in opposition to health behaviours, but rather serve as a "productive" force that simultaneously builds on and challenges binary understandings of men, masculinity, health, and illness. We follow the affective flows between mediated human and non-human actors and discuss how they play into existing discussions of masculinity in crisis, neoliberal understandings of vitality, and the emphasis on the individual in disease prevention.

Masculinity and illness

Our focus on masculinity stems from an interest in the contradictory position that men's bodies have come to hold in research on medicalization, health care, and disease prevention. Men's bodies have historically not been subjected to the same extent of medical interventions and surveillance as the bodies of women and sexual and/or racialized minorities. Instead, the male body has long served as the "hidden" norm against which difference has been measured (Robinson, 2000). Within areas of medicalization that have

not been considered explicitly gendered, (white, cis-gendered) men have constituted the default standard, for example, in the diagnoses and treatment of addiction, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and heart attacks (e.g., Bordo, 2000; Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021). In contrast, cis-gendered female bodies have constituted a key site of medical interventions concerning ordinary psychological and physiological functions, particularly in relation to reproduction (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021; Rosenfeld & Faircloth, 2006). However, in recent years, gender has increasingly come to matter in relation to men and illness, not only because the emergence of “lifestyle drugs” now offers a myriad of treatments for men that make visible how gender segmentation remains a profitable strategy for the pharmaceutical industry (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021; Conrad, 2005), but also because masculinity has been foregrounded as a risk factor for men’s health more generally (Connell & Huggins, 1998; Courtenay, 2011; King & Elliot, 2021).

Thus, researchers have demonstrated a gendered disparity in women’s and men’s health behaviour: Compared to women, men are generally more likely to engage in health risk behaviours, yet less inclined to seek out medical information and treatment when experiencing symptoms. In the vein of these observations, masculinity has been accentuated as particularly problematic: Masculine norms have been argued to constitute a health risk in deterring men from seeking treatment and caring for their health and well-being (Hvidtfeldt et al., 2021; Page, 2012), instead promoting “a stoic, tough-it-out approach to adversity, pain, and distress” (King & Elliot, 2021, p.1). In this way, men have been put on the map, and their vulnerability in relation to illness is argued to emerge because they are men. Within this framework, the doing of masculinity is often read as an “undoing of men’s health” (Nissen, 2017, p. 551). This understanding is seemingly circulated increasingly in popular cultural portrayals of men in Denmark, for example, in television series on men’s health (Eriksen & Hvidtfeldt, 2021), but also in preventive measures such as the project “Fora for men’s health” [“Forum for mænds sundhed”] (see <https://sundmand.dk/>).

This approach to masculinity and illness is also currently being extended to the use of online platforms, as masculine stereotypes are argued to provide a barrier for men to not only care for their health, but also to engage with new technologies for social and emotional support as well as narrative self-expression (e.g., Sendra & Farré, 2020; Page, 2012). While these observations point to important barriers to men’s health, they also risk glossing over men’s everyday care regimes and the changing pictures of masculinity and health care that also occur (Nissen, 2017), as well as the ways in which social media may reconfigure contemporary relations between gender, illness, and health. As Shildrick notes, technologies do not only challenge “the normative performance of the human subject”, they also challenge “the very understanding of what counts as human” (Shildrick, 2015, p. 13), and therefore, as we argue, they, by extension, come to challenge our understandings of both illness and gender.

Social media and illness narratives

In this paper, we consider Instagram as a prosthetic extension that affords bodies new orientations and affective intensities as technologies bend, extend, and challenge the very boundaries of flesh. While the disabled body has long been recognized as a site for technological intervention, and although it may serve as a privileged example of how the boundaries of the flesh are transgressed with and through technology, such bodily plasticity is not reserved for the disabled (Shildrick, 2015). In other words, disabled bodies may be more readily associated with prosthetic devices, but their experiences point to a techno-cultural shift in corporality, in which “the prostheticized body is the rule, not the exception” (Mitchell & Snyder, 2000, p. 7). Furthermore, as Paasonen argues, it is exactly because networked media involve forms of sociability that may be of human design, yet simultaneously facilitate encounters with the nonhuman such as algorithms, information architecture, or emojis alike, that “any clear binary divides between the rational and the affective, the human and the nonhuman or the user and the instrument used are guaranteed to break down” (Paasonen, 2018b, p. 285). This makes social media a particularly fruitful site for the exploration of contemporary reconfigurations of the relations between men, masculinity, and illness.

Instagram is characterized by its distinct visual culture. Unlike other popular social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, Instagram first and foremost prioritizes visual content: All content posted on Instagram must include pictures, while any textual elements, including hashtags and interactions with other users, take place in relation to such imagery, the only exception being the possibility for private messaging (Laestadius, 2016; Marwick, 2015). However, the visual culture of Instagram is not limited to the platform itself, but it is entangled with a broader shift in the norms for the distribution and aesthetics of photography: Instead of photographing others for self-consumption, users of Instagram use pictures to “document the self for the consumption of others” (Marwick, 2015, p. 142).

Instagram’s platform has hereby been part of a process through which the perception of what is deemed photographable has been altered and expanded (e.g., Tiidenberg, 2020). This entanglement speaks to how online platforms are inextricable from social structures – not because they simply reflect the social or facilitate social connections, but because they play an integral part in producing the very structures that we live in (Van Dijck, 2013; Van Dijck et al., 2018). Thus, social media platforms are more than instruments for users to share and consume content. Instead, they can be understood as a “sociotechnical affordance” that supports and modulates how our everyday lives are lived, as they both facilitate and condition the mediated belongings that are now vital to our lives. According to Paasonen, our individual and collective lives depend on such online connectivities to the extent that it makes sense to think of them as “a matter of infrastructure that is reminiscent of electricity, gas or water supply, or heating” (Paasonen, 2018a, p. 103).

The centrality of such platforms to many people's lives challenges previous distinctions between the private and public sectors, and the regulations of them that have hitherto been in place, as everyday practices increasingly depend on platforms that in addition shape the workings of whole industries, such as tourism and transportation (Van Dijck et al., 2018). Platforms can also enable different forms of community-making, activism, and self-expressions, but they simultaneously weave corporate economic incentives and interests into people's everyday lives. These incentives shape the algorithmic folding of content, distributing as well as restricting visibility, whilst modulating users' affective engagements through design features that urge us to like, share or comment. However, while the rise of the platform society is driven by economic interests and technological innovation, the platforms are not only a matter of economic and technical processes; they emerge through a "mutual shaping", because "while platform mechanisms filter and steer social interactions, users also define their outcome" (Van Dijck et al., 2018, p. 5).

Online platforms have also become central for people living with illness: Using online platforms to seek out information, research treatment options, or connect with people in a similar situation is now an ordinary part of the experience of being ill, often foregrounded as an important resource in an emerging body of research. The emergence of social media has provided new opportunities of visibility for those living with illness – visibility that springs from the increased narrative potential of illness as new technologies and medicines have transformed illness from being a mundane part of everyday life to an extraordinary event (Stage, 2017). The narrative potential of illness is also demonstrated in the myriad of articles, biographies, blogs, and social media accounts dedicated to mediating the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of those embodying illness (Hvidtfeldt & Hansen, 2021). However, according to Page, "the role of narrative as a sense-making resource is felt keenly when illness ruptures the speaker's illusion of continuity in life experience" (Page, 2012, p. 49), but in mainstream media, such narratives are often told retrospectively from a point of recovery, which favors a positive outcome and leaves little room for feelings of chaos and pain. In contrast, the temporalities – as well as the values embedded in illness narratives – shift on social media, because the platforms allow for a different mode of storytelling (Page, 2012) in which illness is instead narrated "as updates that appear discontinuously as the narrator documents their experiences while diagnosis and treatment unfolds" (Stage, 2018, p. 15). Though, research also points to how young Danes living with illness may experience a pressure to tell life-affirming stories on social media (Stage et al., 2020). Still, social media gives illness narratives a new liveliness and unpredictability; the outcome is unknown, but this unpredictability further extends itself through the connectivity between platforms, as such narratives can also be "networked" in themselves when shared, liked, or commented on. Illness narratives may even go viral, as they travel across connected social media platforms (Stage, 2017; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). According to Stage (2017), digital technologies have therefore fundamentally transformed what bodies and illnesses are, but also what they are able to "do".

The networked manner in which these illness narratives emerge demonstrates how social media is not only a resource that allows for new ways of coping and constructing meaning in a difficult situation, but also how platforms can provide visibility not afforded by mainstream media. Such visibility can further be the starting point for users “set out to affect the world and their receivers” and “to mobilize, convince and activate followers” (Stage, 2017, p. 13). Taken together with the economy of attention of Instagram itself, the algorithmic folding of content, and the linking through hashtags, tagging, and sharing, the subject we meet on Instagram is assembled according to the way Rosi Braidotti describes the “enfleshed Deleuzian subject” as “rather an ‘in-between’: it is a folding in of external influences and a simultaneous unfolding outwards of affects” (Braidotti, 2000, p. 159).

Biological entrepreneurs doing bodywork: Analytical framework

Campana (2015) suggests that to understand masculinity, we must investigate how it is distributed across bodies and emerges as various actors engage in the shared performance of masculinity; the individual’s claim to masculinity relies on – or is merely a symptom of – a larger system in which masculinity is produced and managed (Campana, 2015; Hickey-Moodey, 2019). Following recent research on the crossroads of assemblage theory and studies on men and masculinity, we move beyond the individual male body in order to explore how masculinity and illness become assembled in the performative making of connections between human and non-human elements on social media.

While the existing research suggests that masculinity may become disrupted by illness, we instead zoom in on how masculinity is reconfigured in the online portrayal of and by men living with illness. As we zoom in on visual content about living with illness, we consider the content as part of a network in which masculinity emerges in the relations between human and non-human actors. This means that we do not ascribe these individual men inherent masculine qualities; rather, we consider them as actors in a network of a becoming of masculinity, as masculinity itself is a making of “connections between things that are then identified as masculine” (Hickey-Moodey, 2019, p. 42). While they actively connect their bodies, experiences, and the objects that surround them to the platform, they are not sole agents in this making; they are part of a network in the literal and theoretical sense, and these objects are co-constitutive. By decentralizing the individual and focusing on the relations between different things, we find that we can foreground the complex workings of masculinity in selected networks, wherein illness affects the emergence of how masculinity becomes reconfigured in relation to men’s bodies on Instagram and beyond.

Instagram, and social media more generally, constitute a particularly interesting site for the exploration of masculine assemblages in relation to illness, with its emergence affording new ways of displaying male bodies for the consumption of others. Hakim (2019) argues that the use of social media has become a way for men to navigate the

increased precarity that followed the financial crisis in 2008: As the capacity to inhabit the role of the breadwinner became out of reach for a growing number of men, social media became an important site for value creation. However, the form of value creation that men engage in on social media is argued to include forms of bodywork that have historically been “associated with less privileged groups” (Hakim, 2019, p. 58). This form of bodywork includes online practices of self-branding that objectify or sexualize the body, but to generate value, such self-branding constitutes work. For example, using the example of “the spornosexual” (a contraction between “sport”, “porn star”, and “metrosexual”), Hakim argues that men who display their fit and muscular bodies online are engaged in intensive labour, which may, for example, include exercise and diet regimes that enable them to achieve the body they desire, but also to show off this body to generate monetary value, for example, by promoting their competencies as nutritionists, trainers, and the like. In the case of the spornosexual, sharing one’s fit body is thus “a form of labor that feeds both his professional and recreational life” (Hakim, 2019, p. 67).

With social media, new forms of labour have thus emerged; self-branding has become an integral part of everyday life for many people, as areas of our lives that have historically been considered non-commercial or authentic have now become sites for value creation, to navigate precarity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hakim, 2019). Interestingly, the bodywork of Hakim’s spornosexuals echoes recent studies on cancer and social media. In his work *Networked Cancer, Stage* (2017) argues that cancer patients make use of social media to engage in what he terms “biological entrepreneurship”, which utilizes the experience of embodying illness as a narrative and affective resource to generate social and personal value. Such entrepreneurship, as we argue, is also integrated into the online practices of men who make use of Instagram to mediate their precarious experiences of living with illness.

When cancer patients utilize their illness as a narrative and affective resource to generate personal and social change by being “biological entrepreneurs”, social media platforms can be used to turn individual suffering into value, as “personal accounts of cancer are intertwined with the facilitation, financing, and realization of personal, social, and political projects” (Stage, 2017, p. 10). The bodywork that involves the seemingly white, male, heterosexual, and ill body that we foreground in this study is thus further intertwined with practices of biological entrepreneurship that reconfigures both illness and masculinity. As we demonstrate later, a central way in which the experience of living with illness is mediated is through the displaying of the body in a variety of affective states, and in the connectivity between human and non-human actors, through which the affected body emerges as entrepreneurial.

Methods

Since our study is founded on an interest in men's use of Instagram to communicate their experiences of living with illness, an initial step was to follow relevant communities and groups on social media sites, primarily (but not exclusively) Danish, such as "Chronic influencers" ["Kroniske influencere"] on Instagram. These communities guided us toward relevant profiles of and about men, masculinity, and illness, spiking our interest in how men were actively engaging with communities through text, hashtags, commenting, and imagery.

From here, we went on to locate specific profiles of men, following relevant profiles that we encountered in the communities, or which were suggested by Instagram's own algorithm. We then systematically went through content posted within the past in relation to specific hashtags that we had encountered in this process, such as #ungkræft, #sclerose, #gigt, #kroniskesyge, #kroniskesmerter, #stomi, and #hoftedysplasi [#young-cancer, #sclerosis, #arthritis, #chronicallyill, #chronicpain, #ostomy, and #hipdysplasia]. We looked through posts that contained relevant images or were posted by users with usernames that indicated that the user identified as a man. Our selection of profiles was thus the result of a hermeneutic process, informed by our observations of communities centred on illness, profiles suggested by Instagram's own algorithm and observations of interactions between profiles that allowed for snowballing.

In this process, we gathered a catalogue of 50 profiles by Danish men that were open to the public, and in which personal experiences with illness constituted a significant part of their content. The process of browsing and gathering this broad selection of profiles provided us with initial insights into the topic and the variety in content. For example, some profiles seemed to primarily centre on content of an encouraging nature that focused on living a great life despite illness. In contrast, other profiles were seemingly more focused on demonstrating an unfiltered portrayal of the emotional toil of their illness, whilst some accentuated their ways of treasuring everyday life when facing the hardship that came with being ill. It was our initial observation that each approach was intertwined with different aesthetics and affective repertoires, as well as strategies for social and/or financial gain. However, we found it necessary and useful to limit our scope of data, as each profile contained vast amounts of content from stories with time-limited accessibility to posts and reels. Furthermore, it seemed that many changed the focus of their profile over time. Thus, to enable an in-depth analysis, we decided to primarily focus on posts and to delimit the number of profiles we included in this study. We therefore selected four profiles in which the focus on illness had been consistent over time, and where the number of followers fell within the same range (approximately 2,000 followers at the time). Furthermore, we chose four profiles that centred on different forms of illness, and, which taken together, included a variety of aesthetics, affective repertoires, as well as attempts at social and/or monetary gain. The profiles we selected were thus chosen because they represent different types of content and different experiences of living

various forms of illness, ranging from chronic pain to mental illness. However, while the four selected profiles include men with different diagnoses, ages, occupations, and living circumstances, they are all seemingly white, ethnic Danes and do not refer to their sexual orientation as other than heteroromantic when mentioning partners and dating. Their texts and hashtags appear as a mixture of Danish and English, marking them as specifically contextualized within a Scandinavian context, yet with an international outlook.

The specific pictures are chosen because they provide insight into a particular profile's content while addressing the intersection between masculinity and illness that is our analytical focus. We have been aware of representativity, and we could have chosen many of the other images without the arguments being different. However, the objective of the analysis is qualitative and led by our interest in finding, following, and understanding the visualizations of illness-related elements, such as tubes, wires, the stoma bag, and pills, combined with everyday objects as sunglasses and towels, as well as tracking different combinations of texts, hashtags, and emojis. The understanding of material and, aesthetic and affective elements (expressions of joy and fear, tears and sweat) as dynamic and complex assemblages has been the guideline in the selection of pictures where masculine assemblages appear in relation to expressions of illness.

Although the content posted is publicly available, we are aware that the profiles in question are also temporarily available on social media, whereas reproducing their content extends this availability. Therefore, we have contacted each profile and received written consent to use their content in this study, as well as permission to include the selected photographs in this article.

Analysis: Assembling masculinity on social media

In the following, we analyze the assembling of masculinity and illness in the content of the four profiles, respectively. We pay particular attention to how biological entrepreneurship and physical and affective bodywork are emphasized and related, as well as the interaction of human and non-human elements, and between images and texts (e.g., hashtags). Thus, the analysis aims to add nuance to our understandings of the relations between illness and masculinity, and how they are reconfigured on social media.

Biological entrepreneurship: Value in transformation

Stomisten's first post is a black and white photo from 20 January 2019 depicting him in a hospital bed with tubes and wires lying tangled across his chest, but nevertheless smiling and showing a *thumbs up* (Stomisten, 2019a) The accompanying text informs us that this picture was taken after he had an operation in 2013 that resulted in a stoma. This experience is presented through a juxtaposition between his own initial reaction to developing a stoma (in the picture) and his current situation in 2019 (the following text), and perhaps more importantly, his present mindset. Here, Stomisten emphasizes how he initially

thought that “the world collapsed”: He was going through a “dark time” in which he felt that “anxiety and depression could easily have taken over” (Stomisten 2019a). However, he got back on his feet again and “today lives a great life”, which he wants to use “to help and inspire others in this situation”, as he goes on to foreground how he himself is now living a “fantastic life” (Stomisten, 2019a).

Thus, Stomisten’s first post (2019a) exemplifies a pattern in which the transformation of mindset is foregrounded as a site for value creation for himself and others. The transformation is further mediatized through imagery in which he engages in an act of self-tracking regarding his physical and mental progress since he got his stoma. This transformation is most visible in the before-and-after images, in which Stomisten displays himself bare-chested with a visible stoma, as his body language, facial expression, as well as his physique changes (Stomisten, 2019b, n.d.; 2020a; 2020b). These before-and-after images track his development over time, in ways that allow followers to see how the stoma has not changed, but his mindset and body have: He has seemingly become happier as well as more fit and muscular. This type of imagery documents his transformation, and the juxtaposition allows us to compare and ascribe value to his former and his present self, mindset, and body. Thus, measurements and stories entangle as short and effective ways of making meaning visible “that fits the storytelling affordances of social media, often privileging brevity, visuality and velocity” (Stage, 2019, p. 84).

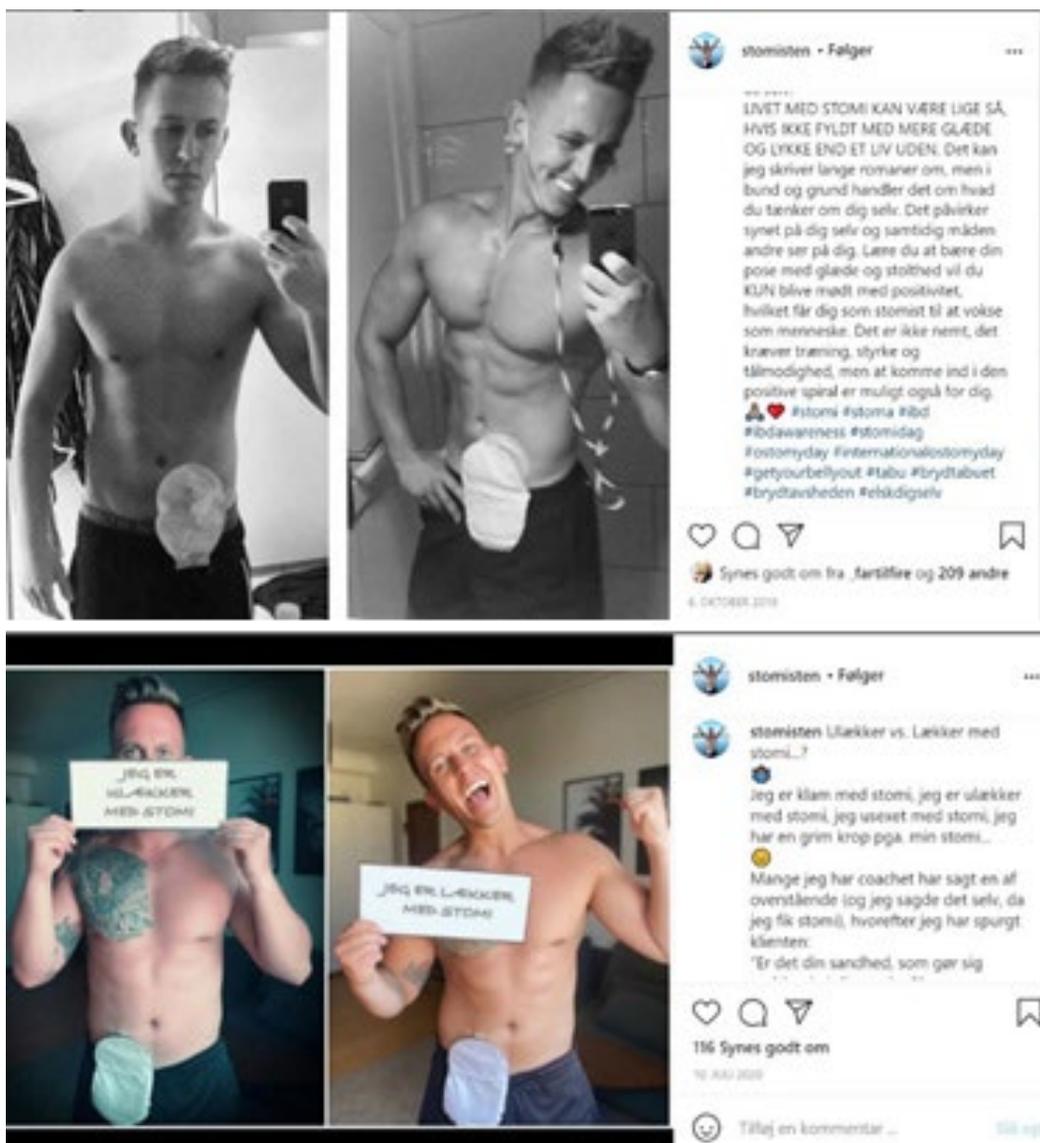
Initially, Stomisten’s value-creation is primarily centred on helping other people in the same situation and working to de-stigmatize stoma through displays of embodied affective states that depict him as all smiles and taking up space in ways that highlight sentiments of happiness, pleasure, and confidence. Such positive affect constitutes an over-arching sentiment across his posts, circulating a sticking-together of affect (Ahmed, 2004) that disturbs the stigma attached to the stoma. This constitutes a form of biological entrepreneurship in that function as a “narrative-affective force”, as the experience with illness becomes a way to educate and “mobilize the public” (Stage, 2017, p. 2), as well as create a sense of community. This is also visible in the posts that depict other smiling people with stoma (“Stomist of the week”), or when a stoma bag is used for purposes not intended from the beginning, for example, as a device for drinking shots with friends.

However, over time, this form of value creation is expanded to encompass others, as he starts to promote his business as a coach, and over time also as a hypnotist. His services are primarily directed towards women, with his current bio stating: “I help women with passion for self-development, who wish to feel content with themselves” (Stomisten, 2021). The transformation that is central to Stomisten’s profile is thus not simply about embodying illness, but rather of transforming one’s affective-narrative relation to illness, and in this instance, the affective-narrative force of his experience is further entangled with gender. This transformation is accentuated as valuable not only for himself, but also for women who want to feel more content with themselves, regardless of their physical health. The mediatized stoma hereby functions not only as a prosthetic device for

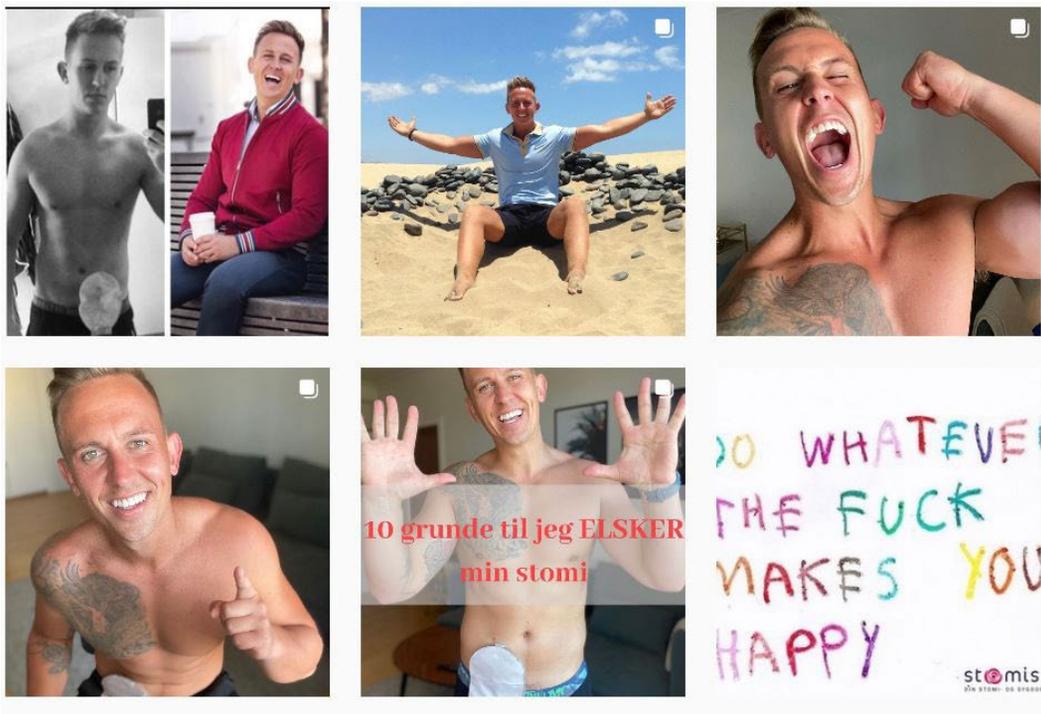


Thumbs up! In these posts dichotomies between illness and physical bodywork are broken down as Stomisten and Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman display how masculinity emerges as a resource, rather than an opposition to health behaviors. (Stomisten, 2019a; 2019b; 2020a; n.d.; 2020b; Thomsen, 2020a; 2020b)

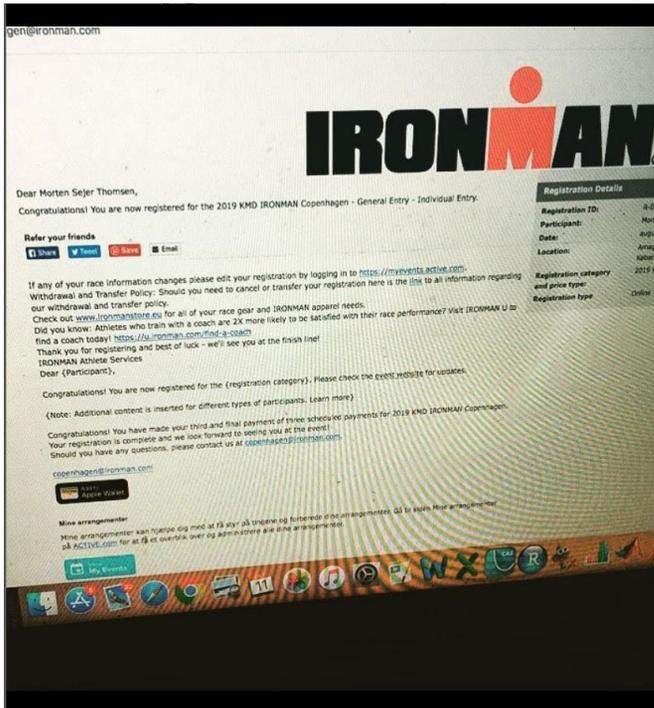
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his body, but also as a prosthetic device in that it enables new forms of movements, orientations, and in addition, entrepreneurship. His linking of positive affect with the fit, muscular body, the smile, and the confidence of his body language destabilizes the negative affect that otherwise tends to stick not only to the stoma, but to the ill body more generally. Instead, this before-and-after imagery presents a hopeful orientation toward the future in which feeling “happy”, “free”, “grateful”, and “positive” is possible.

Thus, Stomisten’s Instagram content functions as biological entrepreneurship in that he utilizes the experience of embodying illness as a narrative and affective resource to generate social and personal value. However, it additionally demonstrates how contemporary entrepreneurship on social media is highly dependent on one’s ability to work and maintain not only a specific type of body, but also to embody specific kinds of affect, or doing specific forms of affective labour.

Stomisten exemplifies how biological entrepreneurship can require not only affective labour, or the ability to communicate experiences with illness, but also concrete physical labour, as his physique is integrated in his entrepreneurial online self. Thus, as Hakim argues, “labour territorializes leisure” (Hakim, 2019, p. 66), but, in this case, also illness. The sharing of pictures is not just about online communication, but also about “the spread, attachment, amplification and dissipation of affective intensities” (Paasonen, 2018b, p. 283). It is this transformation, this overcoming – not of illness but of the negative affect that sticks to illness – that enables him to “sell” the potential of transformation to others, as it is visualized as possible – even concerning an ill male body.

Entrepreneurial bodywork

Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman’s profile was established in 2018, when he, following a Ganz operation for hip dysplasia four years earlier, first signed up for an Ironman Triathlon. The two first posts introduce these two themes – his Ironman training and his illness – in that order: In his first post, we see a screenshot of his confirmation for registering for the Ironman Triathlon in 2019, and in the second post we see him in a hospital bed (Thomsen, 2020a; 2020b). Thus, this profile aligns with Stomisten’s; however, as we argue in the following section, it also explicitly overcomes bodily debility and breaks down boundaries between illness and masculinity by foregrounding extreme sport, bodywork, and sweat.

Akin to Stomisten’s imagery of himself in the hospital bed (Stomisten 2019a), Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman is giving a thumbs up, looking into the camera and smiling, whilst his upper body is covered by wires and tubes (Thomsen 2020b). These two posts illustrate not only the two themes that make up most of the content on his profile (Ironman and illness), but also how they are weaved together throughout his posts. When the visual content depicts his body in one state, either ill or training, the hashtags weave into the other, emphasizing how his “#hipdysplasia” is to be understood in relation to “#ironman”, and vice versa. Thus, imagery of him training may not visually depict illness, but the captions read “#hipdysplasia” and, in a similar vein, when we see his body in hospital beds, in

x-rays, or using a wheelchair, the hashtags weave in his training for “#ironman”. Hashtags hereby provide meaning to the visual content by contextualizing images, simultaneously inscribing them into larger community that affords them a place in the attention economy by making the image searchable and emphasizing its relevance (Tiidenberg, 2020) as a prosthetic device that may disturb the onlooker’s initial impression of what illness and physical fitness can look like, and how they may co-exist.

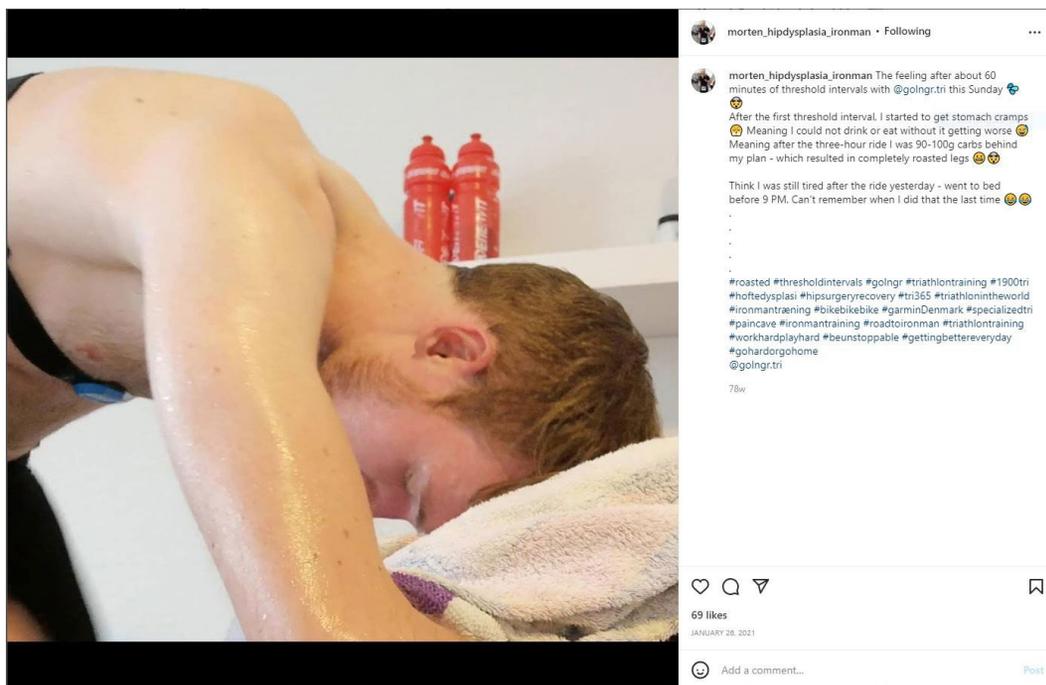
Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman also engages in meticulous self-tracking: Most images centre on his training, and in these pictures, the working body is presented, or progress is measured. Images display him biking, lifting weights, using machines in the gym, accompanied by text that often display “his measurements”: how fast he runs, bikes or swims. However, once again, we do not only see physical labour measures, but also affective labour, as he displays his ability to overcome illness and “#gettingbettereveryday”. Interestingly, we do not see him in pain in imagery centred primarily on illness, but when pain or struggle is depicted, it is in relation to intense workouts. Thus, we do not see him on days where he may not complete his training, but his struggle with illness is consistently presented as a process of overcoming, of working on the body, through which the sweat, struggle, and pain become a visceral reminder of how “#anythingispossible”, as his bio reads (Thomsen 2021b).

According to Waitt and Stanes, sweat and sweating reminds us that our lives are “continually negotiated along the lines of age, gender, class, athleticism and ethnicity” as our sensory experience of our own and other’s sweat is dependent on the social categories that we inhabit and embody (Waitt & Stanes, 2015, p. 31). Sweat has masculine connotations, as it constitutes “a sensual form of sociality to becoming men, rather than a commitment to a particular stable set of ideas about masculinity” (Waitt & Stanes, 2015, p. 31). Thus, when depicting sweat and framing, it is an overcoming of illness; such sweat comes to represent a masculine becoming that is simultaneously an overcoming of illness, framed by hashtags that remind us that the sweat on his body emerges despite “#hipdysplasia” [“#hoftedysplasi”], as part of his “#hipsurgeryrecovery”, as we are presented with images of his sweating body in becoming (Thomsen 2021a).

This becoming is further emphasized in depictions of the screws that he has in his hip due to surgery. In his bio, these screws are represented as emojis “#hipdysplasia with 3 🦴 in his hip” (Thomsen 2021b). Also, one of his posts even displays an x-ray of screws in his body (Thomsen 2019). In this image, we gaze not only upon his body that he himself is working on, but also on the inside of the body with its bones and screws that are presented alongside hashtags, such as “#bloodsweatandtears”, “#rehab”, and “#ifyoucan-dreamityoucandoit”, which remind us of how his overcoming involves both physical and affective labour. It is here that Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman further emerges as entrepreneurial, as his posts also engage with different forms of entrepreneurship which here become available through his bodywork: creating awareness about hip dysplasia and at one point seeking financial support for his sport. In this way, his biological entrepreneur-

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ship becomes dependent on his ability to create value in the nexus between bodywork, affect, and illness. This profile explicates the bodywork and the physical process that Stomisten must have undertaken as well, according to the before-and after images.



Struggle and sweat: In different ways, these posts and pictures emphasize how biological entrepreneurship becomes a way for men to communicate and restructure the experience of living with illness and pain in everyday life. (Thomsen 2021a; 2019; Christensen, 2019; 2020; 2021)

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morten_hipdysplasia_ironman • Following
KMDIronmandenCopenhagen T1

morten_hipdysplasia_ironman 3 days!! Three days until these hips will be in action for the Copenhagen Ironman @kmdironmandenmark 🙌🙌🙌
I am so excited! Can barely wait! However, I feel I could use a month or two more 😊 But I am confident that mine ans coach @mr_hoegen plan will succeed! 🙌🙌

#fromhipdysplasiatoironman #hipsurgeryrecovery #paowarrior #hoftedysplasi #hipdysplasia #tri #triathlete #ironman #ironmantri #ironmantraining #roadtoironman #triathlontraining #1900tri #tri365 #3athlonlife #beunstoppable #trifromotivation #triathletesclub #humansoftriathlon #tri365 #triathlonintheworld #3athlonlife #motivationtriathlon #firsttriathlon #kmdironmandenmark #kmdmcp19 #kmdmcp #3gotraining #sponsorme @tri365 @triathlonworldit @triathlon_in_the_world @humansoftriathlon @3athlonlife @triathletesclub @tri3soost

Edited · 154w

doctor.feliz GO FOR IT!!!! YOU CAN DO IT!!!! 🙌

152w Reply

beadmantri 🙌🙌🙌

192 likes
AUGUST 15, 2019

Add a comment... Post



_fartilfire • Following

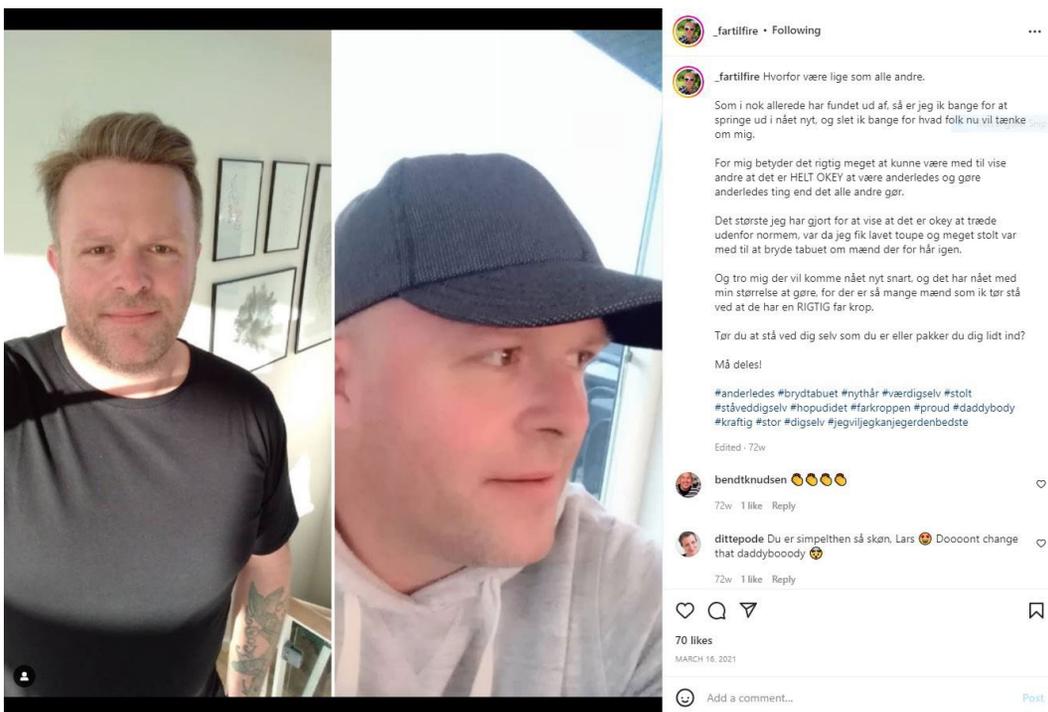
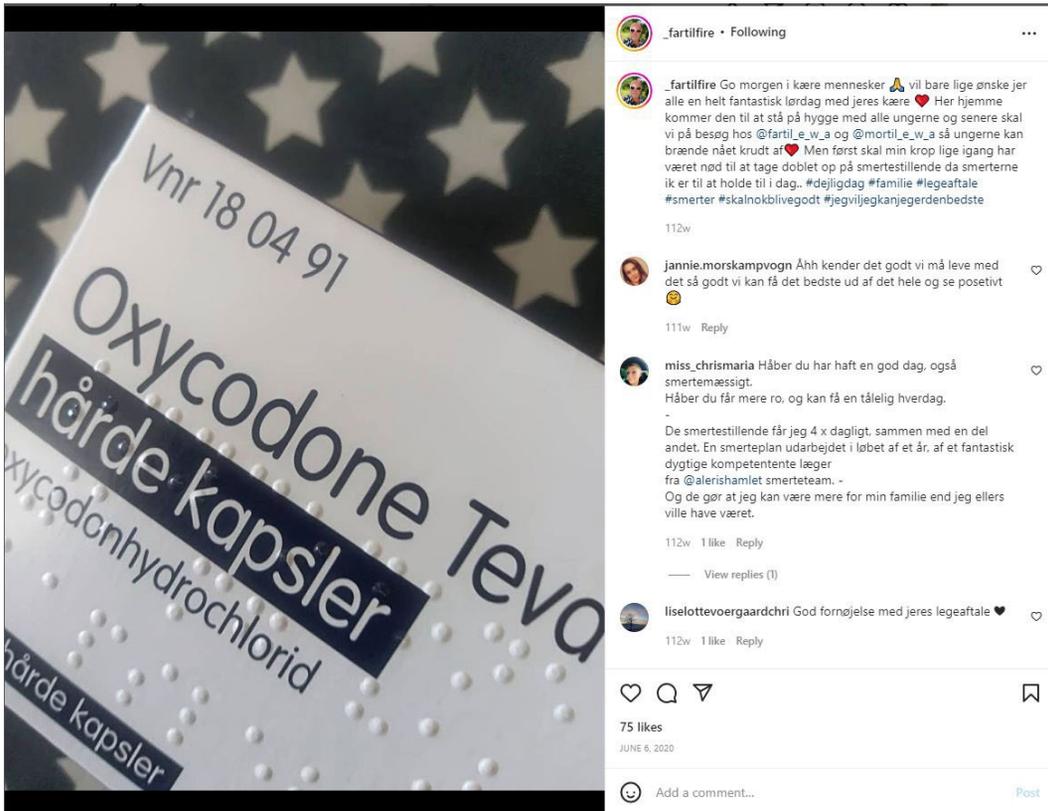
_fartilfire Fra ven. Til alle
Ingen ved en skid om mit liv og hvilken sygdom jeg har og hvad vi går igennem, læger siger, at jeg aldrig får det bedre...
Jeg giver ikke op, men jeg vil gøre andre opmærksom på det.
En lur hjælper ikke altid. Jeg er ikke doven.
Jeg er på medicin. Jeg kæmper med smerte, mobilitet og træthed hver dag.
Det mest frustrerende er, at folk ser på mig og siger "det kan ikke være så slemt; du ser godt ud" selvom min krop oplever smerte, jeg undskylder, hvis jeg savner begivenheder, som jeg gerne vil deltage i.
En dag vil du forstå mine daglige udfordringer.
Denne sygdom påvirker mig fysisk, mentalt og følelsesmæssigt.
Jeg har brug for din støtte, ikke din dæmkekraft.
Jeg ser dem, der vil tage sig tid til at læse dette indlæg til ende.
Med opslaget kommer følgende anmodning:
" tak til ære for nogen, der kæmper mod sygdom, autoimmun, devic sygdom (nmo) Sarcoidose, ❤️🔵 Ehlers Danlos syndrom
💜💜 lupus 💜💜 mere sklerose ❤️🔵 kræft 🟡💛 gigt 💜💜
💜💜 gastropæresis 🟢 skildbruskirtlen, kroniske smerter, angst 🟢 depression fibromyalgi endometriose copd Crohns diabetes eller andre sjulte sygdomme."

Kopiér og indsæt.
Jeg forstår det, hvis du ikke kopierer og indsætter.

Liked by kroniske.influencers and 109 others
JUNE 1, 2021

Add a comment... Post

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Affective entrepreneurship

_fartilfire's profile integrates his experience of living with chronic pain with his posts on everyday life as well as various branded content. Regarding illness, his profile is not centered on a narrative about overcoming; rather, he narrates the difficulties of living with an illness that limits his physical abilities and affects his emotional well-being. Whereas Stomisten's and Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman's content often highlights the ability to transform or overcome physical and emotional barriers through which they emerge as entrepreneurial, _fartilfire foregrounds how his illness continues to impact him negatively. This is exemplified when he posts about how his diagnoses affects him mentally and physically. For example, in a post, we see _fartilfire posing for the camera wearing sunglasses, and at the same time he inscribes pain on his body through text (Christensen, 2019). Such display of his body provides a sharp contrast to the before-and-after images of Stomisten, illustrating how gender cannot be understood as the only component that affects the ways in which men engage with online communities for support (e.g., Page, 2012), as illness and options for treatments become entangled with gender norms for physical and emotional comportment.

_fartilfire also posts images of text, without pictures of himself, in which he foregrounds pain and tears that "no one sees" (Christensen, n.d.). Mentioning tears, pain, and suffering directly in text, or inscribing them on images of himself, or of the pills he needs to get through daily life as a father, function as an affective and entrepreneurial reach into the economy of attention by demonstrating illness that cannot be seen on the body, if gazed upon without accompanying text. Here, Instagram becomes a way of inscribing illness on the body, a prosthetic extension of the body itself, when such illness is not otherwise visible. The affective state of suffering is mediatized by destabilizing the boundaries of the organic body, a dissolution that, according to Puar, reminds us that the contours of the body "should never be assumed to be stable", as affect is "transmitted, shared, and circulated" (Puar, 2017, p. 18). This dissolution of the body, the display of a body in pain, upon which such pain is not otherwise visible, thus makes Instagram a site of biological entrepreneurship insofar as it enables the mediatization of affective states that require an elevated visibility to ignite social change.

This point further extends to his posts about his personal accomplishments, as the activities that he brings forth are about accomplishing the ordinary, rather than the extraordinary. For example, as he measures a bike ride or his daily steps, accompanied by a selfie and text that celebrates his accomplishments, e.g., "high five to myself today", which come to inscribe not only the experience of living with illness as a physical challenge, but also as an emotional challenge (Christensen, n.d.). Here, Instagram becomes an important component to negotiate norms concerning illness; however, this is further entangled with gendered norms. Not only does _fartilfire emphasize how his emotional well-being is affected by illness, but he also intervenes in how such affective displays may oppose the social norms that impress upon men and their experience with emotional hardship. In

extension, *_fartilfire* emphasizes the norms for men in terms of looks not related to his illness, but to the aging male body more generally, such as hair loss and body weight (i.e., “#dadbod”, “#daddybody”, “#toupe”) (Christensen, n.d.). Thus, his biological entrepreneurship not only serves to mobilize the public around illness, but also regarding gendered norms more generally, which further seems to open up for other forms of entrepreneurship and serve to transform his struggles into personal monetary gain.

This is visible, as *_fartilfire* often engages in the advertising of products that are not directly related to illness, such as watches, glasses, clothing, and products for the home, for example, a lavender mist spray and candles, as well as in modelling clothes and displaying objects for consumption in his home (Christensen, n.d.). Such value-creation may not be dependent on bodywork – in the sense that he is not working on his body’s physical fitness – instead, he uses his body and his affective displays of everyday life as the means. Hereby, he is demonstrating how “the personal, the corporeal-affective and public-mobilization are conflated” (Stage, 2017, p. 46) – not only in relation to his biological entrepreneurship, but also as a form of physical and affective bodywork to navigate precarity (Hakim, 2019), when other means for monetization due to illness may not be within reach outside of social media.

Vulnerability as (valuable) masculinity

In his bio, *mathias_soebyk* presents himself as an advocate for breaking down toxic masculinity (Kristensen, n.d.). His stories are utilized to talk about gendered norms, but his content is also more broadly centred on his experiences with mental illness, including being diagnosed as bipolar and with PTSD, the latter in relation to him being a survivor of sexual assault. His content is thus primarily situated in relation to gendered norms, and as he further writes in his bio: “One does not become less of a man by being vulnerable” (Kristensen, n.d.). This intent is not only present as an explicit reflection in posts and bio, but also through content that balances the embodiment of masculine ideals with subversive displays of emotions, for example, by crying, meditating, or posing whilst draped in a towel.

In one post, *mathias_soebyk*’s face is portrayed clenched, crying with his eyes closed, his face turned slightly down and with a hand across his mouth (Kristensen 2020b). His tears are not visible, but his distress is. His crying is engaging his body and face, and he is looking away from the spectator, visibly in pain. The accompanying text is not framing the experience as a matter of overcoming, but rather of bearing witness to the hardship of mental illness and trauma. The act of crying emerges as entrepreneurial in connection to his male body, and the platform itself through the hashtags, such as “#mencanalsobevulnerable”, “#itisokaynottobeokay”, and “#menalsohavefeelings”, as *mathias_soebyk* actively works to emphasize not only the stigma of mental illness, but also the stigma attached to men’s emotional vulnerability, as stated in his bio. His mental illness thus becomes a way to work on, with, and against a normative assumption of men as stoic and unemo-

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Spornosexual bodywork! In mathias_soebk's profile, emotional vulnerability appears as an intentional fight against toxic masculinity. The posts also demonstrate how illness and recovery transforms into narrative resources involving both affective and physical labor. (Kristensen 2020a; 2020b; 2021)

Article: Reconfigurations of illness and masculinity on Instagram



mathiassoebyk • Following

mathiassoebyk Sådan her kan det også se ud...
 Filmen knækker. Låget brænder sammen. Følelsen af ikke at kunne rumme flere kampe alene.
 Angsten er 1/2 % fra at bare bryde igennem medicinen vel vidende at et sådan anfald kunne være flere timer.
 Men det eneste der bliver presset ud er en enkelt tåre.
 Men jeg synes det hele er for meget pt.
 udredning ptsd.. tjek.. bliver der handlet. Nej.
 Ventetid halvanden måned på næste udredning... tjek..
 Mæreriid og dårlig søvn er den største dræber for tiden. Jeg vågner flere gange om natten trods høj dosis af sovemedicin..
 Dårlig søvn medfører tankemylder. Mit hoved er bare er kæmpe kaos med en lunte kortere end kort fordi jeg ikke kan rumme en skid..
 Sådan her ser jeg ud flere gange i løbet af en dag. Mit indre kan mærke jeg er fyldt op. Mit hoved er fyldt op - og det samme er mit pillerlas..
 Men hjælp af form af terapi er der lang udsigt til.. ændring i medicin.. lang udsigt til..
 Jeg er en fighter uden lige... men selv en fighter har bare lyst til at smide håndklædet i ringen.. og bare give op. Igen føle sig svigtet af et samfund der skulle kunne hjælpe.
 Men det eneste der er sket. er at de har fyldt mit hoved med endnu mere at forholde sig til. Uden at vide hvordan jeg skal forholde mig til det..
 Jeg går i stå.
 #psykisksårbar #psykisksyg #psykisksygdom
 #mændkanogsåværesårbar #sårbar #sårbarhed #sammenbrud
 #detokayikkeatværeokay #mændhørsåfølelser

Edited · 99w

oubai_hosnie94 ❤️
 84w Reply

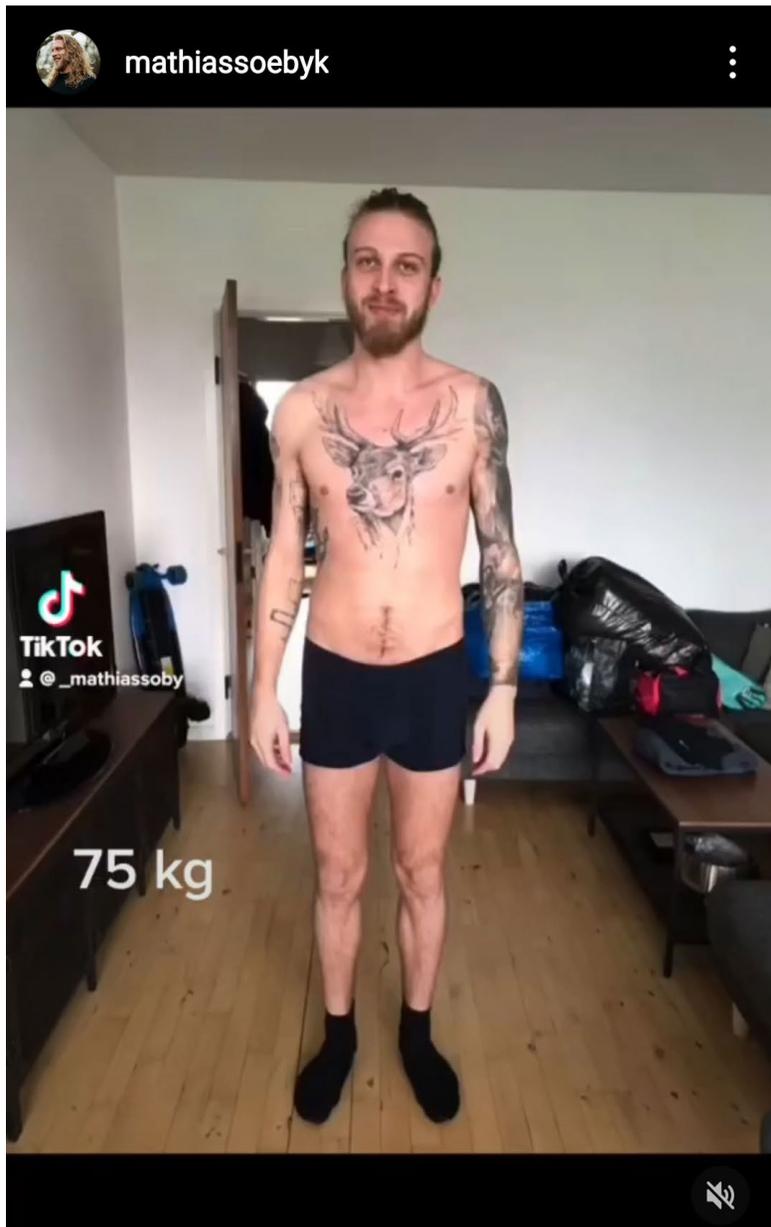
405 likes
 SEPTEMBER 3, 2020

Add a comment... Post

09.14

63%

← Opslag



09.14 📷 ☁️ 🍷 •

📶 🔊 📶 VoLTE LTE1 📶 63% 🔋

← **Opslag**



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← **Opslag**



tional, demonstrating how “vulnerability yields political significance as an affective navigating tool for political subjects” (Rozmarin, 2021). This is made possible, because vulnerability – in the form of crying and tears – already carry gendered connotations (e.g., Fischer & LaFrance, 2015), and, exactly because they are considered a feminine display of emotion, they offer an opportunity for biological entrepreneurship and bodywork, working through and with illness to ignite change. Thus, such affect emerges as subversive, and in extension entrepreneurial, because they are juxtaposed with a normative performance of male, muscular bodywork.

The physical body is often foregrounded in mathias_soebys pictures, but his bodywork is also displayed in a TikTok video (reposted on Instagram), in which we follow mathias_soebys through a bodily “transformation” that comes to stand in for a move away from depression; his weight is used as a metric in the video, with five images emphasizing his weight at each point in time: “75kg”, “85kg”, “95kg”, and finally “105kg” (Kristensen, 2021). The display of his bodywork over time is framed through the lens of illness; the skinny male body comes to signify “#depression”, and as he orientates himself towards the future, his body becomes more muscular, and his less muscular body becomes cemented as past: “never back”. In this before-and-after imagery, he is assembled through prosthetic bodywork that functions as a narrative resource in creating meaning in an otherwise chaotic experience with mental illness. But such bodywork arguably also opens up for expressions of emotional vulnerability that is simultaneously bound up with and challenging masculine stereotypes. Thus, leisure as well as recovery here become transformed into “hard physical spornosexual labour” (Hakim, 2019, p. 67), when his bodywork emerges as entrepreneurial.

Discussion and conclusion: The value in illness?

In their recent work, Eriksen and Hvidtfeldt argue that in Danish popular culture, a masculinity ideal closely linked to notions of capacity and health is emerging, an ideal which they term “vital masculinity” (Eriksen & Hvidtfeldt, 2021, p. 4). Vital masculinity comes to refer to the idealization of capacity and health as important markers of contemporary masculinity, as men marked by debility are encouraged to improve their bodies in ways that able them to “regain their lost (but innate) privileged social position as ‘naturally capable’ based on bodily capacities” (Eriksen & Hvidtfeldt, 2021, p. 10). Vital masculinity thus seems emergent in this type of bodywork depicted in four Instagram accounts, as it comes to function as an orientation out of illness-as-debility. As we have argued, the profiles challenge and break down dichotomies between illness and physical bodywork and present scenes of highly technologized illness treatments. Through this, masculinity emerges as a resource, rather than an opposition to health behaviours that challenge the binary opposition between health and masculinity as well as debility and capacity by emphasizing how masculinity emerges in processes of becoming along with recovery

or accept of vulnerability. As Puar (2017) argues, capacity and debility may, on the one hand, seemingly opposites, but in contemporary neoliberal understandings of lifestyle, capacity is also “a becoming” or “a progress”, as the individual subject is encouraged to reinvent, rehabilitate, and reinvigorate the self to enhance capability. While such processes of rehabilitation and reinvigoration are not readily available for marginalized groups, they constitute an important site for the becoming of masculinity, and in the process of living through, with, and despite illness on Instagram, masculinity emerges not only as a natural capacity, but as the capacity to overcome debility or to transform vulnerability into entrepreneurial action.

In conclusion, this study shows how the visual culture of Instagram accentuates new ways in which bodywork is central to the becoming of masculinity, as the relation to illness becomes dependent on different forms of bodywork that involve affective and physical labor. Through this, the analysis contributes with insights into how biological entrepreneurship becomes a way for men to communicate and restructure the experience of living with illness. Furthermore, we extend this point with the findings of Hakim (2019), as we demonstrate that increased precarity also emerges in new ways that may be specific to ill, cisgendered men. The analysis adds to the knowledge of how content on Instagram can emerge as entrepreneurial by extending the body: Situated within the larger framework of the profiles’ content and their place in the platform economy of attention, illness is transformed into a narrative and an affective resource, whether on the politics of gender (e.g., *mathias_soebyk*), visibility of illness (e.g., *Stomisten*), monetary gain (e.g., *_fartilfire*), or self-tracking and self-help (e.g., *Morten_hipdysplasia_ironman*). Thus, the visual content is not solely about affective displays, but about what these forms of affect do in the connections between illness, Instagram, and male embodiment – and how such acts may reach beyond the platform itself.

This prosthetic reach allows users to establish a presence in the attention economy, which, on the one hand, may produce value for themselves and for a larger community. Yet, as Hakim argues: “the value they as laborer’s end up creating for themselves is very low in comparison to the value they create for the digital platforms that circulate the images” (Hakim, 2019, p. 29). The value generated for the community and individual also needs to be understood in relation to a neoliberal discourse in which “ill-health is too quickly accepted as an attribute of an individual body, rather than a wider, ecological phenomenon of body organization and deployment within social and natural fields” (Fox, 2011, p. 360; see also Lykke, 2019). Instagram seems to emphasize the individual’s choices, and hereby, for example, as “individual lifestyles” are foregrounded as central to disease prevention as well as recovery. Thus, while social media use may reconfigure the relation between illness and masculinity, it also risks downplaying important factors in recovery and prevention by continuously circulating individual attempts to navigate the precarity of illness.

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