

**MEN IN THE GYM: RISKS, CRISES, AND TENSIONS IN
NEOLIBERAL MASCULINE SELF-MAKING IN TURKEY**

by
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NEOLIBERAL MASCULINE SELF-MAKING IN TURKEY**

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ABSTRACT

MEN IN THE GYM: RISKS, CRISES, AND TENSIONS IN NEOLIBERAL MASCULINE SELF-MAKING IN TURKEY

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This thesis examines gym attendance among urban white-collar men in Turkey as a neoliberal–masculine self-making project. It explores how masculine neoliberal ideals unfold in practice and what kinds of embodied selves they produce. Situating the research within debates on post-neoliberalism, it argues that white-collar men’s turn to the gym is an effort to restore their capacity to perform neoliberal subjectivities, eroded in Turkey amid neoliberalism-in-crisis and in parallel with global trends. Importantly, the analysis highlights the contested nature of this project, revealing crises, risks, and tensions—from bodily limits to temporal conflicts and performances of hybrid masculinities entailing the risk of feminization. It shows that men navigate the contradictions within this neoliberal self-making project by adopting the very logic of neoliberalism, rather than developing a critique of it. Moreover, this neoliberal navigation itself becomes the practice through which they reconfigure themselves as neoliberal masculine subjects. The study thus reveals that the gym practices of white-collar men exemplify the endurance of neoliberal ideals of subjectification, even amid debates about possible end of neoliberalism.

ÖZET

SPOR SALONUNDA ERKEKLER: TÜRKİYE’DE NEOLİBERAL ERKEKSİ KENDİLİK İNŞASINDA RİSKLER, KRİZLER VE GERİLİMLER

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Anahtar Kelimeler: neoliberal öznellikler, spor salonu, erkeklikler, beyaz yakalı
erkekler, beden

Bu tez, Türkiye’deki kentli beyaz yakalı erkeklerin spor salonu katılımını bir neoliberal–erkeksi kendilik inşa etme projesi olarak incelemektedir. Çalışma, erkeksi neoliberal ideallerin pratikte nasıl gerçekleştiğini ve ne tür bedenselleşmiş öznellikler ürettiğini araştırmaktadır. Post-neoliberalizm tartışmaları bağlamına yerleştirilen araştırma, beyaz yakalı erkeklerin spor salonuna yönelmesini, hem küresel ölçekte hem de Türkiye’de yaşanan neoliberalizmin krizinin ortasında erozyona uğrayan neoliberal öznellikleri icra etme kapasitelerini geri kazanma çabası olarak ele almaktadır. Analiz, bu projenin çelişkili doğasını özellikle vurgulayarak, bedensel sınırlardan zamansal çatışmalara ve kadınsılaşma riski taşıyan hibrit erkeklik performanslarına kadar uzanan krizleri, riskleri ve gerilimleri ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, erkeklerin bu neoliberal özne inşa süreci içindeki çelişkilerle, neoliberalizme eleştirel bir yaklaşım geliştirmek yerine, bizzat neoliberalizmin mantığını benimseyerek başa çıkmaya çalıştıklarını göstermektedir. Üstelik, bu neoliberal başa çıkma pratiğinin kendisi, onların neoliberal erkeksi özneler olarak kendilerini yeniden yapılandırdıkları süreç haline gelmektedir. Dolayısıyla, bu çalışma neoliberalizmin sonunun gelmiş olabileceğine dair tartışmalara rağmen, beyaz yakalı erkeklerin spor salonu pratiklerinin, neoliberal özneleşme ideallerinin kalıcılığını örneklediğini ortaya koymaktadır.

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“Yet here I am, living on a university campus. Among the tall and imposing young bodies, I shrink smaller and smaller. A yearning to grow emerges within me, and the smaller I become, the stronger this yearning grows (...) It’s not just the young bodies; even worse, I am surrounded by towering trees on this campus. Trees that are a thousand times larger, a thousand times more majestic than any body (...) I wanted a broader, stronger body. I thought I could escape the pitiful helplessness I felt in the presence of the trees if I could possess a grandeur like theirs (...) I knew this, but I also knew that by working out, I could become as imposing as a plane tree. But how does one bloom? That, I did not know.”

To my mother

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1. INTRODUCTION

Gym attendance has been increasingly popular among men in Turkey starting from the 1990s, when gyms first began opening in urban centers, with especially rapid acceleration from the 2010s onward Yildiz, Polat, and Yildiz (2021). It seems that men around me, predominantly middle-class professionals and elite college students, are either already going to the gym or thinking about starting. I myself attended the gym for more than a year starting in 2017, and returned to it in 2023, in two different prestigious private university gyms in Istanbul—the former during my undergraduate studies, and the latter during graduate school.

Although some gyms offer group exercise classes such as pilates, yoga, group cycling, and Zumba—a cardio-focused workout program that combines dance and fitness, predominantly popular among women (Jarvis 2024)—and some include facilities like a sauna or swimming pool, the basic structure of most gyms remains the same. Typically, there is a designated area for free weights (such as dumbbells and barbells), resistance machines spread throughout the space, and another section with cardio equipment like treadmills and exercise bikes. The space is usually surrounded by mirrors, which allow users to check their posture during movements and also observe how their muscles look—especially when pumped during and after exercise. These are the basics of what a gym is. When someone says that he goes to the gym it is generally understood that he visits such a place to do weight training, often combined with some cardio, probably on his own.¹

Based on my observations—both in college gyms that reflect a middle-class atmosphere and habitus, and in middle-class chain gyms I have visited—gym workouts are highly individualistic. Most men train with very limited social interaction, aside from occasional practical exchanges such as quick, often silent greetings, asking how many sets are left, or whether a machine is in use. Wearing earbuds throughout

1. For many men I interviewed with for this thesis, extra facilities like pools or saunas—though available in some gyms—do not significantly affect their gym choices. Even among participants who attend such gyms, proximity and convenience tend to be much more important factors as I will mention in Chapter 4.

the entire session is extremely common, and most people remain fully focused on their own routines. Even though “gym buddy” is a well-known phrase, in practice it seems quite rare. When it does happen, it’s usually among men who appear more professional—those with a sports background or visibly more athletic bodies.

When I first started thinking about the reasons behind the growing popularity of gyms among men, the answer seemed quite simple to me. I thought that gym attendance was profitable for men as it serves as a site of body transformation to accumulate gendered bodily capital. However, as I began speaking with men who regularly attend the gym, a more complex picture emerged. These men spoke not only about physical transformation but also about how gym attendance changes their personalities, behaviors, and the way they feel about the world around them. The gym was a site of both body- and self-transformation for these men. This thesis focuses on the self-transformative power of the gym which is centered around body but goes beyond physical changes. I will show what kinds of embodied subjects came into existence in the gym. I will argue that men produce and reproduce themselves as masculine neoliberal subjects through gym attendance.

I want to underline that this thesis is more about the construction of men as neoliberal subjects than it is about the construction of masculine identities through gym attendance. However, the neoliberal subjects’ character of being a masculine subject (Brown 2015; Folbre 2009; Garlick 2020; Salzinger 2016, 2020), makes completely differentiating these two projects from each other difficult.

Significantly, I am writing this thesis on neoliberal masculine subjectivities at a time when there are ongoing debates about both the crisis of neoliberalism and the crisis of masculinity. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the question of whether neoliberalism ended, and we lived at the dawn of post-neoliberalism emerged (Davies and Gane 2021). Similarly, many gender scholars identified a crisis of masculinity stemming from the rise of feminism, changes in job market and workplace, and decline of male breadwinner role (Kimmel 2007; McDowell 2003). It is important to note that although today both experience an intensification of these challenges, neoliberalism and masculine hegemony are characterized by their constant crisis tendencies and also their capacity to survive from crisis. Peck (2010) emphasizes neoliberalism’s reputation for changing shape across time and space in accordance with changing conditions: he says that it involves strong contradictions and frequently fails but “it tends to fail forwards.” (106). Similarly, scholars commonly emphasize the contested nature of masculinities. “Masculinity must be proved, and no sooner is it proved than it is again questioned and must be proved again - constant, relentless, unachievable” Kimmel (2016, 61) says. Connell (2005) similarly states that construction of masculinities is never-ending and often involves internal contradiction.

Also, she emphasizes the crisis tendency of the gender order and points out that these crises enforce masculinities to get reconfigured.

In this context, I examine the contradictions, risks, and ambiguities involved in the embodied construction of neoliberal masculine subjects. Through this analysis, I aim to contribute to the understanding of how men navigate gendered risks and tensions in the embodied construction of masculine subjectivities, shedding light on the contested and dynamic nature of this process and their pursuit of neoliberal masculine ideals. I will show that they interpret these contradictions and risks by adapting masculine neoliberal discourses and navigating them through neoliberal reflexes. Moreover, they continue to aspire to neoliberal subjectivities despite the contradictions they strongly experience. While the current crisis of neoliberalism has given way to speculations about a post-neoliberal order, at the level of subjectivity, neoliberal logics—though contested—remain deeply entrenched and continue to shape how individuals make sense of themselves and the world around them.

In all these contradictory and risky attempts to construct the neoliberal masculine self, the lean body emerges as a central ideal. Crucially, although it is consistently aspired to, its definition remains ambiguous. As one fitness blog notes:

“Lean” can mean different things to anyone. We often associate lean with the stereotypical “swimmer’s build” or “runner’s body” when it comes to athletics. However, some people would view these figures as “slim” or even “skinny.” . . . No matter how you define being lean, most lean bodies have a few common qualities. A lean body defines itself by having a lower body fat percentage. This highlights a more toned and defined appearance compared to bodies that are more muscular or bulky. . . . “Lean” and “bulky” are challenging to define, since there’s no set weight, size, or measurement for either. What’s lean to one may be bulky to another and vice versa. That being said, lean bodies usually come with a lower body fat percentage as well as a lower muscle mass. Bulky bodies are the opposite, with both higher muscle and higher fat (Flex Fitness, 2023).

Hence, lean reflects the fat-phobia of current male body ideals. However, it has no clear definition. It is defined through what it is not—namely, the bulky body. Still, the boundary between the two remains vague. I argue that the lean body, as an ideal, becomes a key site through which contradictions are negotiated. Its very ambiguity enables it to accommodate conflicting meanings, allowing men to navigate various crises and tensions through its form.

1.1 Rise and Decline of New Middle Class in Turkey

The neoliberal restructuring of Turkey’s economy starting in the 1980s and accelerated by Erdogan’s AKP in the 2000s (Erensu and Madra 2022), transformed the country’s employment patterns and class structure. From the 1980s onwards, the rise of globally integrated and rapidly expanding service sectors—such as finance and communication—contributed to the emergence of what has been described as the “new middle class”, educated white-collar workers employed in private firms unlike the old middle class of Turkey composed mainly of civil servants, small employers and shopkeepers (Rutz and Balkan 2009; Yavas 2020). While privatization reduced the proportion of civil servants in the middle classes in neoliberal Turkey (Hazir 2014), this shift was accompanied by a discourse that increasingly devalued civil service work: job security associated with being a state employee (*memur*) came to be framed as fostering laziness and stagnation, the precariousness of white-collar employment was reimagined as a virtue—one that supposedly encouraged entrepreneurial spirit, hard work, and constant self-improvement (Bora et al. 2011). In this context, private-sector white-collar careers increasingly replaced civil service positions as the main site of middle-class aspiration (Ozyegin 2015). Higher salaries, increased access to urban lifestyle and prevailing western consumption habits made these new careers attractive both economically and symbolically. Hence, scholars often discuss the neoliberal “bifurcation” of the middle classes in Turkey: while the old middle classes moved down into the lower-middle class, the new middle classes moved up into the upper-middle class, both in terms of income and status (Erkmen 2018; Rutz and Balkan 2009).

However, for the white-collar professionals, the sense of insecurity sharpened after the 2001 and 2008 economic crises, when mass layoffs hit key white-collar sectors such as banking. Unemployment among white-collar professionals increased; new graduates found it difficult to find jobs, and competition intensified (Bora et al. 2011; Ucarol 2023). As insecurity deepened, another shift also occurred: the relatively high salaries of the 1990s and early 2000s, which were once thought to compensate for insecurity, began to decline. Especially starting from the 2010s, while the short-lived prosperity narrative of the 2000s neoliberalization gave way to rising financial instability and deepening poverty from the 2010s onwards (Erensu and Madra 2022), Kacmaz et al. (2024) suggest that the ongoing financial crisis in Turkey has particularly affected the middle class. While top incomes continue to rise, the wage gap between university-educated workers and minimum-wage earners has significantly decreased.

In this climate, white-collar workers—often associated with urban lifestyles and aspirational consumption—are facing serious financial difficulties. According to the report *White-Collar Workers in Istanbul: Between Expectations and Reality* by the Istanbul Planning Agency (IPA)(2025), 43.2 percent of white-collar workers in Istanbul state that they are unable to save money, 23.5 percent report cutting back on spending and barely making ends meet, and 9.9 percent say they cannot meet even some of their basic needs. They can no longer afford to buy houses and accumulate savings (see also Kacmaz et al. (2024) for their inability to purchase durable goods). Moreover, the ongoing housing crisis has strongly affected them. According to the IPA report, they commonly complain about rent expenses and many mention that it is half of their salaries. Similarly, Ucarol (2023) highlights the difficulty in affording shelter among white-collar workers and the growing prevalence of shared housing and continued cohabitation with family members among white-collar workers, reflecting a broader inability to sustain the life standards once imagined as middle class. In the end, the tendency toward emigration is rapidly growing among white-collar workers. According to the IPA (2025) report, many actively search for opportunities abroad, seeing migration as a response to deepening insecurity.

Notably, the precarious conditions of white-collar workers are not limited to declining salaries and job insecurity. Long and flexible working hours, mobbing, constant performance pressure, and a growing sense of meaninglessness or sense of alienation have also become sources of stress and dissatisfaction (Bora et al. 2011; Senturk 2013). Yavas’s (2020) study, which focuses on white-collar professionals in managerial positions, shows that even those with high salaries suffer from a distinct set of burdens. Long working hours, constant high-performance demands, and bodily exhaustion have become central to white-collar life. Overwork, he argues, leads to multiple forms of distress: it intensifies work-family conflict, damages physical and mental health, drains the joy from leisure, weakens non-professional social ties, and results in a pervasive sense of emptiness, lack of fulfillment, and even self-blame among elite professionals.

Significantly, the sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness among white-collar professionals stems not only from financial crises and growing precarity but also from persistent political instability that has unfolded alongside them. Especially since the 2010s, escalating authoritarianism has manifested through the violent repression of the Gezi Park protests, the bombings of 2015, the failed coup attempt in 2016 followed by a prolonged state of emergency, a constitutional referendum that drastically expanded Erdogan’s powers, as well as the imprisonment of opposition figures and the systematic silencing and criminalization of dissent. Together, these developments marked a deepening authoritarianism under the neoliberal Erdogan

regime, which has taken the shape of authoritarian neoliberalism (Altınors and Akcay 2022; Tansel 2018). This context is an important source of discontent for secular urban middle classes, especially considering that their lifestyles are directly targeted by the conservative-Islamist Erdogan (Erkmen 2021). Indeed, for the secular middle classes, this feeling of being surrounded and threatened by conservative policies and authoritarianism is as strong a motivation for migrating abroad as financial instability (Ozturk and Baser 2021).

The white-collar men who are the subjects of this study are part of this historical background, situated within the failed local promises, contradictions, and transformations of neoliberalism in Turkey. This thesis examines how they engage with and navigate these conditions.

1.2 The Neoliberal Subject and “His” Gender

In the lectures he gave between 1978 and 1979, Foucault (2008) suggested that neoliberalism changed the primary relationship between market actors. The essential relationship between all actors became competition rather than exchange. This shift rendered individuals into human capital that they are obligated to entrepreneurialize. Critically, this obligation to increase self-value is a "constant and ubiquitous aim" (Brown 2015, 36). It is constant, in the sense that it never reaches an endpoint; it is ubiquitous in the sense that this aim penetrates every domain of life.

Hence, according to Foucault (2008) and scholars who follow the Foucauldian line, such as Brown (2015) and Collier (2011), neoliberalism extends beyond being merely an economic system; it becomes a "governing rationality" that changes how humans think about themselves and others. The thinking of the neoliberal subject is characterized by the expansion of market rationality from the economic domain into all aspects of our lives. The neoliberal subject, akin to *homo economicus*, perceives their life, encompassing family relationships, health, friendships, and body, just like a business to manage and improve (Brown 2015). This subject is characterized as a rational, self-governing, and self-interested subject who responds to incentives, driven to develop their human capital as an "entrepreneur of himself" Salzinger (2020, 198).

While economists often portray 'homo oeconomicus' as a genderless figure, Brown (2015) argues that 'feminists know well that when scholars presume their subject has no gender, this is far from the last word on the matter' (100). *Homo oeconomicus* indeed possess a gender, he is socially male and masculine (Brown 2015; Folbre

2009; Garlick 2020; Salzinger 2016, 2020). The neoliberal subject, needs others to care for his inevitable dependencies, especially in the context of neoliberal state withdrawal from the provision of social welfare, while he pursues his self-interest and rationally develops his own human capital. These "others" are women. Thus, it is the gendered division of labor that enables homo oeconomicus to embody a self-interested "nature," making him socially male.

Rationality has long been one of the core characteristics of hegemonic masculinities as it reinforces the claim that rational men's ideas serve for the interests of all. As a result, it has been a useful tool to ensure male dominance (Connell 2005). In contrast, women have been associated with emotionality and irrationality. Likewise, irrational consumerism has been associated with women (Robinson 2018). Garlick (2020), through a critical reading of Mises' (1944) *Bureaucracy*, a seminal text in the development of neoliberalism, argues that this feminine desire is a source of insecurity under neoliberalism. Mises (1944) values the market as a force through which "men" can freely realize themselves. However, he also underlines that the market is a site of uncertainty. He points out consumers who are full of unpredictable whims and fancies as the source of this uncertainty in the market. That is to say, in Mises's text, consumers appear as irrational figures that make markets ultimately insecure for entrepreneurs (Mises 1944, 21-22). Critically, Garlick (2020) points out that, in Mises's text, the irrational consumer figure is illustrated as a feminine one pointing out the longstanding association of femininity and consumerism. The market itself, on the other hand, is imagined as "the realm of the ultimate, unmarked masculine, as the autonomous miracle of abstract rationality" (Salzinger 2016, 21). In this context, masculinity plays a pivotal role in addressing the insecurity neoliberalism generates (Garlick 2020, 21). Individuals, acting like homo oeconomicus, adopt market rationality to cope with the insecurity arising from the feminine impulses of consumers. In this way, they achieve the affective state of the individual which Mises (1944) describes as "he is optimistic in the awareness of his own strength. He has self-confidence and is full of hope" (93).

Self-confidence or self-reliance emerges as an essential quality of neoliberal entrepreneur subjects in not only Mises but also other big theoreticians of neoliberalism such as Frank Hyneman Knight and Friedrich Hayek. Similar to Mises, Knight (1921) in his classic work, "Risk, Uncertainty and Profit" argues that the unpredictability of future consumer demands makes uncertainty an unavoidable part of entrepreneurship². Therefore, Knight (1942) says "the entrepreneur is simply a

2. The other factor Knight (1921) indicates as the source of uncertainty is the requirement of the labor force for entrepreneurial activity. Knight emphasizes workers are not perfectly controllable (271-272).

specialist in risk-taking or uncertainty bearing" (129). In these conditions of the market, he underlines "the diversity among men in degree of confidence in their judgment and powers" (269) and points out the entrepreneur as the one with high self-confidence. Almost identically, Hayek (2001) asserts that 'willingness to bear risks' is among the virtues required for an 'individualist society' as risk is an unavoidable part of entrepreneurship, which individuals need to take and manage in order to improve. Significantly, another virtue Hayek mentions as being necessary for the individualist society is 'self-reliance' that enables individuals to act in the market freely despite the spontaneity and uncertainties inherent to the market. Hence, in all three important neoliberal economists' writings, self-confidence is appreciated as the locomotory quality of the entrepreneur that enables him to take action despite the inevitable risks intrinsic to the market. That is to say, thanks to his self-confidence, the entrepreneur can take risks which are a prerequisite of profit-making.

Indeed, Salzinger's (2020) ethnographic study on the finance market, empirically highlights the gendered nature of the homo oeconomicus. She reveals that masculine performances and discourses are integral to how the finance market functions. Nearly all traders are men, and risk-taking which is central to the finance market, takes shape as a masculine act. This is further reflected in the emphasis on high testosterone levels among traders, often seen as the driving force behind taking extreme risks and exaggerating market movements, particularly during the 2008 financial crisis. Masculine bodies emerged as a possible reason behind the crisis because "homo economicus was a man all along" (Salzinger 2020, 209).

1.3 Masculinity and Men's Bodies

1.3.1 The Male Body as the Marker of Distinction

The male body, often considered the source of masculinity, has an essential ideological function. It naturalizes the gender differences by presenting masculine traits as inherent to biological men and inaccessible to women (Connell 2005, 45-46). The ideology of gender binarism frames male and female bodies as categorically distinct while most of the differences attributed to male and female bodies are rather a continuum (Fausto-Sterling 2000). Biological essentialist views treat gender differences as being predetermined by biology and women and men as distinct kinds of humans (Saguy and Williams 2022). Connell (2005) argues that biology works to naturalize gender order by emphasizing the differences between male and female bodies and

obscuring similarities, particularly as religion’s capacity to justify gender ideology is undermined. In line with this, Thomas Laqueur (1992), in his classic work *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud*, reveals how biology contributed to the transition from a one-sex model, which sees male and female bodies as two different versions of each other, to a two-sex model that understands them as inherently distinct categories in the early modern period. A more recent scientific trend that reinforces gender-binary ideology is evolutionary psychology, which explains gendered behavior through genes shaped by evolutionary forces and thus naturalizes an unequal gender order (Connell 2005; Larregue and Lavau 2025).

Bodies, although they vary along a continuum, are disciplined according to the binary gender model by social institutions such as schools, law, and the family. A direct and visible example of this disciplinary intervention is the treatment of intersex bodies to make them conform to the two-sex/gender model (Fausto-Sterling 2000; Karkazis 2020). A more subtle but much more widespread disciplinary technique is sport. Theberge (2000) shows how gendered bodies are constructed through exercise regimes that are designed differently for men and women. Sports play a particularly important role in the construction of masculine bodies and identities, starting from childhood (Drummond 2019; Messner 1990a, 1995). Through sport, men masculinize their bodies by increasing muscularity and bodily strength—traits that are culturally disassociated from women and female bodies (Connell 2005; Dworkin and Wachs 2009). This ideological role of sport is so strong that the participation of women in male-dominated sports, and the muscular, strong, and athletic bodies of female athletes, are often seen as a challenge to dominant gender ideology (Messner 1988).

1.3.2 The Cartesian Split: Masculine Mind, Feminine Body

While the male body plays a central role in differentiating men from women and naturalizing the gender order, the relationship between masculinity and the body is complex and even contradictory. Hierarchical binaries such as man/woman, mind/body, culture/nature, and reason/emotion mirror one another. Hence, men have been linked to the disembodied mind, reason, and the role of agents of civilization (Gardiner 2004; Hearn 2012; Lloyd 2002; Seidler 2013, 2024). Although the opposition between the masculine mind and the feminine body can be traced back to ancient traditions, such as Plato’s separation of reason and the body, Seidler (2013, 2024) argues that the Cartesian mind-body split is particularly characteristic of modernity. Importantly, while these gendered dichotomies are rooted in Western thought, they

have spread worldwide through colonialism, modernization processes, and globalization (Connell 2006; McClintock 2013; Said 1978).

In Descartes and Kant, the mind and reason are presented as what defines humanity and distinguishes it from animals, marking their superiority. Men, associated with reason, come to represent the universal human—superior to both nature and women, who are seen as closer to nature (Bordo 1986; Gardiner 2004; Lloyd 2002; Seidler 2013). This configuration legitimizes men’s authority over “emotional women” and their dominance in decision-making positions, as it supports the idea that rational men’s perspectives serve the interests of all (Connell 2005, 164-166).

Even if masculinity is thought to be disembodied and associated with the mind side of the Cartesian split, men are still bodily beings. Their bodies—seen as the source of emotions and representing the animal and feminine sides of men—pose a threat to masculine rationality. For Descartes, the body is a site of unfreedom that distracts us from the goals set by reason. Thus, men, as agents of civilization are required to ensure that their minds properly control and dominate their "inner nature", i.e., their bodies—just as civilized men are expected to control and dominate the natural world (Seidler 2013).

Remarkably, what allows real men with tangible material bodies, to be seen as bearers of rationality and civilization, is not that they are less physical than women, but that their bodies are controlled by their minds. For instance, Freud who claims that men are morally superior to women attributes this not to a weaker *id*—that is, not to weaker impulses, desires, or animality- but to a more developed *superego* (Tapper 1986). Correspondingly, Kant argues that “men” must be disciplined to transform their “animality into humanity” just as “horses and dogs are broken in” (Kant 1899 as cited in Gros 2020, 19) In parallel, Durkheim sees the body as the source of individual drives and impulses, which he considers a threat to sociality. According to him, social life must transform the bodily individual into a moral and social person by liberating him from physical forces (Durkheim 1995, 274).

While the mind is seen as the source of identity, i.e. what defines who we are as famous *cogito, ergo sum* saying implies; that men’s relationship with their bodies is one of possession. In other words, we *are* minds and *have* bodies; and the latter is subordinated to the former. Accordingly, Seidler (1997, 2013) highlights that the control of the body is fundamental to modern masculinity. Men perceive their bodies as instruments or machines they command. This attitude is particularly evident in studies on men and sports. For instance, Messner (1990*b*) reveals that male athletes see their bodies as tools. This alienating masculine relationship with their bodies often turns to violence against them, resulting in damaging their health

and emotional life. Connell (1990) examining the life story of the Australian athlete "Iron Man", shows that for athletes, controlling the body and the emotions like fear and anxiety thought to stem from it, is a principal task in achieving athletic goals. Therefore, she argues, "the decisive triumph" of the athlete is over his own body. Although his body is a "magnificent machine," it only has meaning if it is "subordinated to the will to win" (Connell 1990, 95). Similarly, Drummond (2019) emphasizes the role of sport in disciplining boys into men and notes that they frequently refer to their bodies as machines.

Crucially, not all men are seen as capable of subordinating their bodies to their will. Seidler (1997) emphasizes that it is the white middle-class masculinity that is associated with reason, while other masculinities-such as black, Middle Eastern, and working-class masculinities-are excluded from this configuration. For instance, in the West black men are portrayed as primitive, lacking self-control, animal-like, and oversexualized (Fine et al. 1997; Hall 2001). In contrast to the white male athletes discussed by Messner (1990*a*) and Connell (1990), black male athletes are depicted as possessing strong bodies that are not under control, as captured in the slogan "power is nothing without control" (Carrington 2002). Similarly, the Orientalist view of Middle Eastern men portrays them as irrational, hypersexual, and emotional (Boone 2014; Khalid 2014). Working-class masculinity has historically been defined through the body, in contrast to the disembodied masculinity of the middle class. Unlike middle-class men's intellectual labor, working-class men are tied to manual labor and value creation through their bodies (Baron 2006; Connell 2005; Hakim 2015).

1.4 From Disembodiment to Embodiment: Male Body in Neoliberal Era

1.4.1 Turn to the Body and Body as the Site of Neoliberal Self-Construction

Starting from the 1970s, traditionally disembodied men have become increasingly embodied. On a broader level, this change might be attributed to the dominance of neoliberal logic of "commodification of everything" (Harvey 2007), including masculine selves, performances, and bodies (Bordo 1999; Ozbay 2017; Wolfman, Hearn, and Yeadon-Lee 2021). Additionally, the neoliberal ethos of self-entrepreneurship that prescribes the subject to manage and innovate themselves as if it is a firm, does not preclude the body from being the object of this endeavor. Consequently, in

the neoliberal era, the way men perceive their bodies significantly transformed. Under neoliberalism, they no longer perceive their bodies as unmarked, authentic, and natural. Instead, the neoliberal man's body becomes a negotiable entity to manage rationally and invest in. It is now seen as a plastic surface, which men constantly reshape according to prevailing aesthetic standards (Raun and Petersen 2025). In contrast to the conventional configuration that "men look at women and women watch themselves being looked at" (Berger 1972, 47), it turns into an object of the gaze, open to criticisms and commentary from others, and is constantly constructed within the interaction (Dworkin and Wachs, 2009; Ozbay, 2017).³

Significantly, numerous scholars who examine the role of the body in contemporary societies (Giddens 1991; Shilling 2003; Turner 2009) argue that there is a growing preoccupation with the body throughout society. According to Giddens (1991), in what he calls late modernity, the self became a reflexive project, as "we are, not what we are, but what we make of ourselves" (75). Individuals constantly and reflexively construct their self-identities, engaging in what Giddens terms "reflexive self-fashioning." In this project of self-making, the constant and reflexive construction of the body—while traditional sources of meaning and self-identity dissolve—is of central importance, and "we have become responsible for the design of our bodies" (Giddens 1991, 102). While following Giddens, but giving the body even greater precedence, Shilling (2003) points out that the body is a project that individuals constantly work on in late modernity, and that body projects "become increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity" (1). Similarly, Featherstone (1982) says that in the consumer culture of late capitalism, bodies turn into medium of self-expression. Individuals struggle to cultivate a marketable self through attention to the surface of the body.

According to Giddens (1991), lifestyle choices, including the consumption and selection of commodities from an abundance of options, are integral to the construction of self-identity. Crucially, this process also involves designing the body through consumption. In this context, body technologies—such as various exercise and diet regimes, plastic surgeries, and other practices—have proliferated. Drawing attention to this phenomenon, Shilling (2003) argues that today's body-conscious individuals face a state of chronic reflexivity, continually negotiating between countless bodily options and struggling with uncertainty about the type and extent of interventions to undertake on their bodies.

3. Notably, others suggest that the objectification of male bodies might not be unique to the neoliberal era. For instance, Yildiz (2015) examines the late Ottoman "sportsman" photographs, which portrayed young men shirtless or in tight-fitting athletic outfits, flexing their muscles and exhibiting their bodies.

As male bodies have become increasingly objectified and men have been called to work on themselves and their bodies, their body consciousness prominently increased. Consequently, men's engagement with bodywork has grown in both intensity and variety. In Western societies, the beauty industry has witnessed a rapid growth in male consumerism (Bordo 1999; Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Research shows that male bodywork now involves skincare, cosmetic surgery, gym attendance, grooming, and dieting (Atkinson 2008; Barber 2008; Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Frank 2014; Holliday and Cairnie 2007; Pope Jr. et al. 2001). Moreover, men's interest in fashion and consumption of fashion-related products has significantly increased (Bordo 1999; De Casanova 2015; Kang, Sklar, and Johnson 2011).

Reflecting these changes, the *metrosexual* emerged in the 1990s as a masculine archetype which is an urban, consumer-oriented man who is into fashion and beauty work, deeply concerned about his appearance, and enjoys being the object of the gaze (Coad 2008; Simpson 1994). A more recent form of masculinity reflecting the objectification of male bodies is the *spornosexual*. He is a later version of the metrosexual, but his primary concern is not clothes, but his very own body, which he eagerly self-objectifies often through posting on social media. His primary sites of bodywork are working out and following a diet designed for a lean and muscular physique (Hakim 2018; Simpson 2014).

1.4.2 Explaining Men's Embodiment

So, the shift in men's relationship with their bodies and society's changing perception of male bodies can be interpreted as part of a general trend in neoliberal societies influencing both men and women. These overarching societal dynamics help explain shifts in men's embodied subjectivities as part of larger transformations affecting society as a whole. However, while the contemporary culture of the body has heightened bodily consciousness for both men and women, it is important to note that the female body has long been under the gaze, subjected to eroticization and objectification. The shift concerning men's bodies appears more paradigmatic: bodies that were once unmarked are now marked. Therefore, some scholars, without contradicting these broad societal dynamics and often complementing them, provide accounts focusing specifically on men.

1.4.2.1 Consumer capitalism's discovery of the male body

Bordo (1999) draws attention to the presentation of male bodies as sexual objects in popular culture. She argues that this phenomenon is a result of consumer capitalism's discovery of the male body's "untapped resources" (18). Objectification of the male body through mainstream commercialization of masculine aesthetics served two functions for the beauty industry: first, it targeted gay male consumers whose purchasing power was newly detected. Second, the popularization of highly masculine but objectified male images changed the aesthetic norms for men, eroding the taboo against male vanity and expanding the consumer base of the beauty industry to include straight men (Bordo 1999; Karmakar 2021). In this respect, Bordo (1999) directs attention to the supply side in explaining men's increasing body consciousness and increasing beauty consumption.

1.4.2.2 Gender relations and changing masculinities

Inclusive masculinity and hybrid masculinities approaches, although competing approaches in men and masculinities scholarship, explain men's increasing concern regarding their appearances (together with their other behaviors, tastes, and ideologies associated with femininity and gay masculinity) based on changing gender relations. Inclusive masculinity theory proposed by Eric Anderson (2009), directs its focus on the social dynamic between men, specifically gay and straight men. He argues that in the West homophobia sharply declined. As a result, straight men felt much freer to engage in behaviors associated with gay men such as beauty work (Robinson and Anderson 2022, 80; Anderson 2013).

The hybrid masculinities approach perceives men's feminine bodily qualities and practices as a response to the rise of feminism and LGBTI+ movements. Through the appropriation of such practices and qualities, middle-class white straight men attempt to reassure their challenged hegemony as these practices allow these men to present themselves as progressive and symbolically distance themselves from racialized and working-class masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Bridges 2014). For instance, Barber (2008) shows that heterosexual middle-class men, through the purchase of salon hair care, distinguish themselves from "grease monkey" working-class men who go barbershop and talking about "beer and pussy" there (469-473).

1.4.2.3 Gym culture as a response to gendered challenge

Other scholars focus on men's gym attendance and their aspiration for muscular bodies, often linking these behaviors to a *crisis of masculinity*. This crisis is commonly attributed to the rise of feminism, women's entry into traditionally male-dominated areas, and the decline of the male breadwinner role (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). For working-class men in particular, it is also traced back to deindustrialization, which deprived them of opportunities to perform manual labor, long a fundamental component of working-class masculinities (Nickson and Korczynski 2009). These accounts suggest men turn to the body as the signifier of the essential difference between men and women. Specifically, through gym attendance that reinforces masculine bodily characteristics such as muscularity, men embrace the physical power and the masculine body to reaffirm the challenged masculinity (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Gibbs, Salinas, and Turnock 2022; Heywood 1998; Wacquant 1995; ?).

Critically, the crisis of masculinity is typically discussed in relation to working-class masculinities. Moreover, when gyms are mentioned alongside a crisis related to men, it is often discussed as a hypermasculine performance led by a desire to build hypermasculine bodies (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Wacquant 1995). Hakim (2015) critiques this generalization and emphasizes that gym culture cuts vertically across social classes in the UK. His research (Hakim 2015, 2018) focuses on young middle-class spornosexuals who are obsessed with building lean and muscular bodies during the era of neoliberal austerity. These men are particularly self-objectifying and highly concerned with appearance. Therefore, the intent behind their gym attendance is not necessarily to gain physical strength or project a hypermasculine image. Instead, Hakim (2015, 2018) argues that these young middle-class men resort to the gym to create value through their bodies—a form of value-creation associated with women, working-class, and racialized men—when their traditional breadwinning capacities are undermined. Thus, Hakim (2018) illustrates that men turn to the gym in response to a gendered crisis, but not in a hypermasculine way; rather, arguably in a feminine way.

1.4.2.4 A reminder: continuity of traditional masculinities

Significantly, it must be noted that when pointing out new trends, I do not mean that the old ones have suddenly disappeared altogether. Traditional masculine ideals, although eroded, still persist. For instance, Bordo (1999) reveals that while some brands, such as Calvin Klein, unapologetically sell images of objectified and

softening male bodies, others, like Dockers, consider male consumers' concerns about appearing feminine or vain, drawing on remnants of traditional masculinities. Similarly, beauty products are repackaged "for men" with masculine colors and designs and are marketed as health products to avoid threatening their masculinity (Bordo 1999; Tungate 2008). In parallel, some men show a tendency to frame their beauty work in instrumental terms, such as health or hygiene, as a way to distance themselves from feminization (Frank 2014; Gill, Henwood, and Mclean 2005; Ricciardelli, Clow, and White 2010). This reminds us that old and new masculine ideals coexist and are likely to be in tension with one another.

1.5 Neoliberal Economy and Men's Aesthetic Labor

The emergence of the highly body-conscious masculine subject is also a response to the demands of neoliberal economic restructuring, characterized by financialization, deindustrialization, and the expansion of the service sector (Castells 2000*a*). In today's labor market, where service sector jobs dominate, especially those involving direct interaction with customers, the employee's identity has become an integral part of the work itself (Leidner 1993; McDowell 2000). In such roles, the body of the service provider becomes part of the service delivered, elevating the importance of bodywork and making aesthetic labor central to contemporary laboring (Wolkowitz 2006). Aesthetic labor refers to the embodiment of a specific corporeality—encompassing body shape, posture, movement, and speaking style—that meets the aesthetic demands of a job. This corporeality enables workers to “look good” and “sound right” (Warhurst, Nickson, and Witz 2003).

Remarkably, the service sector job label includes a wide range of jobs that differ in status and conditions. Castells (2000*b*) underlines that the service sector job marker is characteristically polarized between programmable labor—educated white-collar professionals, typically working in the high-tech or finance sector—and "generic labor"—less educated, unskilled, and substitutable labor. However, what is common for these two workers is the significance of bodily performance and personal features of the workers in the sold service "whether it is financial advice of the most arcane nature or the purchase of a cappuccino in a city centre coffee shop", McDowell (2005, 20) says.

Middle-class professionals are more in compliance with these demands of the new economy. They are the main target of the beauty market that expands through men. The metrosexual archetype is typically a young urban professional. Beauty

practices are often accepted as a part of professional manhood (Barber 2008; Frank 2014). McDowell (2005) describes the merchant bank office as follows:

Here concerns with weight, accent, and clothes, the production of a particular version of the dominant or most highly valorized masculinity characterized by a tight, trim, white, middle-class body appropriately garbed in dark suits and crisp white shirts, is what is required by the employer. . . Here young men in the main, but increasingly young women, from the right background, the right school, and with a good degree from a good university—all essentially middle-class attributes in contemporary Britain—are recruited to persuade clients that they (the bankers) know best. Thus as interviewees told me ‘we have only one thing to sell, and that is ourselves’ (22).

Remarkably, McDowell (2005), resonating with the hybrid masculinities notion mentioned above, observes that these white-collar employee performances are a combination of stereotypical masculine and feminine characteristics.

De Casanova (2015), in her study on male white-collar workers’ clothing, points out another aspect of the matter. She argues that in the contemporary service economy, the measurement of one’s success or productivity is not clear and objective. In such a context, *appearing* competent, professional, and successful gains greater significance. Although formal employee evaluations usually do not explicitly mention dress and appearance, male workers in Casanova’s study report that they feel that they are evaluated based on these while other benchmarks of success are vague. Remarkably, Casanova highlights that this situation, together with high job insecurity increases men’s conformity to dress codes. That is to say, men strictly avoid making mistakes in their clothing, since their appearance plays a decisive role in how they are valued as employees, and their jobs are not secure (3-5).

For working-class men, in contrast to their white-collar counterparts, the pressures of the new economy are seen as a significant disruption. The deindustrialization of the industrial cities of the Fordist era, deprived men of industrial jobs that had been central to working-class masculine identity. These jobs not only provided secure employment and a breadwinner wage—which is fundamental to the patriarchal role—but also enabled them to “do gender” through the physical performance of manual labor, a core element of working-class masculinity (Dudley 1997; Osterman 1999). However, the service sector jobs that emerged under neoliberalism failed to compensate for the loss of industrial employment—either in quantity or in quality. These jobs tend to be insecure, demand substitutable labor, and offer lower pay (Harvey 2007; McDowell 2003). Moreover, they require workers to perform soft skills

typically associated with femininity: being deferential, caring, polite, and smiling. Working-class men usually struggle with this feminine-coded embodied performance (Leidner 1993; McDowell 2003; Nickson and Korczynski 2009). Indeed, women are often preferred as ideal workers of these jobs in both the deindustrialized global North (McDowell 2003), and the global South—where the service sector expanded alongside export-oriented manufacturing (Islam 2022; Ozbay 2016*a*; Radhakrishnan and Solari 2015).

Nonetheless, it must be noted that some scholars emphasize that working-class men do not consistently resist the demands of the new economy. Roberts (2013), for instance, illustrates that in the retail sector, some working-class men cultivate softer versions of masculinity to better align with the expectations of service work. Similarly, Wolfman, Hearn, and Yeadon-Lee (2021) show that both middle- and working-class men incorporate certain feminine performances into their marketable personas, albeit without fully internalizing them.

1.6 Male Bodily Ideals: Lean and Muscular

What are the male bodily ideals that body-conscious neoliberal men aspire to? What kinds of bodies do men seek to attain through various forms of bodywork—particularly gym attendance, which is the main subject of this thesis and arguably central to the bodywork practices of contemporary men?

One important determinant of contemporary men’s bodily ideals is their warming relationship with gay masculinities and femininities, as articulated by inclusive and hybrid masculinities approaches. This has led to men’s increasing engagement with beauty work traditionally associated with women, as previously discussed. In terms of bodily ideals, this shift is proposed to have pushed male bodily ideals toward leaner and slimmer forms. According to Anderson (2009), the originator of inclusive masculinity theory, the cause of this change was the dissolution of a homohysteria culture—where men strongly feared being perceived as gay. He argues that the intense homophobia triggered by the HIV crisis caused men to adopt hypermasculine and homophobic behaviors as a coping mechanism. This, in turn, led to the idealization of hypermasculine, muscular bodies throughout 1980s America (Anderson 2009; Peterson and Anderson 2012). However, as homophobia began to decline in the West starting in the 1990s, Anderson (2009) argues that male bodily ideals shifted toward slimmer physiques. To illustrate this shift, he contrasts the young Leonardo DiCaprio of the late 1990s with Sylvester Stallone’s hypermasculine body,

highlighting the changing ideals (90). In line with Anderson, Bridges (2009), one of the main proponents of hybrid masculinities approach, shows that the symbolic value of large bodybuilder physiques is often restricted to the gym, as bodybuilders report being teased on the street. Green (2016) similarly argues that some men in martial arts gyms reject heavy musculature as a way to resist dominant masculine ideals and construct hybrid masculinities.

Crucially, the growing preference for leaner and/or slimmer male bodies over hyper-masculine physiques does not indicate that muscularity has lost its central role in masculine bodily ideals. On the contrary, muscularity remains an important masculine trait, and men continue to strongly desire muscular bodies. If there is any change in male ideals, it favors muscularity—evidenced by the steady increase in men’s gym attendance (Dworkin and Wachs 2009), and the rise of the spornosexual identity centered around fitness over the metrosexual identity centered around fashion (Hakim 2018; Simpson 2014). Nevertheless, today’s masculine ideals are defined not only by muscularity but also by low-fat percentage. Men aspire not for hyper-masculine muscular bodies that are symbols of masculine strength but for aesthetics of low-fat bodies with defined muscles that they self-objectify and present to the gaze of others (Bordo 1999; Hakim 2018; Hiramoto and Lai 2017).

The emphasis on fat-phobia seems to resonate with the broader rise of healthism in contemporary culture. Healthism, as a health-centered extension of neoliberal ideology, has two key characteristics. First, as a health-focused subversion of neoliberalism, it frames health as a matter of personal responsibility. From this perspective, health becomes the outcome of possessing neoliberal traits like self-control and self-discipline, while illness is seen as a failure to embody them. This makes health a moral imperative for the neoliberal subject. This configuration turns health into a moral imperative for the neoliberal subject (Crawford 1980; Halse 2009; Nash 2018). Second, healthism associates and even equates health with appearance. Health, thus, turns into a representational rather than an instrumental category. In other words, looking healthy becomes more important than being healthy in the conventional sense. Within this framework, *healthy* and *sexy* are conflated, and an aesthetic body becomes a direct symbol of well-being and morality (Nash 2018). In contrast, fat is coded as both unhealthy and unattractive, making it a symbol of moral failure in the neoliberal order. Moreover, it is strongly associated with femininity (Norman 2013). As a result, the primary task for men is building a lean body rather than a purely muscular one. Still, the concept of leanness—referring to low body fat—does not exclude muscularity. The ideal male body today is often described as both lean and muscular. Gym attendance of men mostly targets lean and muscular bodies (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Gill, Henwood, and Mclean 2005; Labre 2005), and

sometimes, the desire for leanness overrides muscularity (Dahane 2025; Rothmann 2022).

1.7 Neoliberal Masculinities in Non-West

Neoliberalism, as an ideological and economic order, has exerted dominance over the global landscape order starting from the mid-70s (Harvey 2007). Regarding its influence on men and masculinities, the literature identifies recurring themes, often framed under the umbrella of a “crisis of masculinity.” The erosion of the breadwinner role, the rise of women as ideal workers in the globally expanding service economies and export-oriented industries of the Global South, and women’s increasing visibility in previously male-dominated domains have been highlighted as key concerns by scholars working in various national contexts, including the UK (McDowell 2003), Japan (Kumagai 2013), India (Ray 2021), Russia (Walker 2022), Mexico (Salzinger 2016), the US (Fine et al. 1997), and Middle East (Ghannam 2022). Significantly, comparative and cross-cultural works underscore the global resonance of these themes—such as Cornwall, Kariotis, and Lindisfarne’s (2016) ethnographic collection “Masculinities under Neoliberalism” and Radhakrishnan and Solari’s (2015) comparative study of men in post-Soviet states, South Asia, and the US.

Although much of the scholarship on men and their bodies has concentrated on Western contexts, men’s turn to bodies—the proliferation of their bodily concerns, self-objectifying performances, and neoliberal self-making centered on the body—seems to be a global phenomenon. For instance, Hird (2009) in their study on white-collar men in urban China, shows that bodywork takes an important role in the creation of new professional masculinities and the relevance of the metrosexual archetype in that context. Similarly, Song and Lee (2010) argue that “the body becomes a site of self-expression and projection, reinforced by consumerism” for upwardly mobile middle-class men in China (169-170). The emergence of self-objectifying ideals such as the spornosexual has also been documented in non-Western settings, including Singapore (Hiramoto and Lai 2017), and South Africa (Rothmann 2022).

These trends extend into Middle Eastern masculinities as well, especially in urban settings. In Beirut, for example, men increasingly leave traditional barbershops for beauty centers offering stylish haircuts and other beauty services like skin-care treatments (Aghacy 2004). Similarly, gym participation, driven by a desire to build lean and muscular bodies, has become popular among men in Cairo (Ghannam 2013)

and among Iranian university students in the midsize city of Kerman (Garousi, Khajeh Dolatabad, and Garrusi 2017). Young men in Kuwait, driven by global consumerist culture, consume luxury fashion despite it being coded as vain and feminine in traditional Muslim culture (Al-Mutawa 2016).

1.8 Men, Masculinities, and Body in Neoliberal Turkey

Taken together, these studies from non-Western contexts, indicate that the neoliberal reconfiguration of masculinities and male embodiment is a pattern observable across Western, non-Western, and Middle Eastern settings—categories within which Turkey can simultaneously be situated. Indeed, existing research on men and masculinities in Turkey illuminates the permeation of masculinities by neoliberal values. In the rest of this section, I will review the relevant literature on the entanglement of neoliberalism and masculinity in the Turkish context. While some of this literature may not directly engage with the body, I include these works insofar as they address themes such as hybrid/inclusive masculinities, breadwinning, and entrepreneurial selfhood. These themes have been shown to have embodied dimensions in other contexts, as I discussed in previous sections, and are therefore relevant for this thesis examining neoliberal Turkish masculine embodiment.

1.8.1 Turkish Men's Neoliberal Self-Projects

Ozyegin's (2015) influential study on neoliberalism and masculinities in Turkey focuses on upwardly mobile male university students who were born in the 1980s, at the onset of neoliberal reforms in Turkey and came of age in the 2000s during the rapid neoliberalization under the AKP government. She asks what kind of gendered subjects these neoliberalization processes produced. She shows that these young men disown traditional sources of identity and constitutively distance themselves from their fathers' patriarchal masculinities. Instead, they engage in a neoliberal self-making project, embracing values such as flexibility, entrepreneurship, risk-taking, and individualism. Particularly, the neoliberal aspiration for self-actualization becomes the central index of manhood for them. They devalue their fathers' careers—defined by life-long employment in the state sector—as inhibiting and conformist. Professional achievement in white-collar jobs, or ideally setting up their own business through risk-taking and entrepreneurship, becomes the pathway to self-actualization and personal growth.

Similarly, Ozbay (2016*a*), analyzing Turkish drawn stories featuring male protagonists, highlights the emergence of a new masculinity rooted in neoliberal subjectivity, characterized by neoliberal rationality, self-responsibility, self-governance, and self-vigilance. Crucially, while Ozyegin's study points out that the self becomes a project for men in neoliberal Turkey, Ozbay (2016*a*) emphasizes the never-ending nature of neoliberal self-making: "good masculinity and overachieving men are knit together in the image of a rationalist economic actor, who sees himself as a project to invest in continuously and the world as a setting for ruthless competition" (105). Hence, these men constantly and self-reflexively construct themselves according to ever-changing conditions. While doing this, they do not adhere to any social, political, or moral ideals, acting solely individualistically. Importantly, this self-making does not happen smoothly, and the protagonists he analyzed are not ideal neoliberal subjects. Emphasizing the notion of self-vigilance, Ozbay (2016*a*) points out that this constant self-making and self-reflexivity often result in convulsions of "helpless inconclusiveness."

In other studies, Ozbay focuses on queer men and demonstrates that neoliberal subjectivity penetrates diverse queer masculinities. He reveals that upper-middle-class urban gay men strategically construct themselves as self-responsible, successful, and individualistic neoliberal citizens, distancing themselves from political solidarity, especially queer activism, in alignment with the ethos of neoliberalism. In this way, they seek respectability as moral neoliberal citizens. Bodily practices in the form of upper-class consumption and gym membership (marking both self-responsibility and the conventionally gendered body) are a significant part of this effort (Ozbay 2022).

In his ethnographic study focusing on self-identified straight slum rent boys who have sex with men, Ozbay (2017) demonstrates that neoliberal subjectification cuts across men of different class positions and sexualities. These men engage in a self-reflexive process through which they reconsider their manhood—once perceived as given or natural—and strategically reconstruct their masculine selves to derive benefit. Their masculinities and gender performances become manipulable, flexible, and desirable sources of profit. Ozbay underscores this phenomenon as a consequence of the commodification of all aspects of life under neoliberalism, including masculine selves, performances, and bodies.

1.8.2 New Men and New Women

1.8.2.1 Constructing new men through partnership with new women

The pivot of Ozyegin's (2015) above-mentioned study is this self-actualization requires a gendered other, specifically recognition of individualistic young women who are unlike their selfless mothers. These women are described as possessing "a charisma characterized by independence, high intelligence, brightness, cultivation, risk tolerance, and self-confidence in speech and style" resonating with neoliberal ideals (121). These men desire the recognition of these women, and the new masculine self they strive to construct is contingent on such validation. Crucially, Ozyegin (2015) stresses that this project is a contradictory one. "Selfish" charismatic women whose recognition is a must for this new manhood, also threaten these young guys' masculinity, making them feel unworthy, unloved, and unrecognized, unlike the selfless "energy-giving" girls.

Ozbay (2013) who searches for the hegemonic masculinity in Turkey, despite noting the plurality of the society and even hegemonic masculinities, argues that in Turkey what unites forms of hegemonic masculinities is their infusion by neoliberal logic and subjectivities. According to Ozbay (2013), among these neoliberal masculinities, a form of urban professional/white-collar masculinity is becoming hegemonic and idealized in Turkey.⁴ He characterizes this masculinity in terms of new middle-class occupations and financial status, and adds that "perhaps most importantly, [he] is married to or on the way to marrying a working woman and appears to largely believe in a superficial gender equality⁵" (194).

Parallel to this description, in his above-mentioned analysis of drawn stories, Ozbay (2016a) mentions male protagonists' incomppliance with hegemonic neoliberal masculinities as they do not have stable incomes and successful careers. Furthermore, he specifically emphasizes these men have difficulty sustaining stable relationships

4. Remarkably, despite masculinity studies in Turkey mainly revolve around militarism and nationalism and military service is often mentioned as a passage to hegemonic masculinities (Aciksoz 2012; Altinay 2004; Selek 2012), Ozbay points out the declining role of militarism and army as an institution to represent and shape hegemonic masculinity mainly due to its incomppliance to neoliberal entrepreneurship. He also highlights the declining capacity of the military to shape society, in contrast to its long-standing role as an agent of social engineering in Turkey. He also notes the growing expectation for the abolition of compulsory military service, an expectation that has been partially met through the introduction of expedited military service in exchange for payment in 2019. A recent work by Evren (2024) based on interviews with middle-class men who purchased this opportunity, shows that these men see compulsory military service as unnecessary and inefficient. They report their reluctance to be exposed to military discipline which was once considered necessary to turn a young man into proper manhood. (See also Aciksoz (2017) for the crisis of the militarism-masculinity nexus following the failed coup attempt in 2016.)

5. This part is excerpted from the original Turkish article and directly translated.

with women -which is fundamental to idealized neoliberal masculinities in Turkey. Therefore, he claims that they do not represent hegemonic masculinities in Turkey, where neoliberalism is intertwined with familialism under neoconservative AKP rule.

1.8.2.2 Dual earner model

The qualities—a serious relationship with a working woman and belief in superficial gender equality—Ozbay (2013) points out to be most important, resonate with Ozyegin’s (2015) upwardly mobile young interviewees who construct a new form of masculinity through romantic partnership with charismatic girls, and one of whom directly defines the partner he wants to be with as “a really successful business-woman, one who elicits everyone’s respect and who is very capable” (123). Hence, the traditional breadwinner model seems to lose its effect for the middle classes; at least the dual-earner model is not excluded from hegemonic masculinities. Although Bora et al. (2011) reveal that unemployment has a demasculinizing effect on white-collar men, this seems to stem not from the inability to provide alone, but from a failure to provide (together or alone) and to establish a successful career. In fact, they also show that unemployment is experienced as a gendered crisis by white-collar women, as being employed is seen as a key component of the modern and independent womanhood many aspire to (198).

1.8.2.3 Belief in gender equality or hybrid masculinities

It is critical that Ozbay’s (2013) definition also involves the belief in gender equality, although a superficial one. In that respect, it echoes the hybrid masculinities discussion. Indeed, men’s feminist-like, gender-equality-favoring approaches are also highly questioned by the hybrid masculinities literature. These approaches are thought to be ways to reassure masculine hegemony, which is threatened by the rise of feminism and queer movements (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Kandiyoti (2016) discusses the rise of male violence against women as an indicator of the weakened hegemony of patriarchy.⁶ She frames this phenomenon as an attempt at “masculinist restoration.” However, violence is not the only—nor the most sustainable—response available to men who want to maintain their dominant positions in the face of weakening masculine hegemony. A more sustainable response is the reconfiguration of

6. On this issue, see also Sayan-Cengiz’s (2024) work. She reveals that Islamist neo-conservative self-help writers glorify an imagined ideal of masculinity and blame men for deviating from this ideal. Although the project of making men "great again" is framed as women’s responsibility, these findings also support a crisis in masculinity’s capacity to generate consent.

masculinities in ways that produce consent for the reestablishment of hegemony—in other words, the production of new hegemonic masculinities. Indeed, in the West, hybridization is discussed as an effort toward this end (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). In Turkey, such attempts have been relatively underexplored, with a few notable exceptions. Ok's (2023) work on white-collar masculinities is an exception in this respect. He argues that these white-collar men engage in kitchen work as a performance of hybrid masculinities.

1.8.3 Neoliberal Masculinities in Turkey and Body

1.8.3.1 Service sector jobs and embodied performance

In the section on the demands of new economy service sector jobs from men, I have discussed how expanding service sector jobs demand an embodied, gendered performance from employees—both men and women. In these jobs, workers' bodily selves become part of the service provided, and they perform aesthetic labor by trying to look good and sound right (Leidner 1993; Warhurst, Nickson, and Witz 2003). These gendered performances are often a hybrid form of characteristically masculine and feminine characteristics (McDowell 2003; Wolfman, Hearn, and Yeadon-Lee 2021). Correspondingly, a male bank employee Bora et al. (2011) talk in their research on Turkish white-collar employees and report that "you shouldn't be too much of a man, you need to be an ideal urban person in banking. You need to blow yourself up, you need to dress well, the cigarette you smoke shouldn't be a cheap brand, you need to use expensive phones⁷" (294).

This demand for aesthetic labor/embodied performance also applies to lower-segment jobs in the service sector. In the Turkish context, Ozbay (2016*b*), in his ethnographic work on a shopping mall in Turkey, argues that there is a specific gender regime in malls where "men are less manly, women are more feminine" (80-81). Additionally, upper-tier retail shops demand their workers perform a new kind of masculinity which is polite, stylish, well-groomed, and good at building and maintaining relationships with both women and men, although many working-class men have difficulty in enacting this traditionally feminine performance.

7. This part is excerpted from the original Turkish text and directly translated.

1.8.3.2 The body as a site of neoliberal self-making

As previously mentioned, Ozbay's (2022; 2017) research on queer masculinities in Turkey highlights the body as a central element in neoliberal self-making projects. Although focusing on women, other studies show the prominence of the issue in the Turkish context. For instance, Sehlilikoglu (2021) demonstrates how middle-aged Turkish women use exercise to construct a new selfhood distinct from conventional Muslim femininity. Likewise, Liebelt's (2016) ethnography of beauty salons in Istanbul reveals how upwardly mobile pious women engage in corporeal self-making through practices of beauty consumption. Other research shows that healthism has emerged as a dominant ideology shaping perceptions of the body and health in Turkey (Aykan and Guvenç-Salgirli 2015). In this context, women appear as familial neoliberal subjects, assuming responsibility not only for their own health but also for that of their families without relying on the diminishing welfare state (Kalderon 2019; Ulker 2019).

In the context of straight masculinities, Ozipek (2013) highlights the increasing attention urban lower-class young men pay to their appearance. These individuals style their bodies through hairstyles, clothing, accessories, and tattoos. Ozipek argues that their bodies become expressive tools for creating a new urban lower-class masculine identity, one that diverges from stereotypical portrayals of low-class men as uncivilized. Another manifestation of Turkish men's growing preoccupation with the body is seen in the rising popularity of cosmetic surgery following global trends, as demonstrated by Sahinol and Tasdizen (2021). Their study on hair transplantation shows that, for men in Turkey, the procedure functions as a body-centered project of empowerment. Critically, the authors highlight how hair, as a biomaterial, may resist the intentions of medical intervention and, in turn, shape both the procedure and its outcome. For instance, qualities such as root strength, thickness, or density significantly influence the achievement of the desired aesthetic result. Consequently, men must negotiate between their ideals and the biological possibilities their hair allows. Reflecting the shift from traditional disembodied masculinities to more embodied ones, Polat (2020) demonstrates that (some) middle-class heterosexual men actively participate in assisted reproductive technological processes alongside women, in contrast to the conventional male role of being an outsider to reproductive matters. As part of performing the "new man," these men speak openly about intimate and embodied experiences. In resonance with this, andropause—a male-specific bodily condition—is increasingly medicalized and culturally marked as a site of masculine vulnerability further evidencing the embodied turn in contemporary masculinities in Turkey (Erol and Ozbay 2013).

1.8.3.3 Gym and the body of the ideal man in Turkey

In Turkey, the visibility of male bodies in the media has been increasing. Muscular and fit male bodies are commodified and objectified in advertisements and Turkish TV shows (Karacam and Koca 2016; Ozturk 2012). In men's magazines, the ideal man is portrayed as healthy and attractive. Men are encouraged to take responsibility for maintaining and improving their health and appearance through sport, fashion, and diet (Erdogan 2013; Turanci and Esiyok 2021). In line with this trend, Nuhurat's (2020) study on football fans shows that fans are paying increasing attention to the bodies of players. Fit bodies—accentuated by tighter jersey designs—are seen as indicators of professionalism, discipline, and merit.

Parallel to this growing visibility, gym participation has rapidly expanded in urban Turkey. Since 1993, when the first chain fitness center opened, both chain and independent gyms have proliferated and Turkey has become the leading country in Europe in terms of the growth rate of gym membership (Yildiz, Polat, and Yildiz 2021). Karacam and Koca (2016) shows that Turkish young male gym attendants are motivated by their desire to have bodies such as Brad Pitt's body in *Fight Club* movie and Turkish actor Kivanc Tatlitug. They report that having a well-built body helps them to be a more self-confident and respectable man. Similarly, Kavasoglu and Anderson's (2022) study on Turkish gay gym attendees, shows they strive to construct masculine bodies and increase self-confidence and attractiveness through gym attendance.

1.9 Methodology

1.9.1 Research Questions

In this thesis, my central research question is: How do white-collar urban men construct gendered, embodied selves through gym attendance, engaging in the process with neoliberal and post-neoliberal forms of subjectivity? I also ask: What are the risks, tensions, and contradictions involved in this project of masculine self-making? To address these overarching questions, I pose the following sub-questions: What are men's motivations for starting to go to the gym and continuing this practice? What bodily transformations do they aspire to achieve through gym attendance, and what are their bodily ideals? In practice, does regular gym attendance make a difference in their bodies and in their lives—including work, friendships, and ro-

mantic relationships—and if so, how? Beyond mere physical change, what forms of masculine selves are produced through gym attendance? Are these selves more conventional, or do they represent newer forms of masculinity, such as hybrid masculinities? What do participants think and feel about other men with more muscular and visibly fit bodies in the gym? How do they manage to sustain gym routines despite the demands and rhythms of busy white-collar lives? How do they experience and navigate the limits of their own bodies—limits that may contradict their bodily aspirations?

1.9.2 Sample and Recruitment

To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with heterosexual urban white-collar men who have been regularly attending the gym for at least three months. Significantly, I also included two undergraduate engineering students at an elite university, as well as graduate students who are working as research or teaching assistants. Although students are not formally part of the workforce, under contemporary neoliberal conditions, the boundary between students and young professionals is increasingly blurred. Today, students actively orient themselves toward future careers, searching for internships and constantly striving to develop their employability and enhance their resumes under the conditions of neoliberal insecurity.

I limited the participants to heterosexual, cisgender men, explicitly excluding openly queer men. This decision stems from my concern to avoid reifying queer masculinities in the gym context and to prevent the thesis from being centered on a comparison between queer and heterosexual male experiences. Another criterion of recruitment was not having a professional sports experience. This was due to my concern about not turning the thesis into an “athlete masculinity” thesis rather than a common white-collar masculinity thesis.

In recruiting participants, I followed a family resemblance strategy, considering the fluidity of the notion of the middle class, and focused on men who can be broadly described as urban, middle-class professionals. With two exceptions that I elaborate on below, all participants were either graduates of, or currently studying at, elite or high-ranking universities such as Koc University, Bogazici University, METU, ITU, or Sabanci University. All, if not students, work in white-collar occupations in the private sector and predominantly live in middle- and upper-class neighborhoods of Istanbul, with a few residing in Ankara. Notably, after the interviews, three of the eighteen participants moved to Europe, one to the United States, and one

to Dubai for work or further study. This post-interview mobility underscores the transnational aspirations and global orientation of these men, situating them within the global middle class.

Two participants slightly diverge from this pattern. One lives in Denizli and graduated from Pamukkale University; the other was born in Istanbul, studied in Kocaeli, and now works in Istanbul. I chose not to exclude them, as they still shared key cultural and class-based orientations with the rest of the sample as white-collar employees in private companies. In the thesis, I occasionally discuss these cases through comparative reflections to highlight internal diversity within the sample.

In the end, I conducted interviews with 18 heterosexual men between the ages of 20 and 44. For recruitment, I used two main strategies. First, I relied on snowball sampling. Second, I directly invited participants from the gym I personally attend. In addition, I visited two chain gyms in Kadikoy and invited a few men there as well. The interviews lasted between 15 and 75 minutes, depending on the participant and the flow of conversation, as the interviews were not strictly structured. On average, each interview lasted approximately 40 to 45 minutes. I conducted one-on-one interviews in various settings such as participants' offices, quiet cafés, or my office at the university. Additionally, I conducted some of the interviews online. It was not ideal for assessing non-verbal cues such as gestures and bodily movements of the interviewees. However, convincing middle- and upper-class professional men, who often complain about busy schedules, to spare time for interviews was challenging. Online meetings, requiring less time and energy and allowing more flexibility, made it easier to persuade them to participate. For instance, instead of arranging a common meeting place and time, some of the men simply texted me when they were available at a late hour or when they had a small window of time between two business meetings.

1.9.3 Ethics and Reflexivity

This study was reviewed and approved by the Sabanci University Research Ethics Council (Protocol No: FASS-2024-01, approval date: January 4, 2024). To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' privacy, pseudonyms are used throughout the thesis, and any potentially identifying details have been altered or omitted.

In a conversation about bodies, your body as a researcher unavoidably manipulates responses. For instance, in an online meeting on which it was not possible to see anything below my shoulders, the interviewee was going to make a negative statement about having a belly. However, he paused for a moment and asked me whether

I had a belly. I told him that I did not, so he continued to speak candidly. I am an able-bodied, conventionally gendered, tall, and fit young man without big muscles. I believe that my body resembling society's male bodily ideals was an advantage for me to a large extent. At the same time, I am far from representing either the ultimate lean aesthetic ideal or the stereotypical bodybuilder figure. Participants likely perceived me as someone similar to themselves: I am also a man who goes to the gym, holds a degree from a similar university background, and shares some parallel experiences. This perceived similarity fostered a sense of comfort and openness in our interactions. I believe that both my social position and bodily appearance contributed to this comfort.

1.10 Chapter Outline

In the next chapter, I will show that gym attendance reconstructs men as masculine neoliberal subjects through the embodiment of neoliberal virtues such as self-governance, entrepreneurship, self-responsibility, and self-confidence. In this reconstruction, rational control of the body serves as the scaffold of this self-making. Here, the lean body ideal is referred to as the embodiment of ultimate control over the body—as healthy, low-fat, with defined muscles, and perfect proportions in line with contemporary bodily ideals. In this chapter, I also contribute to the post-neoliberalism debates at the level of subjectivities. I show that, parallel to the broader crisis of neoliberalism, white-collar men still aspire to and pursue neoliberal subjectivity. They continue to understand the world, themselves, and their bodies through the lens of neoliberal logic. Although their capacity to perform neoliberal subjectivity has declined in this crisis context, they struggle to increase this capacity through gym attendance.

Nevertheless, despite the dominance of neoliberal self-governance discourse, bodies often resist efforts to control them. In the third chapter, I will focus on this tension between the body's limited governability and the discourse of self-governance. Throughout their gym journey, men experience this contradiction through aging, injuries, fat-proneness, or difficulty building muscle. However, they navigate this tension by embracing neoliberal logic. Reflecting the very neoliberal logic of governing the self like a firm, they decide how much to invest in the gym—in terms of money, time, and the sacrifice of pleasures—based on their body's capacity to pay back. Thus, they strive to manage the contradiction between ideals and the body's limited possibilities in an efficient and rational way. Eventually, this ongoing

effort becomes the very means through which they reconfigure themselves as proper masculine neoliberal subjects.

The fourth chapter will concentrate on two other interrelated temporal contradictions. While neoliberal discourse holds men responsible for pursuing the idealized male body, it also celebrates busyness and degrades the leisurely consumption of time—such as that required by gym attendance. In addition to this contradiction within neoliberal discourse itself, the lives of white-collar men are characterized by time scarcity. That is to say, they have very limited time to spend on molding their bodies in the gym. To deal with these temporal contradictions, they apply time management strategies. Also, by adapting the discourse that devalues leisure, they devalue bodybuilder bodies as “unbusy immoral bodies” and construct their own neoliberal, middle-class masculine selves as “fit enough” in contrast to this devalued embodiment.

In the third and fourth chapters, the lean body reappears as a more humble, attainable, and thus more efficient goal. This framing stems from its ambiguity and its characterization as less muscular compared to the bulky body. Consequently, in Chapter 3, it emerges as the body constructed through the rational calculation of bodily limits and the amount of investment made in the body, based on its perceived capacity to pay back. In parallel, in Chapter 4, the lean body corresponds to the “fit enough” busy body, constructed in contrast to the “too” muscular “unbusy” body.

The fifth chapter places gender relations and the gendered character of the crisis in neoliberal masculine self-making more centrally than previous chapters. I argue that Turkish urban white-collar men’s gym practices resemble hybrid masculinities—a form that incorporates feminine-coded gendered elements into masculine identities. These men combine gym attendance with bodywork traditionally coded as feminine and frequently engage in self-objectification. Instead of aspiring to hypermasculine bodies with large muscle mass and strength, they pursue lean bodies. Here, lean emerges through its character of being slimmer, less masculine, less strong, and less muscular compared to bulky bodies. Additionally, its quality lies in prioritizing not large muscle mass but aesthetic muscles referred to as “toned” and “defined,” reflecting a self-objectifying gaze. Crucially, they devalue both hypermasculine bodies and hypermasculinity itself, including its performances and personalities. I argue that hybrid masculinities are a response to the demand of the new service economy, which requires feminine performances and aesthetic labor from men. Additionally, it is a strategy through which men, characteristically middle-class men, present themselves as progressive while maintaining masculine hegemony. However, hybridization carries risks: incorporating feminine elements exposes men to feminization. Yet, this risk is not merely a threat but a constitutive feature of neoliberal masculinity, as

managing it aligns with entrepreneurial selfhood and the neoliberal logic of calculated risk-taking to enhance human capital. Thus, the risk of feminization plays a positive, central role in constructing neoliberal masculinities.

2. (RE)CONSTRUCTING THE NEOLIBERAL MASCULINE SELF THROUGH GYM ATTENDANCE

Alongside going to the gym, I'm trying to redefine myself through my style. As an individual, I'm attempting to take a different path by re-defining my self-expression to the outer world through my body and my style. These two processes have been reinforcing each other. As my body looks better [due to gym attendance], I want to dress better. A loop has occurred: as I dress better, I look better. (Kerem, 26, master's student in economics)

The idea that the neoliberal subject perceives the self as human capital that requires continuous development, suggests that this struggle encompasses the body. Shilling (2003), however, attributes a special role to the body in the construction of the self in contemporary society. He argues that bodies have been "increasingly central to the modern person's sense of self-identity" pointing out that "growing numbers of people are increasingly concerned with the health, shape and appearance of their own bodies as expressions of individual identity" (Shilling 2003, 1)¹. Kerem's account closely aligns with Shilling's argument. For him, gym attendance constitutes a body-centered self-transformation project. Considering gym attendance was the initial step that triggered the loop of bodywork he describes; it was the impetus of this project. This chapter will focus on the self-transformative power of the gym.

I will argue gym attendance disciplines men into masculine neoliberal subjects by making them embody neoliberal qualities such as self-governance, entrepreneurship,

1. Shilling (2003) does not rely on neoliberalism but "late" or "high modernity" in his analysis of contemporary society following Giddens (1991). This conceptualization of the contemporary period suggests that, unlike what postmodernists advocate, what characterizes contemporary society is not a break from modern society, but a radicalization of modernization. Bauman's (2013) "liquid modernity" and Beck's (1992) "reflexive modernity" concepts also resonate with Giddens's late modernity. However, in line with human capital's character of being a constant aim, Shilling (2003) repeatedly underlines that in contemporary society the body is understood as "an entity which is in the process of becoming"(3).

self-responsibility, self-confidence, and efficiency. This process also operates at the level of feelings. Men in the gym reproduce themselves as positive selves through continuous emotional self-governance, aligning with the neoliberal structure of feeling (Williams 2001), which urges individuals to embrace positive emotions while policing negative ones (Ehrstein, Gill, and Littler 2020). Thus, men reconstruct themselves as neoliberal subjects through gym attendance. Crucially, this is not a construction but a reconstruction: the gym does not create neoliberal masculinity from scratch but rather refines, reinforces, and embodies it.

By analyzing the reconstruction of neoliberal masculine subjectivity in the gym, I seek to contribute to the debates on post-neoliberalism. Since the 2008 financial crisis, scholars have debated whether we are witnessing a paradigm shift in which neoliberalism has ended and a post-neoliberal era has begun. These debates have predominantly focused on macro-level socio-economic structures, while only a few scholars have addressed post-neoliberal subjectivities (Dorschel 2022; Ehrstein, Gill, and Littler 2020). In this chapter, I will bring gendered subjectivities into focus and argue that Turkish white-collar men still aspire to and pursue neoliberal subjectivities. The gym is a site of this aspiration and pursuit. Remarkably, this subjectivity is itself undergoing a crisis, parallel to the broader crisis of neoliberalism in Turkey and around the world, and my interviewees struggle to perform it. Indeed, most of them turn to gym attendance as a way to overcome this crisis and reconcile themselves with neoliberal ideals.

2.1 Constructing the Body of the Neoliberal Moral Self

The healthist discourse that emerged in the neoliberal era, points out health as a personal responsibility, a product of the embodiment of neoliberal values such as self-control, self-responsibility, and self-governance. Illness, conversely, is seen as a consequence of failing to embody these values. Consequently, health turns into a moral imperative while disease is interpreted as a lack of moral character (Crawford 1980; Halse 2009; Nash 2018).

My interviewees appreciate gym attendance as a sign of taking responsibility for one's health and pursuing a moral life. Bartu (20, computer engineering student) says that he prefers others to know that he attends the gym as it demonstrates his commitment to health and self-care. The association between health and morality is so pronounced that, Alperen uses healthy (32, sales and business development manager in the software industry) as an adjective to describe a moral life:

Interviewer: Do you tell people that you go to the gym? Is it something you like to share with others?

Alperen: Sure, it's something I like sharing with people. Because, in my view, it's sort of a success story. It's a task, a difficult task to accomplish if you don't have persistence. So, doing regular exercise is something is one of the few things I mention when I tell about myself. So, my answer is yes to this question.

I: What do other people think about you when you tell them that you exercise regularly?

Alperen: First of all, you give a healthy impression. What I mean by health is... I say it figuratively. [Healthy means] he goes to work and does sports, you portray the image of living a quality life. This is important, especially for first impressions.

Alperen is a fit and fairly good-looking guy who has been going to the gym for three years. Indeed, he openly expresses satisfaction with his appearance, stating that he feels “sexy” and enjoys the admiration his body receives through the looks of others. Although Alperen claims that regular exercise is a sign of persistence and orderly life and thus creates a good impression, his body plays a crucial role in the creation of this impression. Whenever he talks about going to the gym, it is reasonable to infer that he is also presenting his body and drawing attention to it. In contrast, others who have recently started going to the gym and have not seen clear physical changes report feeling hesitant to share this information. For instance, Yigitcan (28, information management officer) who has been going to the gym for four months, says:

Interviewer: Do you tell people that you go to the gym, is it information you like to share with other people?

Yigitcan: Oh, that's a good question! In the beginning, it was something I liked to tell other people. Because I was considering it like a part of myself. But I don't want to tell [people that I went to the gym now]. Because, if you go to the gym, you need to make an outcome like a more muscular body. I don't have such a body. So, no need to let people know. Therefore, if I share this info, I say I go for pleasure.

Resembling Yigitcan, Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) who has been going to the gym for five months says that he does not like to tell people about his gym attendance since his body has not changed visibly yet. However, he also says that if he sees bodily progresses in the future, he might enjoy talking about his gym attendance. This suggests that it is not merely gym attendance but rather the body

men achieve through it that holds greater social value.

Healthism greatly shapes the male bodily ideals men struggle to conform to in the gym (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Since fat is seen as unhealthy, a fat body is associated with being irresponsible and failure to control yourself and body (Nash 2018). Critically, fat is associated not only with being unhealthy but also with femininity (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). For instance, Onur (44, accommodation manager) explains one of the reasons he goes to the gym as "having a more masculine body by lowering my body fat." Therefore, unlike women, a man with a fat body is seen as failing to embody a proper gendered body, in addition to being unhealthy. Furthermore, the ideal male body is characterized not only by the absence of fat but also by muscularity (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Norman 2013). Hence, having a lean/fit body with low fat and defined muscles emerges as a masculine responsibility for neoliberal men. This body associated with health turns into symbol of neoliberal values such as self-responsibility and self-control (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Gill, Henwood, and Mclean 2005; Norman 2013).

This perspective is precise when Arda (24 years old, art historian and content creator) says that "getting out of breath because of a physical activity shows that you are irresponsible to your body, and you are betraying your body". Similarly, Berkay (26, financial auditor) expresses criticism in the following manner:

[Think of] someone who tries to catch the bus but can't run. (He repeats this to emphasize). He isn't able to run! Unless they have a physical condition, this is a deficiency. One should be able to do this [running after the bus] and lifting things. People who don't do sports have difficulty in doing these.

Berkay points out fitness as the main goal of doing sports. When I ask him what it means to be fit, he explains that "[it is] a term equivalent to being healthy... the ratio of weight, height, and fat... correct body proportions. I'm not doing body positivity; I don't believe in it anyway." Berkay's words refer to a condition of perfect control of the body through sports resulted in optimum balance of fat and muscle mass. His reference to body-positivity and proportion notions reveals that this control is demonstrated by an attractive appearance. Thus, a low-fat body with visible muscle mass serves as a symbol of neoliberal values, enabling him to maintain his health, whereas a fat body signifies a failure to embody these ideals Norman (2013).

Echoing Berkay's perspective, many other interviewees highlight 'the healthy appearance' as the goal of attending the gym. Indeed, this association between health and appearance has become increasingly dominant in contemporary culture, par-

ticularly among the middle and upper classes (Shilling 2003). In the view of my respondents, health is a socially perceptible symbolic value, a feature of the visible body – what Bourdieu refers to as “the body for others” (Bourdieu 1978, 834)

2.2 Making of the Neoliberal Self in The Gym

The story I tell thus far demonstrates that in the neoliberal era, the male body has become a negotiable entity that men rationally govern, invest in, and continuously reinvent as self-entrepreneurs. My respondents’ words further support the argument that body governance aims to cultivate an appearance aligned with neoliberal selfhood, enabling them to embody and project this identity.

Nevertheless, my interviews also suggest that for these men, gym attendance goes beyond the incarnation of an already existing, static assumed self. Rather, the transformation of the body through gym attendance is part of a broader project of self-transformation. These men perceive this practice as a means of reshaping themselves into a desired neoliberal self.

2.2.1 Constructing the Self-Governing and Self-Entrepreneur Subject

Kerem (26, master’s student in economics) who began going to the gym after being exposed to negative comments about his appearance, explains:

I turn it [doing sports] into one of the things through which I define my personality because it makes me want to do it more. Being someone who does sports... Maybe, I don’t like doing sports, but I like being someone who does sports.

Thus, working out in the gym provides individuals with a renewed sense of self, and this transformation becomes the incentive for going to the gym for Kerem. When asked what kind of person this new identity represents, he first explains what working out signifies about a person’s inner qualities. He, then, suggest that sports cultivate these qualities. Crucially, the person he depicts closely resembles *homo oeconomicus*:

I think it signals that you are someone who strives to achieve something

in life. Secondly, this person does not waste time idly; he wants to make a change in his life, he has a problem with life. . . I try to draw an image of a person who dominates his life. Doing sports gives you the ability to govern your life. I think this is important, I look for that in a person. I think people will look for it too.

Kerem explicitly articulates the concept of self-governance. Additionally, his description of a person who desires to make a change in life resonates with the entrepreneur subjects celebrated by neoliberal theorists such as Mises (1949) and Schumpeter (1959). Mises (1949) refers them homo agens, the acting man, while Schumpeter (1959) describes them as the innovator. What characterizes the entrepreneur is their desire to change from an initial state to a more favorable state coupled with capability to act in pursuit of this desire (Brockling and Black 2016). Similarly, Ali (33, marketing manager) states that with gym attendance, he turned into someone who "takes action instead of watching things outside".

Efficiency is another neoliberal quality that men develop through gym attendance. Ali lists the benefits of going to the gym as follows: "It makes you vigorous and increases your concentration... efficiency increases... whatever you are doing, getting it done". Kerem (26, master's student in economics) expresses similar views but focuses specifically on the efficient use of time. He states that doing sports altered his time perception by increasing his time awareness. As a result, he became more efficient with his time. Sinan (41, college instructor) also talks about how the gym has helped him develop better time management skills. Consequently, he has become more organized in his daily routine, able to handle multiple tasks within a day.

Many interviewees mentioned how gym attendance helped them build self-discipline, self-control, and a strong-willed personality. Sinan (41, college instructor) refers to gym attendance as both the output and outcome of these qualities, stating, "self-discipline, strong-willed personality and [regular] gym attendance: their relationship is like a chicken-and-egg situation". Two university students in my sample, Sercan (21, computer engineering student) and Bartu (20, computer engineering student) report that gym attendance transformed them into more disciplined students.

A common transformation mentioned by my interviewees is increased self-confidence. Berkay (26, financial auditor) says, "[when you do sports,] you gain self-confidence because you know you're healthy, you like your body." Sinan (41, college instructor) says that he had always struggled with self-confidence, and increasing his self-confidence was one motivation to start going to the gym. Kerem (26, master's student in economics) mentions that he was experiencing a long-term "recession" in his romantic life that made him "withdrawn and shy". However, he adds that thanks

to the self-confidence he gained through the gym, he became "daring" in his love life. Similarly, Tamer (26, financial data analyst) says that, thanks to the self-confidence he gained in the gym, he started speaking more in business meetings. Bartu (20, computer engineering student), who calls himself "a shy person" and "someone who is afraid of meeting new people," states that he has become more comfortable in social relationships and now experiences less difficulty in making friends thanks to his gym attendance.

If we consider men's statements that self-control, self-governance, self-confidence, efficiency, and entrepreneurship are intertwined attributes of the new selves they continuously reinvent through gym attendance, gym attendance appears to be a project of empowerment. In fact, starting gym attendance follows challenging life periods for most of my respondents. Critically, however, this empowerment project is an apolitical and individualistic one concentrating solely on the self, even though most of the challenges they encounter stem from structural reasons such as unemployment, long and flexible working hours, low wages, and the housing crisis in Istanbul and the ongoing political and economic crisis in Turkey. In this regard, this empowerment project strongly echoes Chandler and Reid's (2016) definition of the neoliberal subject as a "subject at home in a world in which externally orientated projects of transformation are no longer imaginable. A subject for who work on the self is understood to be liberating and emancipatory." (15-16).

The relationship of this subject whose object of change is himself, with the external world is built upon the notion of resilience. It is a neoliberal form of governmentality that emphasizes individual responsibility for their social and economic welfare instead of relying on state in the face of uncertainty intrinsic to market. Resilience discourse calls the individuals to prepare themselves for possible externally imposed changes by increasing their adaptive capacities and bounce back from them when they occur (Evans and Reid 2013; Joseph 2013; O'Malley 2010).

2.2.2 "Gym is My Antidepressant": Construction of the Positive Subject

Although my interviewees commonly report starting the gym during challenging periods in their lives, when linking gym attendance to these periods, they typically focus more on their feelings than on personal traits. Almost all of them express a desire to shift their mood toward a more positive state by attending the gym. However, the transformation of mood and self is often intertwined, making them difficult to separate. For instance, when an interviewee talks about building a self-governing

self or developing self-control, it is hard to distinguish this from the sense of having control over one's life. These feelings and traits become even more interwoven when my interviewees talk about self-confidence. Their descriptions of positive feelings toward themselves, especially concerning their appearance, go hand in hand with their perceptions of developing a self-confident personality. Hence, interviewees' ideas about how the gym transforms their selves reflect their interpretation of how they feel and used to feel about themselves and the world around them.

When I ask interviewees about their motivations for attending gym and the advantages they associate with it, they commonly mention the gym's impact on how they feel. For example, Ali (33, marketing manager) recalls that when he first began going to the gym, he was in "a depressed mood" and part of his motivation for going to the gym was to overcome that mood. In fact, he notes that "gym makes him look at life positively". Similarly, Hakan (44) shares:

When you go to the gym, even the way you walk changes. It becomes more confident and calmer. For example, when I exercise, I find myself in a peaceful state of mind. Going to the gym helps me reach a tranquil psychological state.

The significance of the gym's role as a 'feel-good' activity becomes even more apparent in Sinan's (41, college instructor) experience. Sinan has been experiencing serious spinal disorders and medical professionals have advised him to stop weight-training. However, he continues to work out although using lighter weights. He explains that one reason behind his continued workouts is that he does not want to lose the body he has been building, while the other is that he does not want to give up the positive feelings the gym provides:

Going to the gym has a positive impact on me mentally. Even if I'm in a bad mood, feeling pessimistic, depressed, or angry, I notice that after a good workout, these negative thoughts are significantly reduced. I feel like I'm floating on air when I leave the gym (laughs). I become more relaxed afterward, and my interactions with people become more positive. I realized this, and of course, it's something that has been scientifically proven, due to its effects on hormones like serotonin.

Many other interviewees also brought up serotonin and dopamine, known as the "hormones of happiness," during our interviews. One of them is Alperen (32, sales and business development manager in the software industry), who says:

You feel fitter. How to say, you feel better, you feel more self-confident. You are hormonally "high" anyway. I don't know, serotonin, dopamine whatever they're called. So, you feel more positive in your life. This is an important benefit of going to the gym in my opinion.

Exercise has been demonstrated to have bodily effects inducing positive feelings (Hayer and Benipal 2023). Hence, it is reasonable that one enjoys the positive emotions triggered by exercise. However, I think my interviewees' strong aspiration for positive feelings is particularly meaningful when considered alongside our contemporary culture of mental health which is obsessed with "positive feelings" and "happiness" (Adams et al. 2019; Binkley 2011, 2014; Burnett 2011; Sugarman 2015). This obsession is reflected in the growth of what Davies (2015) calls the "happiness industry" which includes psychotherapy, anti-depressants, and self-help books. Positive psychology points out happiness as its ultimate goal and personal happiness has been increasingly popular and influential in the field of psychology (Binkley 2011). In regard of these phenomena, Ehrstein, Gill, and Littler (2020), who emphasize that intimate neoliberal governance operates at the level of feelings, says it produced a particular "structure of feeling" (Williams 2001), based on embracing positive emotions and denial of negative ones. This strong and omnipresent call for positivity is a mechanism of interpellation as the ideal subject of neoliberalism is a positive one (Gill and Orgad 2018). This subject is the one who "disavows and self-polices negative feelings and dispositions favoring positive affect and, specifically, self-love, self-belief, confidence optimism, and living in the moment" (Gill and Orgad 2018, 481).

The theme of positive mental state presents in writings of many neoclassical economic thinkers. Brockling and Black (2016), in his critical analysis of texts Mises, Kirzner, Schumpeter, Knight, and Casson reveals that in their thinking, positive mentality, -more specifically self-confidence and joy of acting within the market- emerges as the inner power of the entrepreneur subject. Particularly Mises (1944) describes the entrepreneur subject of neoliberalism as "he is optimistic in the awareness of his own strength. He has self-confidence and is full of hope" (93). He advocates that this positive affective state enables the entrepreneur to pursue his self-interests through entrepreneurial action although the market is unavoidably a site of insecurity and unpredictability (Garlick 2020).

Unlike Mises' (1944) ideal and idealized portrayal, affective orientation of the actually-existing-neoliberal subject is defined by his efforts to suppress negative feelings. His primary relationship with his feelings is self-policing of negative feelings resembling Gill and Ograd's (2018) definition of the positive neoliberal self,

more closely than Mises' depiction. Hence, he is not a positive, optimistic, and self-confident subject who acts on the market despite the risks intrinsic to the free market, to pursue their self-interests. Rather, he struggles to maintain his mental well-being while navigating precarious living conditions under free-market capitalism. In Chandler and Reid's (2016) words, he "is a resilient, humble, and disempowered being that lives a life of permanent ignorance and insecurity" (93). Indeed, Gill and Orgad (2018) point out resilience discourse as a part of how neoliberalism shapes our psychic life. Increasingly turning to our feelings, neoliberalism calls subjects to control their emotions to increase their adaptivity for (expected or unexpected) adverse conditions (Illouz 2008; McKeown, Bui, and Glenn 2022). In fact, despite its good fit to neoliberalism, resilience discourse became increasingly prominent in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis (Joseph 2013; McKeown and Glenn 2018).

Deniz (25, business analyst) states that his job leaves him feeling stressed by the end of the day, and he finds that going to the gym after work helps him cope with this stress. Similarly, Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) who "has to stay indoors all day long and work without going outside even for lunch", reports that the gym has contributed to his mental health. About his gym time, he says that "It is nice to be outside, rather than working in the office by sitting in front of a screen." Yigitcan (28, information management officer) describes the gym as "an efficient way of coping with stress". He explains, "I spend most of the day at work. It feels good to be somewhere other than work." He also emphasizes how the gym alleviates his work-related stress, enabling him to work more efficiently, which he identifies as a positive influence of the gym on his professional life.

Gym attendance's function to affectively reproduce the men becomes particularly apparent in Selim's (25) case. Selim is a doctoral student in engineering, though he tells me that pursuing a Ph.D. was actually his "Plan B." He originally created a start-up but, knowing that "most start-ups collapse," he simultaneously began his Ph.D. as a backup plan. When his start-up failed, he stuck with his Plan B. He says the gym helps him "achieve a healthy mental state" by preventing "overthinking" particularly about his career and future. He refused to discuss details of his start-up's collapse and his "overthinking" saying that "these are deeps subject" that he does not feel comfortable about to talk. It was apparent that he was not satisfied with his current life and his "Plan B". Now living on dormitories located on the periphery of the city, he expresses frustration with campus life: "Most of the graduate students go crazy here". However, due to Istanbul's housing crisis, he cannot afford to live in the city. In this context, he explains:

Gym protects my mental health. Sports is like psychological therapy for me. I'm an overthinker. It's an activity that prevents overthinking because when you expend extra energy, the brain stops thinking about things it shouldn't. At least for me, my brain uses that energy for overthinking. This is one of the things that can, for example, lead me to depression. Sports is like my antidepressant.

It is meaningful that Selim draws an analogy between gym and psychotherapy and antidepressants. This underscores how the gym, resembling or perhaps even being part of the "happiness industry" Davies (2015), enables men to shape themselves into positive selves. Furthermore, it reveals that the positive subject of neoliberalism is not one defined by hope and self-confidence. Instead, it is a subject that continuously strives to monitor and suppress the negative feelings that are inevitable outcomes of living in an insecure market economy.

Significantly, while Selim can assume no control over the external threats to his life, through gym he establishes a sense of control over his body:

For example, I try to buy clothes that are one size smaller. Like, instead of getting an extra-large, I get a large, even though it doesn't always fit perfectly. So, when I can fit into it, I feel happy. I set a goal for myself, and it had this effect. I mean, I might need a larger size, but I know that if I lose weight, I'll be able to fit into it.

When I asked him whether he could fit into smaller size clothes he answered displaying an open pride "Yes, I did, I accomplished it". Gym clearly seems to help him gain a sense of control over his body, especially when other aspects of life feel uncontrollable. Setting and accomplishing bodily goals fulfils his desire to achieve personal success. Additionally, he mentions that he has an ultimate bodily goal he plans to achieve step-by-step:

I can imagine my ideal body. I achieved it in the past for a short time. My ideal body has well-defined abdominals and sharply outlined chest muscles, with pronounced biceps and triceps. The shoulders and back are also more developed. It's all about competing with myself.

Interviewer: So, you had that body in the past? When was it?

Yes, I had accomplished it before the pandemic. Although it was for a short time.²

2. Selim also mentioned that he had achieved his ideal body for a short time but lost it as he gained weight during the pandemic. In February 2025, a year after our initial interview, I

2.3 How Does Gym Attendance Cultivate a New Self?

2.3.1 Seeing Yourself through Your New Body

According to Goffman (1990), the control and manipulation of the body—encompassing its surface, dress, and manner—are critical components of self-presentation aimed at creating a specific impression on others. However, in Goffman's (2009) framework, the body also mediates the interaction between social and self-identities. This is because, individuals internalize the social meanings attached to the body and these meanings shape the one's sense of self (Shilling 2003). For instance, Goffman (2009) discusses how stigmas attached to certain bodies are internalized by the individuals with such bodies, who then integrate the stigma into their self-identities. Therefore, the manipulation of the body to create a certain impression in others, especially when it involves a transformation that is irreversible or difficult to reverse, alters a person's sense of self.

Transformation of their bodies into a more socially valued form through gym attendance seems to be internalized by my interviewees and shifts their sense of self. For instance, Onur (44, accommodation manager) after talking about how he enjoyed both bodily changes he got through gym attendance and the positive feedback he received about these changes, states: "even a person's walk changes, you know, he walks in a more confident way". Correspondingly, Alperen (32, sales and business development manager in the software industry) explains how gym attendance boosts his self-confidence by making him feel more satisfied with how he looks:

[Going gym] improves your physical appearance. For example, you wear it well whatever you wear. Also, you feel fitter. How to say, you feel sexier. There are many parameters like this. After all, you feel confident, or rather, you feel more confident, so to speak.

Similarly, Tamer (26, financial data analyst) emphasizes how he feels about his body changed after he started going to the gym, and this change is reflected in his increased self-confidence:

reconnected with Selim. He told me that he had quit the gym in October due to the demands of his doctoral courses, research, and professors, which disrupted his routine. Additionally, he had started a new start-up and was feeling highly stressed about it—so much so that he even sought my advice, referring to my background in psychology. Due to stress and a poor diet, he gained 18 kg.

Going to the gym increases your self-confidence. When you look in the mirror, you see yourself in a positively biased way (he used the exact English word bias). It also depends on the nice words you hear from the others. People at work say, "You've got in shape." You see yourself as powerful in a social environment. You exude confidence when you speak. Your physical strength affects your mental strength too. In a room where you might have stayed silent in the past, your voice is heard. There's nothing you're afraid of anymore. For example, when you're in a meeting with senior individuals, you might naturally switch into a listener mode due to the senior-junior relationship. But because you perceive yourself as strong, because of sports, you find yourself speaking more.

Tamer's insights give a good account of how self-transformation occurs within social interaction through the transformation of the body. The physical transformation identified by self-gaze and that of others reflects on the way he perceives himself as a person. Consequently, bodily capital transforms into cultural capital in the form of a personal trait: self-confidence.

Nevertheless, it is important to note that the transferability of bodily capital into other forms is determined by the intersection of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). The seemingly same bodily quality might signify a lack when embodied by an already marginalized individual, while a privileged individual can utilize it to gain benefit (Skeggs 2004). Tamer's and Alperen's privileged positions as Turkish middle-class straight men enable them to develop self-confidence through bodywork. My findings might not be applicable to men who belong to sexual or ethnic minorities or to working-class men.

2.3.2 Becoming through Practice

Goffman (1990) underscores that self-presentation is not a pure manipulation of others to create a desired impression. Remarkably, individual's own belief in the impression is an essential component of self-presentation to accomplish the impression one intends to engender. An individual, performing a social role by adopting behaviors, manners, and appearance of this role, often internalizes this role as their authentic self. Here, what I mean is not all social roles are internalized. Goffman (1990) discusses belief in the role one plays as a continuum. One might try to manipulate the other party by adopting a role with pure unbelief in this role. However, in Goffmanian understanding, since the world is a stage where individuals perform their roles, the concept of role encompasses our sense of self which we believe to be authentic. Selfhood, therefore, is formed through constant day-to-day interactions.

Correspondingly, West and Zimmerman (1987) who also adopt the social interactionist perspective of self, understand identity as something individuals do. In other words, we continuously form and maintain our identities through daily practices.

My interviewees seem to construct themselves as self-governing, self-controlling, and self-entrepreneur subjects through gym-attendance which is the practice of ‘entrepreneurising’ the body that requires self-control and self-governance. For instance, many of the interviewees mentioned that they had to plan and manage their day better to find time for the gym. Sinan (41) says this necessity obligated him to develop his time management and organization skills.

The bodily transformation the respondents aspire for also necessitates control over diet. Deniz (25, business analyst) says, although he is someone who likes to eat fast food after starting to go to gym, he began to eat less of it. He explains, "I'm someone who likes eating fast food. And I was eating and feeling like in a cycle of unwieldiness'. Gym helped me to break this cycle". Hence, the gym makes him exercise control over his diet. Similarly, Utku (26, supply chain specialist) says that after starting the gym, he adopted a healthier diet. Moreover, after mentioning his enjoyment of going out and drinking frequently, he notes that gym attendance has changed his lifestyle to a more orderly one, as he now "goes to the gym instead of going out.

Bartu (20, computer engineering student) underlines the repetitive nature of gym attendance in building discipline and self-control that diffuses into his life:

Going to the gym gives you something to do every day. When you wake up in the morning, you say, "I'll go to the gym." So, something new is added to your daily routine. When this routine is repeated, it becomes meaningful. Also, for example, I feel better when I come back from the gym. I focus better on my classes and study hard and diligently in the library.

In a similar vein, when I ask Sercan (21, computer engineering student) about the influence of gym attendance in his life, he says:

I think I'm heading in a positive direction. Because it requires discipline to stand up and to get yourself to the gym and to lift weights there. These things put you right.

Interviewer: Does this situation affect other areas of life?

I think it does. When you have an assignment or duty, it puts the idea

of "I should do it " into your head. When you're already engaging in exercise regularly, you think 'I do this regularly, I should do my homework regularly as well, and also attend my classes regularly'.

Sercan emphasizes that gym attendance requires self-control and self-governance for making yourself go to the gym and start and finish the workout. Therefore, regular gym attendance serves as a practice for developing these skills.

2.4 Discussion

2.4.1 Still Neoliberal Subjects

In the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, debates emerged about whether neoliberalism had reached its end, and whether we had entered the post-neoliberal³ era—further fueled by the rise of authoritarianism, populism, the COVID-19 pandemic and the climate crisis (Buscher et al. 2021; Callison and Manfredi 2020; Davies and Gane 2021; Peck 2010; Peck and Theodore 2019; Slobodian 2021). While the question of neoliberalism's demise remains contested, discussions on post-neoliberalism often revolve around the evolving nature of neoliberalism across time and space. Scholars ask whether these emerging forms of neoliberalism or "mutations" of neoliberalism (Callison and Manfredi 2020) represent a paradigm shift and signal the arrival of a post-neoliberal era, or whether they are merely "still neoliberalism" (Peck and Theodore 2019).

In Turkey, the evolving nature of neoliberalism in the 2010s and 2020s has been marked by a shift toward authoritarian neoliberalism. As the short-term economic success stories of the 2000s gave way to prolonged financial instability (Erensu and Madra 2022; Tansel 2019), middle-class professionals—among whom my interviewees can be situated—were particularly hard hit (Kacmaz et al. 2024).

While much of the literature on post-neoliberalism focuses on macro-level political and economic transformations, a few scholars (Dorschel 2022; Ehrstein, Gill, and Littler 2020) have asked whether post-neoliberal subjectivities are emerging, or whether the crisis of neoliberalism and its potential transformation are giving rise to new forms of subjectivity (Feher 2019; Salzinger 2020). Addressing this ques-

3. The term 'post-neoliberal' first emerged in Latin America, introduced by leftist political parties and intellectuals. This use originally referred to the end of neoliberalism (Brand, 2016). However, what I am referring to here is the proliferation of analytical debates surrounding the current state of neoliberalism, its evolving features, and its future.

tion for white-collar Turkish men, my findings suggest that neoliberalism remains deeply embedded as a way of living, thinking, and feeling. My interviewees continue to perform and aspire to neoliberal subjectivities. They embrace discourses of self-governance, self-responsibility, and self-entrepreneurship, striving to become “proper” neoliberal subjects.

In this striving, the lean body ideal embodies neoliberal masculine subjectivity. It represents a strong control over the body—being healthy, low in fat, with defined muscles and proportions perfectly aligned with contemporary bodily ideals that reflect a self-governing neoliberal subjectivity. Furthermore, the rational control exercised to achieve the lean body serves as the scaffold for disciplining the self into a rational and self-governing masculine subject.

However, this does not mean that this culture of subjectivity operates smoothly. In fact, paralleling the broader crisis of neoliberalism, it appears to be experiencing a crisis of its own. My interviewees often complain about the precarity of their living and working conditions and struggle to suppress negative emotions that stem from them. Notably, their turn to the gym—especially during difficult periods in their lives—as a strategy to reconstruct themselves as neoliberal masculine subjects suggests that their capacity to perform such subjectivity is significantly diminished. In this sense, the growing popularity of gyms among men in Turkey not only reveals the enduring appeal of neoliberal aspirations but also underscores the crisis that men experience in the pursuit of these aspirations.

In that respect, men’s gym attendance echoes Peck’s (2010) description of late neoliberalism as “dead but dominant.” He argues that in the absence of an alternative socio-economical program and opposition, neoliberalism enters a “zombie phase” in which “the brain has apparently long since ceased functioning, but the limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too” (109). If zombie neoliberalism persists through its defensive reflexes, the reflex of white-collar men in authoritarian neoliberal Turkey—dissatisfied with their precarious conditions and struggling to realize the neoliberal subjectivities they desire—is to turn to the gym, an individualized and apolitical practice of masculine self-making.

2.4.2 End of Disembodied Masculinities?

Do these self-making efforts, centered on bodily transformation, suggest a departure from Cartesian dualism that associates men with mind in contrary to feminine mind? In his study on middle-class *spornosexuals*, Hakim (2015) highlights the discrepancy between traditional, disembodied middle-class masculinities and this emerging form

of selfhood. The term spornosexual was first coined by Simpson (2014) to describe men who are highly concerned with appearance, with an emphasis on a muscular and toned body and are openly self-objectifying. Hakim (2015) situates the spornosexual men within the context of the UK following the 2008 crisis. As structural conditions constrained men's ability to create value through traditional routes—such as stable employment, financial accumulation and the breadwinning role— they turned to their bodies as sites of value production. Crucially, Hakim emphasizes that bodily value creation has historically been associated with women, working-class individuals, and racialized men, reflecting the gendered and classed legacy of Cartesian dualism. In this context, the male body has traditionally been understood as secondary or even irrelevant to masculine identity. Therefore, this turn to the gym and the male body seems to diverge from traditional forms of disembodied middle-class masculinity.

This chapter, in line with Hakim's (2015) argument, shows that Turkish white-collar men also turn to their bodies in response to a crisis of neoliberal subjectivity that occurs alongside the broader crisis of neoliberalism. They struggle to construct the desired neoliberal masculine self through bodywork, which suggests a tension with the Cartesian legacy of disembodied masculinity by foregrounding men's corporeal existence. However, it is equally important to note that this transformation is pursued through the control of the body and aiming to produce a self-controlling subject, highlights that it ultimately reaffirms that very dualism. The neoliberal masculine self—self-governing, self-controlling, self-confident and positive—appears more as a fantasy than as an embodied being. In the next chapter I will focus on the contradiction that arises from neoliberal self-governance discourse and limited governability of our bodies.

3. THE LIMITS OF THE BODY: NEOLIBERAL MASCULINITY AND THE BODY'S CHALLENGE TO SELF-GOVERNANCE

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated how men shape their bodies according to societal bodily standards through regular gym attendance. While discussing their bodies and gym-attendance, they often adopt a discourse of self-governmentality, in which the control of the body serves as the framework for constructing themselves as *homo oeconomicus*, the ideal self-governing masculine subject of neoliberalism.

This subjectification process seems to typify the social constructionist approach to the body; it emerges as a site of (productive) power that hails subjects through being passively 'imprinted' by cultures, relationships, and structures (Foucault 1977). Social constructionist approaches to body are useful to shed light on power relations and their inscriptions on bodies. However, they should not blind us that our bodies are not fully malleable and passive objects of social forces but play an active role in the creation of the world around us and in determining how we experience it (Crossley 1995). They frequently reject to be molded in accordance with our intentions and set limits to our manipulation of them (Shilling 2003, 6).

In this chapter, I will focus on gym participants' experience of bodily limits. First, I will show that despite the dominance of self-control discourse in my interviewees' narratives, they frequently acknowledge the limitations of their physical possibilities. Moreover, regular gym attendance makes them experience their material being explicitly, also confronts them with the restrictive aspects of the body. Then I will elaborate on the question: how could the efforts men make in the gym function to transform them into self-governing subjects while these efforts are simultaneously recognized as incomplete in the face of the limited plasticity of bodies that these practices seem to primarily target? I will argue that although men experience and recognize that the self-governance discourse is unrealistic in the face of their bodies' constraints, they embrace this discourse. In the end, they struggle to navigate the tension between neoliberal bodily ideals and their corporeality efficiently and rationally. This task becomes the practice through which they reconstruct themselves as

proper masculine neoliberal subjects.

3.1 Encountering the Limits of Body

Our contemporary culture of the body, which regards bodies as ongoing projects to be worked on, also overemphasizes their malleability. It assumes an authority of humans on their bodies. The relationship it imagines between humans and their bodies is one of possession. Yet, humans do not just *have* bodies but also, they *are* bodies. Consequently, our corporeality is not only enabling but also constraining (Shilling 2003, 20-21). Our bodily being is the source of life but also guarantees that we all are going to die (Berger and Luckmann 1967). As Shilling (2003) perfectly puts it:

Investment in the body also has its limitations. Indeed, in one sense the effort expended by individuals on the body is doomed to failure. Bodies age and decay, and the inescapable reality of death appears particularly disturbing to modern people. . . Bodies are limited not only in the sense that they ultimately die, but in their frequent refusal to be molded in accordance with our intentions. (p. 6-7)

Men, although they are driven to shape their bodies according to societal bodily ideals and adopt a discourse of self-governmentality when discussing their bodies, encounter the limited malleability of their bodies in several ways. This is evident despite the young age of my sample. Predictably, interviewees over 30 are more likely to discuss bodily limitations compared to their younger counterparts -except the condition of being a hard-gainer. In their statements, aging emerges as a factor that further reinforces their unwanted bodily tendencies such as becoming even more vulnerable to injuries and increasing tendency for fat-gaining. Still, most participants frequently mention bodily tendencies such as being a hard-gainer in terms of muscularity or being prone to fat gain and injuries.

3.1.1 Hard-Gainers

Three of my interviewees complained that their bodies did not visibly get bigger. Their experiences resemble what is known in gym jargon as 'hard-gainer,' referring to people who struggle to build muscle despite their efforts, often due to genetic

tendencies. I cannot assess whether they did everything correctly or truly exerted enough effort. Rather, my focus is on the fact that their bodies did not transform as they expected through working-out.

Among them, Arda (24, art history student and content creator) had just quit the gym at the time of the interview, since he did not see the bodily transformation he had hoped for after going for six months. Cafer Efe (26, high frequency trader), who had been skinny since his teenage years, had also been going to the gym for six months. He reported, “I am still a man weighing 69-70 kilos [at 180 cm tall]” emphasizing that his slim body type remained largely unchanged despite his efforts at the gym. The only change he noted was not becoming the ‘muscular’ or ‘well-built’ man he aspired to be but instead noticing a difference in his belly fat. He explained, “I felt like I had a belly before, but now I don’t feel that way.” When I asked him if his belly fat was gone, he hesitantly replied, ‘I mean, sort of.’

Interestingly, Cafer Efe mentioned his “lack of appetite” as a problem. Notably, his low appetite was a long-standing characteristic of him. However, after starting the gym with the aspiration of achieving a more ‘well-built’ body but struggling to progress toward his desired physique, this characteristic began to seem like a problem to him. Consequently, he visited a medical expert to investigate whether an underlying health issue was causing his low appetite. At the time of our interview, his medical test results were still pending. Later, when I followed up via text, he informed me that no health issues were found and continued “I ate three meals a day actually. Maybe, I felt that way [that I have appetite problem] because I want to gain weight.”

Yigitcan, (28, information management officer) is another skinny and hard-gainer guy. Just like Cafer Efe, this situation makes him visit a medical expert. His words perfectly exemplify the limits of the body’s malleability and men’s ambivalence when confronted with it:

The primary reason I go to the gym is [to develop] a more muscular body. I started with a huge motivation; I was going 4-5 times a week. I also pay attention to my diet—maybe I don’t? but I think I do. Then, I noticed that I was not getting bigger as much as I wished. I started to look at medical journals. They were talking about a group of men, non-responders. They have a specific genetic make-up; they can’t gain muscle whatever they do. Bodybuilding might be even harmful for them, some say. I thought why am I not gaining muscle? I thought that maybe I was one of them. I went to a doctor, got a checkup, and asked them whether going to the gym was healthy for me. They told me to continue, and everything was okay [with my health]. So, I don’t know whether I’m

a non-responder. But I'm genetically disadvantageous.

Shilling (2003, 3) points out that as bodies became central in self-construction and options to adjust bodies increased in our contemporary culture (Giddens 1991), it induces a chronic reflexivity that people search for answers to whether or how they should adjust their bodies. Resembling this feeling, Yigitcan became indecisive about whether he should go to a fitness center since if he is a non-responder, gym attendance would be like plowing water and even be harmful to him. This ambiguity exacerbates the sense of ambivalence for Yigitcan and reveals the body's refusal to be molded as he wishes.

Regarding chronic reflexivity in relation to our bodily projects, Shilling (2003) especially emphasizes the proliferation of body work technologies. However, for Yigitcan -and to some degree, for Cafer Efe-, the feeling of ambivalence regarding how he should treat his body, is further fueled by the ambiguity of his body. At the beginning of this section, I pointed out that it is not my intention to assess whether these men are true hard gainers who have done everything right; moreover, I cannot assess what it means to do everything correctly, nor can I say if they applied these practices properly. Indeed, this inability is not unique to me, as the interview excerpt above shows: Yigitcan himself, while talking about how he did everything correctly immediately pauses and questions whether his diet is truly as it should be. He, like Cafer Efe who cannot be sure whether his low appetite is an anomaly, cannot decide whether he is a non-responder, and is left indecisive about how to treat his body.

3.1.2 Fat-Prone Bodies

Many respondents state that they tend to gain fat more easily compared to an average person. Deniz (25, business analyst), for instance, says he has been "suffering from [high] fat percentages since childhood." Similarly, Murat (33, mechanical engineer) describes his own body as inherently inclined to gain weight. As self-described fat-prone men, Deniz and Murat particularly emphasize that their primary motivation to go to the gym is to lose weight and get fit rather than to gain muscle. Still, Murat—although he says that he does not find "overly muscular" bodies aesthetically pleasing—repeatedly expresses his admiration for men with lean bodies or "statuesque physiques" and says he would like to have such a body. Yet, he acknowledges that people have different anatomies and genetic tendencies. To better explain it to me, he mentions a mutual friend of ours with a lean and muscular body

as "genetically lucky" unlike himself. Murat also recalls that when he first started going to the gym at 23 or 24, he was more muscular and focused on gaining muscle. But now, as he has gotten older, he says, 'it has become even more difficult to maintain [my] weight.' He also mentioned how much he enjoyed it when a girl once complimented his chest, saying it looked muscular. Suggesting that Deniz's desire also goes beyond losing weight, he began aspiring to build muscle and included more weightlifting exercises into his training, after losing some weight in the first couple of months with a cardio-focused workout program¹.

Looking at Murat's (33, mechanical engineer) and Deniz's (25, business analyst) words and experience, while a lean body with a good amount of muscle mass is desirable to them, their fat-prone bodies lead them to prioritize weight loss over muscle-building as their primary gym goal. That is to say they negotiate with their bodily limitations and navigate the tension between these limitations and their aspirations. Consequently, Murat shifts away from muscle-building as he gets older, and his body becomes more fat-prone while Deniz begins taking steps toward a more muscular body as he has recently lost weight.

Like Murat, Ali (33, marketing manager) started going to the gym in his early twenties but has not attended continuously since then. Echoing Murat, he reports that as he ages, his primary goal has shifted from muscle-building to maintaining his weight and capabilities—that, in his words, "make [him] feel like [he is] not getting old," such as "mobility and flexibility". Although he does not classify himself as genetically fat-prone like Murat, his narrative suggests that aging makes it harder for him to stay free of belly fat, which, in turn, makes him feel 'ungainly' and 'heavy'."

It is also notable that these fat-prone men could have still prioritized muscle-building over fat-burning if they aspired to a large and muscular body, high in both muscle and fat mass. Nevertheless, although they adjust their bodily goals according to the body's limitations, this adjustment is informed by the "lean body" ideal that prioritizes low fat over muscularity, as I will discuss in detail in Chapter 5. Therefore, although accepting that statuesque-like bodies (lean body with visible muscle mass) are not available to them, they scale down their bodily goals to a lower-fat body. Consequently, they channel their efforts into fat-burning rather than muscle-building.

1. In chapter 5, I discussed how men update their gym goals as they achieved the initial one under the subsection of "unfinished bodies" including updating goal of losing weight to gaining muscle.

3.1.3 Injuries

Berkay (26, financial auditor) is a young man with a tall, fit, and moderately muscular physique. Having engaged in various sports, including bodybuilding, for years, he openly declares that he does not “believe in body positivity.” Strongly adhering to a healthist discourse, he equates health with fitness and emphasizes that one must be fit to be healthy. He values exercise as it is essential for achieving healthy and fit body. Remarkably, while discussing the necessity of sports for maintaining health, he paused and admitted, “Actually, sports can also harm your health. At one point, I was running too much, and my legs and knees were in constant pain.” As a regular gym-goer myself, I have also experienced how exercise can disrupt health and confronted the limits of my body’s plasticity when I got injured.

3.1.3.1 My experience: when a self-claimed easy-gainer gets injured

Four months before I began conducting interviews for this thesis, I started going to the gym on the university campus, not only to make observations but also to work out myself three or four days a week. I am still attending a gym regularly—although not the college gym I went initially—one and a half years later while writing my thesis.

The first ten months of my gym experience, which encompassed all the interview and transcription processes of my thesis, were particularly rewarding in terms of my bodily transformations. My muscle mass increased quickly, and my body started to resemble the fit and muscular bodily ideal that I desired. This was not only my perception; I also began receiving positive comments from people around me—friends, other teaching assistants, potential partners, and even people I had just met. It was because of this when my interviewees and other gym-attenders from my social circle had been talking about their bodily limits, I did not relate them but thought about how lucky I am in terms of my bodily tendencies. Sometimes, I was thinking it was not only my tendencies but “there must be something I did very good” that others complaining about their tendencies did not, although I did not exactly know what it is.

Retrospectively looking at my experience, I now realize that all these bodily transformations gave me a sense of accomplishment and control in a difficult period characterized by the precariousness of being a graduate student echoing the common experience of men I talked about in the previous chapter. Indeed, when I had to move to Aydin, a midsize provincial city, during my thesis year due to financial

constraints, I thought that the gym could help me get through this period as well. Moreover, I could bounce-back from this period with an even “better-looking” body.

Second half of my gym experience, however, has not gone as well as the first one. I suffered an elbow injury that recurred after my initial recovery and eventually became chronic. These injuries, each taking more than a month to heal, interrupted my gym routine. Also, even after recovery my elbow repeatedly aches due to strength loss. When I returned to work-out, not only my strength and familiarity had eroded but I had to continue with lower weights to avoid another injury of my elbow that chronic pain constantly reminds me of. Ultimately, my expectation that my body would gradually transform into a more muscular and fitter one failed to materialize. Moreover, this discrepancy became a source of frustration rather than the resilience I had hoped my gym attendance would foster. These unsettling feelings were further exacerbated by chronic self-reflexivity, much like Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) and Yigitcan (28, information management officer) experienced. I found myself questioning: Am I training incorrectly? Am I lifting too much weight, or is my form flawed? Or is it simply that my skeletal structure is a genetically weak one?

3.1.3.2 Sinan’s journey: navigating injuries after eighteen years of training

Sinan (41, college instructor) differs from the rest of my sample both in the duration and nature of his engagement with the gym. He has been attending gym regularly without any long break for eighteen years. Also, there was three years of period in his gym history when he considered participation to bodybuilding competitions and implemented a very strict diet and training program. However, he did not adopt such a program anymore. Notably, his body, although being relatively fit and muscular, is not one of a bodybuilder. So, his training program and body resembles the other interviewees now.

Talking about his start to the gym and his initial motivations, Sinan mentioned that he was “very weak” weighting 50-55 kg with around 180 cm height when he was at college and had problems about self-confidence. Notably he said, “right now, while talking with you, I notice that my motivation was always physical appearance rather than things like health.” Yet, he also said that as he gets older, his health concerns increased and started to involve more exercises that will directly contribute to his cardio-vascular health. Additionally, unlike his efforts to build a much muscular and fit bodybuilder physique until eight-nine years ago, he now wants to have “a normal

body with no belly” and feels satisfied about what he sees in the mirror. He wants a body that makes other people to notice that he works out but he “does not miss much” his bodybuilder body “with 43-44 cm [width] arms” and “85-86 kg with lower than 10 percent fat”. However, these words were implying not a literal satisfaction about his look but settling for what his bodily limits allowed.

The primary limit-setter that forced Sinan to settle for “a normal body with no belly” was the serious spinal health issues he developed. Looking back, he stated, “I realized that I was training the wrong way, and as I got older, I started experiencing spinal problems. Apparently, my [spinal health-related] genes were bad,” he adds. The spinal problems Sinan referred to include two severe lumbar herniated discs, one of which required major surgery, as well as two serious cervical herniated discs. He visited many medical experts for these serious health issues that still affect his life. Doctors advised him to quit weight-training. Although he agreed with these doctors, he could not quit gym that he defined as an addiction for him. He stated that when he quit, he felt aggressive and pessimist as if he experienced “withdrawal”. Following his health issues and doctors’ suggestions, Sinan mentioned that he adopted a different training style in the gym which is not damaging his spinal health and allowing him to continue training without the feeling of “withdrawal”:

I feel restless when I stop going to the gym. I feel unhappy, something like withdrawal. I become more aggressive and pessimistic. Because of that, I first tried to adapt my workouts in different ways: using much lighter weights with high repetitions. Then, I switched to resistance bands. I adjusted the movements, doing them horizontally instead of all vertically. But every time I got a little better, this cycle repeated. Whenever I started feeling slightly recovered, when my spine felt a bit better, I always returned to weights. And then, I had to face myself—I told myself, “I guess this is how it’s going to be.” I mean, I can walk *right now* (he let out a small laugh while saying “right now,” emphasizing the possibility of a worse future), and I can maintain a normal daily life. My pain tolerance is a bit high—I can manage the pain.

Although Sinan mostly talks about how he feels negative emotions when he quits, when I asked whether concerns about his appearance were influential in his persistence despite health problems and medical advice, rapid loss of his muscle mass appears to be the reason that turned him back to weightlifting:

Oh, absolutely. Definitely yes, and during that period—oh! When I was training with those resistance bands, I lost a huge portion of my muscle mass. I was around 82 kilos with 10

In Sinan's narrative, his body itself emerges as an obstacle to the muscular physique he desires. Throughout our interview, he mentioned how his aging body makes him more vulnerable to injuries, specifically discussing his "bad spinal genetics," which make him prone to injuries and better suited to a smaller body mass. His perception of his body as an unyielding material becomes even more apparent when I asked him whether he would want a different body.

Interviewer: Would you want to have a body different from your current one?

Yes (he answered very quickly and then laughed. The speed of his response seemed more like a gesture to show how much he wanted it, rather than being sure about it).

I: What kind of body would that be?

I would want it to be different, basically. I wish I had been born with a different body. I mean, my family's genetics clearly aren't suited for this sport. I have a narrow frame, the shoulder width, what we call the "frame." Also, my spinal health, my spine quality isn't great. I know other people who do this sport, or even much heavier sports, and continue their lives without any problems. I just wish I had been born with a different body.

3.2 Impression Management in the Face of Body's Limits

Previously, I discussed that healthism as an individualist perception of health frames health as a matter of personal responsibility. Therefore, gym attendance gives the impression that one takes responsibility to maintain their health, portrays them as a self-responsible moral subject of neoliberalism. Therefore, many of my interviewees say that they like others to know that they go to the gym as it shows that they are disciplined, self-caring, responsible individuals, who deserve respect.

However, one aspect of healthism is that it equates health with appearance. While gym-attendance is valued as an effort to be healthy, a fit body is a direct symbol of accomplishment exhibiting one is able to establish control over his body. Therefore, interviewees like Berkay (26, financial auditor) and Alperen (32, sales and business development manager in the software industry) who go to the gym regularly and have a fit and quite muscular body mention gym attendance as a symbol of their disciplined personality as this image is supported by their appearance. Men who

are not able to make a visible progress in the gym, on the other hand, report their hesitation to tell people about their gym attendance.

Deniz (25, business analyst) and Murat (33, mechanical engineer)-who both mention fat-prone nature of their bodies-report that they do not tell people that they go to the gym unless the other party notices that they have lost weight. Deniz explains why he does not tell people about his gym attendance as “my workouts are still cardio-centered” rather than muscle building implying that he still pursues humble goals in the gym that do not lend themselves to self-promotion. Parallely, Murat says “I would talk more about it [my gym attendance], if I had a statuesque-like body. I mean I would show off about it”.

Nevertheless, Murat prefers not to dwell on his gym-attendance in his current body, even when the topic arises through others noticing and commenting on his bodily change in a compliment-like manner. This is because, he states that the conversation often shifts to people criticizing his exercise techniques. Correspondingly, Tamer (26, financial data analyst) says that he does not like to tell people that he went to the gym because “it increases expectations, and some people start to judge what you eat because you go to the gym”. These criticisms implying their bodies do not meet expectations, seem annoying to Murat and Tamer. Although they work to keep a regular gym attendance, their bodies indicate people that they might not be a person who can exercise control over his body and encourage others to give them advice on how to exert better control.

Signification of non-accomplishment becomes more visible in words of Cafer Efe (26, high frequency trader) who struggles to increase his body mass. He states that he doesn’t like to tell people that he attends gym or talk about gym attendance. He explains this unwillingness is because he is still a skinny guy, and he does not feel like he “successfully completed” his gym journey. However, he also says that in case his body will visibly progress in the future, he might enjoy talking about his gym attendance; but referring to our discussion about his hard-gainer body, he adds “but I don’t think that it’ll never be at the level that I can show off about”. Parallely, when I asked Yigitcan (28, information management officer), another hard-gainer, whether he tells others about his gym-attendance, he says:

Oh, this is a good question! In the beginning, it was something I liked to tell other people. Because I was considering it like a part of myself. But now I don’t want to tell [people that I went to the gym]. Because, if you go to the gym, you need to make an *outcome* (English word in original) like a more muscular body. I don’t have such a body. So, no need to let people know. Therefore, if I share this info, I say I go for pleasure or I

say I go to maintain *lean* (English word in original) because there are other people as well who aim this. I am not the only one who says this.

Yigitcan openly reveals that he strategically manages impression by misstating his gym motivations for gym attendance although he wants to build muscles. Notably, unlike guys with fat bodies, his skinny body-type allows him to frame his inspiration as a lean one. Thus, he managed not to present his gym journey as a wasted effort.

3.3 Governing the Ungovernability of Bodies

Let's go back to the initial question of this chapter: how could the efforts men make in the gym function to transform them into self-governing subjects while these efforts are simultaneously recognized as incomplete in the face of the limited plasticity of bodies that these practices seem to primarily target?

These men navigate their bodies through the contradiction between their bodily possibilities and the ideal male body image of society. This navigation becomes the primary task that men rationally and efficiently govern, and through which they re-invent themselves as homo oeconomicus. For instance, Yigitcan (28, information management officer) who could not gain the muscle as he longed for says:

But, for instance, some of my friends told me that I gained muscle. They told me that my arms got bigger when we went on holiday together. Maybe, I didn't gain muscle as much as I expected. This unmotivated me a little. I thought, I'll go three times a week instead of five, or even two. I'll take it easy and see how it goes in a year. I would like to be more muscular. I wish my genes were better when it comes to building muscle. I would like to put [bodybuilding] at the center of my life. But I don't want it right now.

Yigitcan continues to go to the gym as he receives some positive feedback from others. However, he gave up working out as hard as he did at the beginning. This is because he noticed that the investment he made in his body in the gym after all is not highly profitable. Similarly, Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) says although he would like to have a muscular body, he can imagine how much effort it would require to achieve. Additionally, his body did not get muscular in three months, which made him change his gym to a cheaper one as his costly gym spending turned out to be not paying back:

After three months, I looked at myself and saw that I hadn't really gained weight or built muscle. I did feel healthier, but there was nothing worth paying that much money for at a gym with a personal trainer.

In a similar vein of rational cost and benefit calculation, Arda (24, art history student and content creator) states:

If muscularity is a spectrum, I would like to be more muscular. But I wouldn't want to be one of those people at the other end who I saw there [at the gym] and said there was a difference between us. I know I can't work that hard for muscle. It's not that valuable and there are things more valuable in terms of both time and effort. Those people sacrifice a lot, including food. I love eating and drinking.

Critically, Arda's words show that the component of costs involves not only resources such as time and energy but also the sacrifice of pleasures such as eating and drinking for many respondents.

Many others like Arda, on the other hand, talk about time as a resource they invest in at the gym. For these guys, it is important to allocate the optimum amount of time to the gym. The optimality of the allocated time to gym attendance is determined both by the benefit they get from this investment and the opportunity cost of spending this valuable and limited resource in the gym rather than in other activities. For instance, Murat (33, mechanical engineer) says:

I sometimes skip [the gym day] and eat less instead. [I do this], especially when I'm busy (*yoğun*) or when the gym is crowded because it takes too much time at those times since you have to wait in line to use equipment.

3.4 Discussion

In the previous chapter, I demonstrated that Turkish white-collar men turn to their bodies in response to a crisis of neoliberal subjectivity that coincides with the broader crisis of neoliberalism. Despite this crisis, they continue to shape their bodies in accordance with the bodily norms of neoliberal society and seek to construct the ideal neoliberal masculine self through bodywork. In this respect, I argued that they

remain neoliberal subjects, rather than becoming post-neoliberal ones.

In this chapter, I turn to the contradictions embedded in this body-centered masculine self-making and explore how the construction of embodied neoliberal masculinity unfolds in everyday practice. Despite the discourse of strong self-control that these men adopt to conceptualize and govern their bodies, they repeatedly encounter the limited malleability of their bodies throughout their gym experiences. Their bodies frequently resist their efforts to transform their embodied neoliberal self through gym attendance. The experience of gym turns to the experience of this resistance by injured, fat-prone, hard-gainer and aging bodies.

Significantly, even as men acknowledge these bodily limitations, they continue to reframe them through the neoliberal discourse of self-control. They strive to rationally and efficiently govern the limitations of their bodies. Ultimately, this ongoing struggle becomes a form of self-governance—a way through which men reaffirm themselves as neoliberal subjects. Thus, similar to their reflex to turn to the gym to reconcile with neoliberal ideals through control of the body when their capacity to perform neoliberal subjectivity is eroded, they continue to adopt the neoliberal discourse of self-control even when their bodies resist transformation.

Although this effort to rationally and efficiently manage bodily limits demands time, energy, money, and adherence to proper diets, time emerges as the most critical factor within the broader context of temporal acceleration in contemporary life (Sugarman and Thrift 2020). Interviewees frequently and in detail addressed issues of temporality—discussing time management skills, the gym’s potential to improve these skills, the difficulty of maintaining attendance amidst time scarcity, and the strategies they deploy to overcome it. Time is understood as a limited resource that is deliberately invested in gym-going, revealing the deeply temporal nature of this self-making process.

4. "FIT ENOUGH BUSY BODIES": TEMPORAL CONTRADICTIONS OF MEN'S GYM ATTENDANCE

As neoliberal self-entrepreneurs, men are expected to discipline their bodies in accordance with bodily standards of society. Moreover, a well-disciplined body is celebrated as embodiment of moral neoliberal virtues: self-responsibility, self-control, and the continual development of human capital. Gym attendance is appreciated as the means to achieve this embodied existence. Nevertheless, leisure has been losing its status due to another responsibility neoliberalism dictates to individuals, which is being busy. Therefore, consuming time at the gym, since it is categorically a leisure activity, is at the risk of being degraded parallel to the degradation of leisure.

This chapter is about this risk. I will strive to portray how the changing meaning of leisure and the neoliberal approach to time is reflected in the discourse on middle-class professional men's gym attendance. By doing so, I aim to reveal the discursive construction of the neoliberal middle-class masculine self. I will argue that the bodybuilder body will emerge as the "unbusy immoral bodies" against which neoliberal middle-class masculine selves with "fit enough" bodies, are discursively constructed.

Crucially, it is important not to overlook that these men are, in fact, busy. Therefore, what they experience is not only a clash of discourses but also a material contradiction. As white-collar employees working long hours in pursuit of career success—another requirement of the neoliberal subject—they have very limited time to spend at the gym. Yet bodily discipline, considering that bodies often resist it, is a time-consuming endeavor. Moreover, their professions enforce a sedentary lifestyle, making it difficult to keep the body in good health and shape. This chapter also explores how men navigate this contradiction. I show that, to overcome the obstacle of time scarcity in attending the gym, they employ various techniques of time management. Interestingly, some report that going to the gym does not exacerbate their time scarcity; instead, it helps them use their time more efficiently and improves their time management skills. Additionally, the marking of bodybuilder bodies as "unbusy immoral bodies" functions as a protection against the potential devalua-

tion of their non-ideal white-collar bodies. In that sense, they strategically turn the discursive tension—which otherwise poses a threat to their gym attendance—into a discursive resource to safeguard themselves against the symbolic devaluation of their own non-ideal bodies.

Remarkably, “fit enough” body ideal is strongly influenced by the lean body ideal. Actually, lean body as a contemporary ideal refers to a low-fat body with not necessarily large but toned muscle mass. However, men—enabled by the ambiguity of the lean body ideal, as explained in the introductory section—construct a discourse centered on the lean body ideal’s subordination of muscularity to fat-burning. Before delving into the main objective of the chapter, I will first present the degradation of the leisurely consumption of time against the busyness under neoliberalism.

4.1 Degradation of Leisure and Moral Elevation of Busyness

4.1.1 Leisure Class to Busy Class

Veblen (1899, as cited in Gershuny, 2005) understands superordinate classes as “leisure classes”. Upper classes holding wealth, do not work themselves but exploit the labor of the working classes. Instead, they engage in leisure activities. Therefore, possessing more leisure time functions as a symbol of one’s class position. Middle-class individuals who have to work to make a living, appeal to the leisurely life of the upper class. In the male breadwinner model of the time, Veblen claims that middle-class wives’ conspicuous use of time is used to compensate for their husband’s ‘shameful busyness’.

Parallel to Veblen, Bourdieu (1984) posits distancing from necessity as the marker of upper-class taste. Therefore, possessing leisure time, in his own words, “time free from economic necessities”, draws a symbolic boundary between the upper and lower classes (Bourdieu, 1986, 246 as cited in Shilling, 1991). Consequently, he suggests that participation in sports activities, a form of leisurely consumption of time, works as a symbolic capital. This makes physical capital gained through sports as a function of time free from necessities in Bourdieu’s thinking (Shilling 1991). Indeed, regarding the acquisition of any kind of cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986) posits:

The length of time for which a given individual can prolong his acquisition depends on the length of time for which his family can provide

him with the time free, i.e., time free from economic necessity, which is the precondition for the initial accumulation (246, as cited in Shilling, 1991).

In contrast to Bourdieu and Veblen, many scholars point out that the symbolic meaning of having a large amount of leisure time changed over the past several decades. Having free time became less prestigious and even disreputable. Rather, busyness became a status symbol (Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan 2017; Gershuny 2005). Bellezza, Paharia, and Keinan (2017) argue that the degradation of leisure against busyness is because busyness turned into an indicator of the individual who embodies a valuable and scarce human capital that is highly demanded in the market (Gershuny 2005; Kuhn and Lozano 2008). Indeed, complaining about time pressure is not common among those located in the lowest strata but among those in the higher strata (Sugarman and Thrift 2020).

4.1.2 Busy in Pursuit of Human Capital: The Neoliberal Subject

Brown (2015), following Foucault (2008), suggests that neoliberalism changed the primary relationship between actors. The essential relationship between all actors became competition rather than exchange. This shift turned human capital into a "constant aim" for the neoliberal subject (Brown 2015, 36). The unstable and flexible spirit of the neoliberal market with constantly changing demands imposes continuous self-development as a necessity for people (Olssen 2006; Sennett 1998). Insecurity becoming an inevitable part of all jobs including white-collar jobs further stimulates the need to improve human capital (Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Lazzarato 2009). Hence, for the neoliberal subject the self-development is a significant and never-ending duty (Turken et al. 2016).

It must be noted that efforts to develop human capital are not only a result of external forces of the market. Rather, neoliberalism, as an ideology, turns self-development into a moral obligation. Moreover, endeavor to self-development goes beyond increasing the market value of the self. Instead, for the neoliberal subject, life becomes a self-realization project as a whole and he feels morally obligated to develop a better version of himself (Rose 1999).

Both moral obligation of neoliberal ideology and imposition of neoliberal market to develop your human capital, using time productively to develop his human capital becomes a strong imperative for the neoliberal subject. Under neoliberalism, individuals feel dissatisfied and immoral when they spend their time unproductively

which does not contribute to self-development (O'Flynn and Petersen 2007, 209). Numerous studies reveal that people hold negative attitudes about idleness and they feel desire for busyness (Ariely, Kamenica, and Prelec 2008; Hsee, Yang, and Wang 2010; Keinan and Kivetz 2011). Hence, busyness signals not only that an individual possesses desired human capital but also, he spends his time improving his human capital which is a strong moral imperative for the neoliberal subject.

4.1.3 Efficient Use of Time

4.1.3.1 Desire to accomplish more in less time

As a result of the spread of market rationality to all dimensions of life in the neoliberal era, efficiency became a principle of governing life (Brown 2015). To put it simply, we started to "feel pressed to accomplish more in less time" (Sugarman and Thrift 2020, 816). Consequently, leisure time became like work time. The neoliberal subject aims to use leisure efficiently so that she can consume, enjoy, and experience more in a shorter time (Sugarman and Thrift 2020). For instance, Tideswell and Faulkner (1999) found that the goal of maximizing benefit and pleasure in a shorter time is a central element of holiday planning.

The idea of accomplishing more in a shorter time also affects the way we perceive the lifetime as a timespan (Sugarman and Thrift 2020). For the neoliberal subject, living the good life increasingly means actualizing as many life possibilities as possible and engaging in a wide variety of experiences within a single lifespan:

She who lives twice as fast can realize twice as many worldly possibilities, achieve two times as many goals, have twice as many experiences, and accumulate twice as many lived events: she thus doubles the number of worldly options that she exhausts (Rosa 2013, 183).

Thus, for the neoliberal subject, a meaningful life must be a busy one.

4.1.3.2 Time management

The desire to use time efficiently to accomplish more in a limited time and single lifespan and to improve your human capital makes time management a crucial skill for the neoliberal subject. Improving time management skills is offered as a solu-

tion to people who suffer from time pressure, reflecting neoliberal ideology ignoring structural reasons and emphasizing individual responsibility (Sugarman and Thrift 2020). Correspondingly, digital time management applications have been increasingly popular (Strzelecka 2022). Time management training became an important part of employee training (Valovirta and Mannevu 2022). Increasingly more psychology research focus on the question of "how can we manage time more efficiently" (Sugarman and Thrift 2020).

Time management is valued as a means to accomplish more in less time for the neoliberal subject. It is also an end itself since time management skill shows that one embodies neoliberal values such as self-control, self-governance, and efficiency. Therefore, failure in managing time indicates that one cannot govern himself and his life efficiently.

4.2 Mastering Time: Gym Attendance Amid Busy Schedules

Gym attendance is one of the primary means to fulfill the masculine responsibility to have a lean and muscular body. Bodybuilding, with its emphasis on physical transformation, aligns well with contemporary culture, which increasingly associates health with appearance (Shilling 2003, 5). Nevertheless, consuming time at the gym, since it is categorically a leisure activity, is at risk of being degraded parallel to the degradation of leisure. In response to this risk, my interviewees do not present themselves as men who can purchase leisure time in the form of gym attendance. Rather, almost all of them mention busy schedules at one point during the interviews and usually cite it as a challenge to attend gym regularly. Busy schedules emerge as the primary and the most legitimate reason for taking breaks from the gym or skipping gym days. Those who do attend the gym regularly, emphasize that they manage to go to the gym despite their busy lives.

For instance, Cafer Efe (26, high frequency trader) says that he works long hours, and he tries to go to the gym despite his busy schedule since "it is good to spend time doing something rather than looking at the screen for hours". Nevertheless, his program allows him to go to the gym twice a week at most. Onur (44, accommodation manager) states that it is challenging to go to the gym regularly because "it takes up time since one needs to allocate time to go there, start working out, finish working out, take shower, get ready." To overcome this challenge and to manage to go to the gym, he fits gym time into his lunch break. Many respondents echo the phrase "the best gym is the one closest to home". For instance, Deniz, a 25-

year-old business analyst, chose his current gym due to its convenient location, only 300 meters away from his workplace and placed between his office and home. This proximity enables him to extract transportation time from the overall gym time and integrate gym sessions into the short unproductive time after work which he terms "dead time".

In a similar manner, Berkay, (26, financial auditor), says he goes to the gym before work:

I am working too much, when I say too much, I mean it. I work seventy hours a week in winter. And I go to the gym at the expense of sleeping less. I sacrifice my sleep time and go to the gym at 6:30 pm. It makes me feel like I can make time for myself.

Interviewer: Do you like to share that you go to the gym with people? Is it considered cool?

Yeah, I guess. Many people in our office can't manage it because of the intense work pressure. Only an ambitious person can do it. But in the office, I only share it with my small circle. Because we complain about busy schedules to managers. I don't want them to say, "he can spare time for himself" (while I complain about busy schedules).

So, gym attendance does not work as evidence of economic means that enable one to consume time free from economic necessities. For Berkay, not gym attendance itself, but going to the gym despite his heavy workload and long working hours by sacrificing his sleep, is a source of pride. He appreciates this as an indicator of his ambitious personality.

Another important quality associated with regular gym attendance is time management ability. It might be argued that it is also present in Onur's and Berkay's accounts although less visibly. In Sinan's (41, college instructor) words, however, it becomes explicit:

People always have excuses, right? Like, "We're at school until 5 pm" "we're doing this and that," "we have kids, blah blah." I find it funny, like, can't you spare even half an hour? Seriously, not even half an hour? It might sound judgmental, but... you know, maybe sports demonstrate that it's possible. When you organize yourself, your life, and your time properly, you can always find time (for gym).

In Sinan's account, gym attendance emerges as an outcome of the ability to manage one's time well and, more broadly, one's life – a reflection neoliberal imperative to

self-govern. People who cannot manage to go to the gym are portrayed as those who fail to govern their lives properly.

In the words of gym-goers, there was a consistent preference for shorter training sessions. Some of the strategies people often use are going to the gym during off-peak hours to save time on things like waiting for equipment, taking short rests between sets, and choosing a gym close to home or work to shorten the time spent training, if not the duration of the workout. Alperen (32, sales and business development manager in the software industry), who attends a boutique gym offering “bootcamp training” group sessions. As its name signifies, this training style is intended to get maximum benefit within shortest possible time. Alperen who reflects on his concern about limiting the time he spends in the gym, mentions the short duration of the group training sessions as an advantage so that he does not have to spend hours training.

Avoiding social interaction in the gym is another strategy men apply to shorten their work-out time. Sinan (41, college instructor) says:

I used to socialize in the gym. I went there and during the exercise breaks, chatted with people, and met new people. Since the people around me were usually my students (because he goes to the gym located in the college where he works), I enjoyed joking around with them. But after a while, when I realized I was spending too much time, taking up a big chunk of my time, I decided to reduce it by putting on my headphones and focusing on my workout. So, if I could finish my work within about 35 to 40 minutes, it was ideal for me, and I tried to stick to that.

Similarly, Selim, (25, doctoral student in an engineering major), who goes to the same college gym as Sinan, states that just like Sinan he puts on "headphones" and does not interact with people for the same reason. He even rejects beginner friends who want to train together so that they can benefit from his experience because group workouts take longer than individual ones.

Developing social capital, i.e. building a valuable network is shown to be one of the motivations and benefits behind participation in sports and fitness activities (Crossley 2004, 2006; Stebbins 2014). Nevertheless, we might suggest that the network Sinan who is an instructor, and Selim who is a doctoral student, could build in the college gym primarily consisting of undergraduate students, does not constitute a valuable social capital that can be converted into other benefits. Therefore, long workouts involving socialization do not seem like a profitable use of time. Alperen,

(32 years old, sales and business development manager in the software industry), who attends a boutique gym focusing on group training, also has concerns about limiting the time he spends in the gym. He mentions the short duration of the group training sessions as an advantage so that he does not have to spend hours training. However, he does not see social interaction in the gym as a waste of time. In contrast to Sinan and Selim, he mentions that he enjoys social interaction in the gym, makes friends, and develops business relationships in the gym. The high-segment gym consisting of other middle- and upper-class professionals serves as a valuable source of social capital for him, making time spent for social interaction rewarding.

We see this rational calculation regarding time spent in the gym more obviously in Ali's account, (34 years old, marketing manager) who used to go to a low-segment gym but now attends an upper-class gym. He says that when he goes to 'the gym for commons', he does not want to spend time in the gym. He tried to 'do the business' as quickly as possible and leave the gym. Nevertheless, currently, since he attends a 'gym for elites', he spends more time in the gym since this new gym 'provides high-SES people and a social environment'. Indeed, when I ask him about the benefits of gym attendance, 'meeting new people' he says.

Thus, these men refrain from presenting gym attendance as an outcome of possessing leisure time. Instead, they emphasize that their busy lives pose a challenge for gym attendance which they overcome by applying various strategies. These strategies include incorporating gym time into unproductive periods, such as before work that would otherwise be spent sleeping, during lunch breaks, or unproductive after-work time. Additionally, they choose gyms close to home to minimize transportation time and shorten their gym sessions by avoiding gym activities other than exercise itself in case they do not provide further benefits such as valuable social capital.

By adopting this discourse, regular gym attendance is portrayed as an activity reserved for people who can successfully navigate these challenges thanks to desired qualities like ambition, effective time management, and self-governance. Through this lens, the gym continues to be a source of pride for these men despite the degradation of leisure by neoliberal ideology.

4.3 Busy Bodies: Constructing Neoliberal Middle-Class Masculinities in the Gym

Berkay (26, financial auditor) underlines the importance of early gym attendance as a symbol of proper middle-class masculinity, during our discussion about masculini-

ties and what defines a masculine man. He noted that muscularity is not necessarily associated with masculinity in his workplace, but rather with knowledge. When asked if muscular men are less knowledgeable, he responded:

Some of them are. I can infer (that some of the muscular men are not knowledgeable) from their behaviors. They comport themselves with useless behavior. But there are others, who comport themselves with good behavior. They seem to work in good places. Most of them must be even more knowledgeable than me so they have a very high income.

Interviewer: How do you know this? Most of them have very luxurious cars. Their clothes are expensive. Someone without an orderly life wouldn't show up at 6:30 (at the gym). They must have more valuable things to do later, to have gone to the gym by 6:30.

I: You mentioned that some of the muscular men engage in useless behaviors, can you explain what kind of useless behaviors you are talking about?

Like screaming, using every place... useless behaviors, you know, behaviors civilized people wouldn't engage in.

I: But aren't they also showing up at 6:30 am (since you encounter them)?

Berkay: (pauses) Yeah... well, they must've good income and jobs too. (pauses) They drive good cars too.

It is noteworthy that Berkay values not merely attending the gym but specifically going there at 6:30 a.m. because of the status of busyness associated with this timing. He interprets this as these busy men are likely to possess valuable business knowledge. This knowledge makes them masculine and contributes to their human capital which makes them sought after in the market. Although this interpretation may seem self-contradictory, given that some other men that Berkay does not view as knowledgeable and masculine also attend the gym early, the discourse he adopts suggests the role of busyness in the construction of neoliberal professional masculinity. Going to the gym early as a sign of busyness, turns into a symbol of proper masculinity.

This association of busyness with proper neoliberal masculinity becomes more evident when I ask my respondents about more muscular men in the gym. Some perceive highly muscular and fit bodies as an indicator of the irrational use of time and invaluable human capital. When I ask Arda (24, art history student and content creator) who says that he did not want to be one of the muscular guys in the gym because it requires too much labor, energy, and sacrificing in terms of diet, whether these efforts give a signal about the personality of people, he states:

When I see someone, who is fit and a little bit muscular, I say ok, it is optimal but... okay I will talk frankly, when I think about a [highly] muscular person, I feel like he isn't intellectually developed, like there is a negative correlation [between intellectual development and muscularity], because of time. But also, he cares about physical appearance and muscularity too much, I feel like it is superficial. It might be wrong, but I found myself thinking like this.

Similarly, when I ask Ufuk (26, master's student in electrical and electronics engineering) whether more muscular men in the gym annoying/discomforting for him are, he says:

When I see men with huge muscles, I say "*poor them*" (he used the exact English expression) they must've been focused on only this [gaining muscles] and nothing else... Whenever I see someone who goes to the gym every day and with an enormously muscular body, I say "Here's another idiot"... My basic motivation is not to be like them. On the contrary, they seem very far from aesthetics to me. (Since men with huge muscles are annoying for me), I go to the gym at 8 am., out of peak time, when it's not crowded. If I go (at peak time), I ignore them.

The respondents emphasize that highly muscular bodies, which require plenty of time, signal that men with such bodies use their time inefficiently and invest all the time they have in developing their bodies. Therefore, they neglect other aspects of self-development such as intellectual development which is a significant entity of valuable human capital. Consequently, muscular bodies are coded as a sign of invaluable human capital, inefficiency, and failure to govern the self rationally.

Critically, men with excessively muscular bodies are portrayed as lacking rational self-governance, proper self-management, and intellectual capacity—traits central in the construction of professional middle-class masculinities. This positioning places them in a lower position in the moral and class-based hierarchy of masculinities. Moreover, the discursive construction of muscular men without these qualities is part of the interviewees' construction of their own masculinities. The portrayal of the "enormously muscular" man constitutes the other from which interviewees construct their neoliberal middle-class masculinities by differentiation. For Arda, who is an art historian, he constitutes the non-intellectual; for Ufuk, pursuing an academic career, he is a "stupid animal"; for finance worker Berkay, he is the man without business knowledge that the market demands.

4.4 Transformative Power: Improvement of Time Management Skills Through Gym Attendance

In the second chapter, I showed that gym attendance is not merely a practice in developing the bodily aspect of human capital, engaged in by men who are already completely neoliberal subjects. Instead, it constitutes a body-centered self-transformation that turns men into neoliberal subjects. This notion is suggested by interviewees reporting that gym attendance led them to acquire neoliberal qualities such as self-control, self-governance, and efficiency. Alongside these qualities, time management skills emerged both as a distinct attribute and as a crystallization of possessing all these skills. Highlighting the self-transformative aspect of gym attendance, interviewees suggest that regular gym attendance, despite busy schedules, is not only a product of successful time management but also improves their time management skills:

The gym made my daily planning a bit healthier, I guess. Back when I was living on campus working in the city of X (the city he lived in before he moved to Istanbul), I didn't really need to think minute-by-minute to plan my day. But even there, you know, the gym brings thoughts like "when will I eat, (before or after going to the gym), what time will I wake up in the morning," as soon as I wake up, "can I fit in a workout before class," thoughts like these made my time planning, my daily planning, a bit easier. And it also enhanced my abilities, and my skills, in terms of time. (Sinan, 41, college instructor)

Sinan points out that adding the gym as an extra activity to his schedule enhances the need for time planning. Engaging in planning his day more seriously, in order to maintain regular gym attendance, serves as an exercise through which he develops better time management skills. Additionally, gym time breaks the day into smaller, more manageable pieces. In this way, time becomes easier to manage and use efficiently. Kerem (26, master's student in economics) also says gym attendance makes him use time more efficiently, although he explains the process behind this change differently from Sinan:

Exercise stimulates the whole body, you become more aware of your entire body, which also affects your perception of time. It enables you to use time more efficiently. You become more conscious of time as well. Interestingly, when you're normally engaged in a passive activity, time seems to fly by, doesn't it? It rushes by very quickly. Because you've

become lost in other thought processes. However, in sports, perhaps because this awareness increases, it pushes you to be constantly present in the moment to some extent. Maybe I've attributed too much meaning to this. (Kerem, 26, master's student in economics)

Deniz (25 business analyst), who goes to the gym right after work, does not mention improvement of time management skills specifically but says the gym makes him use time more efficiently in two ways. First, he reclaims this time which was normally spent resting, in the gym which is a more productive activity. Second, he says gym time functions as a "buffer time" (he used the exact English expression) making him use the rest of the day more productively. When I asked him what he meant by 'buffer time', he told me that going to the gym right after work "resets" his mind and helps him release stress. Therefore, it enables him to continue working efficiently for the rest of the day.

4.5 Discussion

In this chapter I explored gym attendance among neoliberal professional men as a site where time, leisure, and masculinity are negotiated amid both discursive and material contradictions. Although gym attendance is categorically a leisure activity, I showed that it is discursively reconstructed in a neoliberal context in which leisure is devalued and busyness is morally elevated. Crucially, this tension is not only discursive but also material: these men are genuinely busy. As white-collar professionals working long hours, they face real constraints on their time. My interviews suggest that men emphasize their ability to attend the gym despite busy schedules, presenting it as evidence of self-control, efficiency, and proper self-governance. In this way, gym attendance retains its symbolic value—not as a sign of free time, but as a sign of overcoming time scarcity in line with neoliberal virtues.

I also discussed how busyness plays a central role in the construction of proper middle-class masculinity. Early gym attendance, in particular, is interpreted as a marker of ambition and productivity. These men are perceived as proper neoliberal subjects whose busyness signals that they possess valuable human capital demanded by the market. In contrast, excessively muscular men are portrayed as devoting too much time to bodily development at the expense of other valued domains, such as intellectual or professional growth. In this context, the lean body ideal—flexible and vaguely defined—becomes crucial. Enabled by its ambiguity, men construct a discourse in which muscularity is subordinated to fat-burning and time-efficiency,

allowing them to align bodily aspiration with the temporal constraints of their white-collar careers. In this way, the lean body ideal reemerges as the 'fit enough body' that professional men can build while sustaining a successful and busy white-collar career.

Finally, I highlighted the self-transformative function of gym attendance, especially in relation to time management. While time management is often framed as a prerequisite for regular gym attendance, many interviewees also describe it as a capacity that is developed *through* this practice. Thus, gym attendance becomes both a reflection and a generator of neoliberal qualities such as self-discipline, personal optimization, and the efficient use of time.

Hence, even as men navigate these contradictions, they rarely step outside the logic of neoliberalism. Instead, they draw on its discourse to explain, justify, and sustain their practices—parallel to Chapter 2, where men turned to the gym when they felt a rupture in their ability to sustain neoliberal masculine subjectivity, and in Chapter 3, where they navigate the tension between the discourse of self-control and the body's resistance to being controlled. In that sense, I argue that despite the tensions they articulate in the enactment and maintenance of neoliberal subjectivity, they remain committed to neoliberalism as an ideological framework. Rather than rejecting neoliberalism, they use its very logic to make sense of their practices and negotiate the contradictions embedded within them.

5. THE NEOLIBERAL MODE OF MASCULINITY: HYBRID MASCULINITIES, THE SERVICE ECONOMY, AND GENDERED RISKS

Gym attendance is a form of bodywork that reinforces masculine bodily characteristics, especially increasing the muscle mass of the body (Wacquant 1995). A common interpretation of men's gym attendance highlights this aspect of it. This account frames male gym attendance as a reactive masculine act in response to the crisis of masculinity. In this view, going to the gym is framed as a reactive masculine act in response to the crisis of masculinity. By building strength and emphasizing gendered physical difference, men are seen as reasserting masculine supremacy in response to feminism, the entry of women into male-dominated spaces, and the feminization of labor (Dworkin and Wachs 2009). Within this framework, gym attendance is often treated as separate from men's broader turn to the body, marked by increasing engagement with bodywork traditionally associated with femininity—such as body depilation (Frank 2014), cosmetic surgery (Ricciardelli, Clow, and White 2010), hair-dressing (Barber 2008), and fashion (Bordo 1999; De Casanova 2015). These latter practices are typically conceptualized as expressions of softer versions of masculinity (Anderson 2009; Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Other scholars (Hakim 2015, 2018; Hiramoto and Lai 2017; Marshall, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts 2020) challenge this conceptualization of male bodybuilding. They emphasize that bodybuilder men often objectify their bodies—a stance traditionally understood as feminine. In line with this perspective, in this chapter, I argue that gym participation among Turkish urban white-collar men is not merely a reactive masculine response. Rather, they exemplify hybrid masculinities—forms of masculinities constructed through the integration of feminine elements into masculinity. These feminine elements encompass tastes, behaviors, and ideologies traditionally associated with women and gay masculinities (Bridges and Pascoe 2014).

Significantly, hybrid masculinities are examined as a strategy to maintain threatened masculine hegemony. As Bridges and Pascoe (2014) argue, men, especially middle-

class men, utilize hybridization to present themselves as progressive men and to distance themselves from racialized, ethnicized, or working-class masculinities. Offering a different emphasis, Wolfman, Hearn, and Yeadon-Lee (2021) situate hybrid masculinities within the context of the neoliberal economy. Service sector jobs of the new economy requiring aesthetic and emotional labor, demand men to enact feminine performances. In response to this demand, men perform hybrid masculinities that incorporate feminine-coded practices to craft a marketable self.

In the first part of this chapter, I will show that my white-collar Turkish interviewees' gym practices align with the demands of the new economy, including the objectification and commodification of male bodies and the performance of aesthetic labor. They often do not aspire to hypermasculine bulky bodies, but instead to slimmer and fit bodies and enjoy presenting their bodies to gaze. Moreover, they have a negative stance toward men with hypermasculine bodies and hypermasculinity in general. Finally, they are highly concerned with their appearance and gym attendance often goes alongside other forms of bodywork that are traditionally coded as feminine.

In the second part, I turn to the ambivalences within this process. I ask: Is it a smooth strategy? Isn't the appropriation of feminine elements into masculinity prone to the risk of feminization for men? Can the increasing bodily concern among men be interpreted as vanity—an attribute traditionally associated with femininity? I argue that the extent and form of the hybridization of masculinities—through the appropriation of feminine elements while still allowing a man to be considered masculine—are uncertain. Therefore, the construction of masculine identities through hybridization is a risky project that can result in feminization. However, the risk involved in hybridization reflects hybrid masculinities' neoliberal character. The hybrid masculine subject is, above all, a neoliberal subject: an entrepreneur of the self, expected to take and manage risks to enhance his human capital. Therefore, I further argue that the risk of feminization is *positively intrinsic* to hybrid masculinities. By this, I mean that for neoliberal men, risk of feminization is not an undesired or unavoidable aspect of masculinity; rather, the navigation of masculine risks plays a positively constitutive role in the construction of manhood in the neoliberal era.

5.1 Bringing The Male Body into Gaze

A couple of years ago, I was drinking coffee with two friends, Olgu and Ali, in Akaretler, one of the upscale neighborhoods in Istanbul, where Olgu's office is. At

that time, both Ali and Olgu were in their late twenties. They were upwardly mobile sons of lower-middle-class families who had studied at Bogazici University, one of the most prestigious state universities in Turkey. Both men were about to move to Europe, as Olgu had been admitted to a business master's program at an elite college in the UK, and Ali had found a prestigious job at a Europe office of a prestigious global technology company.¹ Notably, both men were good-looking, with heights of approximately 185 cm. with conventionally gendered bodies. During this meeting, the topic of discussion turned to the gym. Olgu commented that we were all attractive guys with nice facial features and tall stature. Our bodies were fit and somewhat well-proportioned. "However," he added, drawing an imaginary graph in the air and pointing to a spot with his index finger, "we're still in the B-class. Most women like us, but it's still challenging with A-class girls. If we go to the gym", he moved his finger to the upper right of the imaginary graph, "we can climb to the A-class and A-class girls."

Foucauldian understanding of—the extension of market rationality from the economic sphere to every sphere of life—was crystallized in the words of my friend (Brown 2015; Collier 2011; Foucault 2008). He used very economical language to discuss romantic and sexual relationships and to categorize and describe women and men, as well as male and female bodies. My friend suggested we should invest in our bodies rationally at the gym and increase their market value. In his words, our male bodies were commodified. We moved into the eyes of others, i.e., became the object of the gaze, in contrast to the conventional gender norm suggesting men are the ones who look and women are the ones who are looked at.

Accounts from my interviewees demonstrate that the anecdote I shared at the beginning was not an exception in straight Turkish middle-class men's bodily perception. The neoliberalization of men's understanding of their bodies strongly pertains to Turkish straight middle-class masculinities. All the men report that they receive comments about their appearance from others, including friends, significant others, family members, and co-workers. Furthermore, they shape their bodies according to the feedback they receive from others. For instance, Kerem (26, master's student in economics) explains why he decided to attend the gym:

The previous semester was incredibly demanding; I dedicated myself to intensive studying. I also hit rock bottom physically and reached the highest weight of my life. I faced a lot of '*fat-shaming*' (he used the exact English phrase) from society and the people around me. When I

1. Ali, after spending couple of years in Europe employed in this company, moved back to Turkey. Later, he became one of the interviewees of this study.

tried to wear my old pants, people were like “Kerem, you shouldn’t wear those anymore.” Even Ibrahim, a shopkeeper I greeted on my way home in my neighborhood told me that “you became paunchy”. I didn’t feel good about my appearance, so I decided to start going to the gym.

Kerem’s account is significant in showing that increasing consciousness about the male body is not exclusive to men who attend the gym and who could be argued to be unrepresentatively conscious about their bodies. Kerem’s experience suggests that his body—and the undesired changes in it—became the subject of his social circle, and that the comments of various others made him go to the gym.

My interviews indicate that men not only feel the gaze of others but also usually enjoy it. Almost all of them mentioned the positive comments and looks of others as a benefit of going to the gym, and as one of the main motivators for maintaining gym attendance. Deniz (25, business analyst), who recently lost weight by attending the gym, says:

I feel something that comes with exercise; I feel a change in the way people look at me, in the vibe I radiate to the environment. I feel like I’m being looked at more, for example, I feel like I evoke a certain feeling in the other person, you know, I didn’t feel that much before. It might be related to my self-confidence as well. On the other hand, it could be because of the changes in posture or, you know, the things brought by the change in your body. It might be reciprocal, too.

Murat (33, mechanical engineer) says: “While you’re flirting with a woman, she touches your arm and your chest... It’s very nice when she asks whether you went to the gym.” Bartu (20, computer engineering student) says that he did not receive as many comments about the bodily changes initiated by gym attendance as he wished, and openly expressed his desire to receive more compliments:

It would be nice to receive more compliments. I feel like I’ve made a lot of progress, but I don’t hear much feedback from others. Sometimes, they’ll just ask, ‘Do you go to the gym? You look different.’ But not very often. It would be better to hear it more frequently; it would motivate me.

Remarkably, they enjoy not only the gaze of women but also that of men:

Interviewer: Do you receive any comments from people around you re-

garding changes in your appearance, like what you wear, how you look, and so on?

Alperen: Of course, I do. Like, you know, when you look fit and you dress up nicely, you get reactions from people around you. Whether it's from friends, colleagues, whatever. They say something like, "Wow, you look really smart today," or when you're going on a summer vacation, like to the beach or somewhere, and you look fitter, they'll notice. You can even see it in the way strangers (he stressed this word) look at you, you know? Whether it's from the opposite sex or the same sex, you inevitably attract attention. It's like, everyone has this instinct to seek approval, you know? And when you get that feeling, it's incredibly satisfying. (32, sales and business development manager)

Similarly, Onur (44, accommodation manager) talks with enjoyment about how his male colleagues and friends comment on his bodily changes. He mentioned that sometimes his friends touch his arm, notice that it is getting bigger and toned, and ask, "What's going on here? What's happened to your arm?" Additionally, in the college gym I had been attending for nine months, it was also my observation that men commonly touch and compliment each other's bodies. These compliments are not in the form of approving big size or strength but focus on the aesthetic qualities of the body. Men's words being liked by women is open to interpretation within the framework of the hunting male in dating. However, enjoying the gaze of other men excludes this interpretation. Even if it suggests a homosocial competition through the body, it is significant that this competition is not based on bodily strength but on bodily aesthetics/appearance.

5.2 "I Don't Want 45 cm Biceps": Distancing from Hypermasculine Body and Men

5.2.1 Preference of Lean Bodies

The lean body ideal defines men's aesthetic bodily ideals. It is defined in contrast to the bulky body—a larger and stronger body with more muscle mass and a higher fat percentage. What characterizes a lean body, in contrast, is low body fat at the expense of some muscle mass, making it slimmer than bulky bodies. The low body fat emphasis of the lean body ideal, at the expense of some muscle mass, makes muscles more defined; in other words, muscles become more visible. When my interviewees talk about their bodily ideals or goals, they usually start by mentioning

lowering body fat and having a fit body, with increasing muscle mass coming after. Additionally, muscle mass is mentioned as “having a good muscle-fat proportion.” They talk about defined muscles rather than big muscles.

In addition to what they want, they commonly stress what they do not want, which is a hypermasculine bulky body. They refer to this body type by saying “too muscular,” or “gigantic” (*dev gibi*). Interestingly, during interviews, one of the most repeated notions was 45 or 50 cm biceps. Many men say that they don’t want to have 45 cm or 50 cm biceps to stress their point. They commonly say that such bodies are not aesthetic. For instance, Ufuk (26, master’s student in engineering) says gym attendance “gives you a fit appearance, but if you exaggerate it, you get swollen, like a Hercules. I never want to look like that. It looks ugly.”

In their accounts, the desire to appear aesthetic outweighs the desire to be traditionally masculine. Although they aim to increase their body mass and masculinize their bodies, they want these changes to enhance their aesthetic appearance—one that is conventionally gendered but not hypermasculine. They prioritize lowering body fat, improving fitness, and developing defined muscles over simply building large muscles. Consequently, they aspire not to achieve big, hypermasculine physiques, but rather a lean body ideal characterized by low body fat and smaller, yet visible and well-shaped, muscle mass.

When I ask Murat (33, mechanical engineer) whether he would want to be muscular like one of the bodybuilders he says:

I wouldn’t want to be one of these bodybuilders (with bulky bodies), but I would like to have a fitter body like a cyclist’s body, not a bulky physique. I’d want to be one of the defined (*define*)² guys, like those sculptures displayed in museums.

As Murat’s account suggests, his bodily aspiration is shaped by the desire to be liked by others as a bodily object, as if a sculpture displayed in a museum. Similarly, Deniz (25, business analyst) refers to another setting where bodies are publicly displayed: the beach. He says that his expectation from the gym is to be “fit,” although not “muscular.” To clarify, he describes this body type as a “summer body.” “Summer body” (or “beach body”) is a popular term referring to a body type considered attractive enough for display on the beach in swimwear. Considering the beach as a

2. He used the word “define,” pronouncing it as in Turkish (de-fi-ne). This usage is not found in the official Turkish Language Association (TDK) dictionary nor widely used in mainstream society but is part of fitness jargon in Turkey. It also reflects the influence of global fitness trends, as Turkish gym-goers adopt English-derived terms.

social setting where bodies are naked and public, it places the gaze of others at the center. By using the term, Deniz signals that the body he aspires to is not defined by strength or function, but by its aesthetic appeal and desirability in the eyes of others.

5.2.2 Bulky Men as 'Meatheads'

As I explained in the introduction, men are associated with the 'mind' side of the Cartesian mind/body dualism—aligned with reason over emotion and civilization over nature. They are expected to subordinate their bodies to their minds, a capacity that is thought to distinguish them from women, who are viewed as emotional, embodied, and closer to nature. However, this capacity is not attributed equally to all men. While white, middle-class masculinities are constructed as rational and civilized, non-Western, racialized, and working-class men are often associated with the body. This distinction is particularly visible in the stereotypical portrayals of Black men as physically strong but intellectually dull and primitive or lacking self-control (Hall 2001), against which white middle-class masculinities are constructed (Kimmel 2016).

My interviewees not only disapprove of muscular, bulky bodies but also express disdain toward men with such bodies. They often stereotype bodybuilders in ways that echo racist caricatures of Black men. A recurring image they invoke is “a big man who is screaming while lifting weights and disturbing other people.” These men are typically described as “primitive,” (*ilkel*) “uncivilized,” (*medeniyetsiz*) “rude,” (*kaba*) “brutish,” (*hayvani*) “lacking intellectual capacity,” and “someone who develops his body but not his head.” Hence, within this discourse, they are portrayed as overly embodied men who have failed to subordinate their bodies to their minds—thereby marked as inferior or less civilized.

For my Turkish middle-class urbanized interviewees, the brutish and dull bulky man seems to correspond to the image of a man who failed to westernize and urbanize himself. For instance, Sinan (41, college instructor) calls these men “meathead.” (*etkafa*) He describes “meathead” talk as “Dude (*kanka*), I have 45 cm biceps.” Remarkably, while saying this, he imitates the accent associated with the inner rural Anatolian dialect of Turkish—as he pronounces the “q” sound as a “g” sound and speaks gutturally. Not all, but many men connect this stereotype with lower-class gyms that they call “backstreet” (*merdivenaltı*) or “neighborhood” (*mahalle*) gyms.

Similarly, when I ask Ufuk (26, master’s student in engineering), a skinny guy,

whether he would think of muscular men are more masculine compared to less muscular ones he says:

I don't think that's the case. Uneducated, primitive, pro-AKP people would think like that. Because they look at it in a very simplistic way — like, evolutionarily, the more muscular one is the more masculine. But that entirely depends on the person's level of education and their ability to think critically.

Interviewer: What do you think masculinity is?

It gives negative connotations. Like someone who doesn't help his wife with housework, doesn't take care of his kid. He's rude, can't communicate with people —primitive. It reminds me of my relatives in Diyarbakir, it feels like them.

I: Then, according to this definition, are muscular men more masculine?

Ufuk: I mean, there're also gay people, they are muscular but they've nothing to do with being masculine. I don't know, I'm confused.

Despite Ufuk is being confused, similar to Sinan, he makes a connection between the image of a bulky bodybuilder and the image of provincial/rural masculinities.

Turkey's historical orientation as a Westernizing society positions it in a continual relationship of comparison with the West, which is constructed as more developed, rational, and civilized (Ahiska 2003; Sirman 2004). Social practices in Turkey are frequently assessed through this comparative lens, particularly with respect to gender relations. As Sirman (2004) argues, the status of women in Turkish society often becomes a symbolic measure of the nation's progress toward Western modernity (40). Within this framework, the image of Atatürk came to represent modernist-secularist hegemonic masculinity, one that claimed gender egalitarianism and alignment with Western ideals. This model of masculinity stands in contrast to that promoted by the ruling Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), which advances a more conservative, patriarchal gender regime (Ozbay and Soybakis 2020). Ufuk's comment can be understood within this symbolic framework: he portrays the bodybuilder as someone who failed in Westernization and is regressive in gender relations.

Ufuk's confusion is also remarkable. He seems uncertain about whether masculinity is about the body or bodily characteristics, and even about whether masculinity is something positive or negative. On the one hand, he denounces men who associate masculinity with muscular physiques and calls them primitive. On the other hand, the traits he uses to define masculinity—such as being rude, unhelpful, and emotionally distant—resemble the very men he criticizes. At the same time, he disconnects

masculinity from the body once again by referring to muscular gay men.

This confusion is not an exception when it comes to masculinity. My informants often express uncertainty about what masculinity means and which traits are considered masculine. Moreover, while not the majority, some of them even describe masculinity in negative terms. For instance, Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) reports that he thinks more muscular men give a masculine impression. “But” he says, “it could be because I am not someone very masculine.” When I ask why he does not think of himself as masculine, he explains:

I don’t feel like that, you know. I’ve been in a lot of male environments throughout my life, and I still am in many. Most of my friends are men anyway... But sometimes it’s because my interests don’t exactly match theirs, and sometimes the conversations can feel kind of crude, stuff like that, you know.

Hence, Cafer Efe associates masculinity both with muscularity and negative traits like crude conversations. Nevertheless, he also questions this association. He says, “I don’t know whether masculinity can be inferred from appearance,” and mentions that personal trainers who give a very masculine appearance might turn out to be more “kind and normal” persons when “you sit and talk with them.” I ask:

Interviewer: You mentioned that one’s appearance might be masculine, but he might not be. Then, what kind of inner qualities make a person masculine do you think?

Cafer Efe: It’s like being confident and feeling comfortable with yourself. I don’t know why, maybe it’s not quite right to associate the two, but in my mind, it keeps getting associated with masculinity. Other than that, it might also be about appearance, for example. Like, how can I put it... no matter how confident and comfortable someone seems, if he’s, say, a *köse* (a man who cannot grow any facial hair, giving him a boyish or childlike appearance) guy, I still wouldn’t get that masculine vibe from him. So that’s a factor too, I guess.

He refers to masculinity as a specific combination of bodily and inner qualities and says that these two might not be in harmony for every person. More importantly, resonating with Ufuk (26, master’s student in engineering), he connects masculinity to both desired (self-confidence) and undesired (crudeness) traits.

Yigitcan (28, information management officer) says that masculinity might bring a “toxic culture” and links masculinity with “being more power-oriented and less

other-oriented.” Also, he states that women can be masculine as well and continues:

My previous boss was a woman, but she was incredibly masculine. She was toxic and caused an incredible amount of stress. Now we have a new manager who is also a woman, but she is nothing like that. She is quite feminine.

Corresponding to both Cafer Efe and Yigitcan, Tamer (26, financial data analyst) says that masculinity is not only about muscularity but also about behaviors. He mentions that he knows a muscular guy from the gym who “is kind and never looks down on others,” and he defines masculinity as “behaving in a dominant way,” adding that “in my mind, masculinity is a bad thing.”

Thus, most of my interviewees distance themselves not only from hypermasculinity but, to some extent, from masculinity itself. Some perceive hypermasculine bodies and personalities as a unified whole, while others acknowledge that hypermasculine bodies may create a negative impression, even though some individuals with such physiques are actually “normal” and “kind.” In this regard, they echo concerns raised in a fitness blog article that compares lean and bulky physiques. The article warns men aspiring to develop bulky bodies that “people may be scared of you,” as “there is a very real stigma associated with being a more muscular or imposing person” (Team, Flex Editorial 2023).

5.3 Aesthetic Labor

5.3.1 Embodying the Proper White-Collar Worker

The concept of aesthetic labor refers to workers’ embodiment of a certain corporeality, encompassing body shape, posture, movement, and speaking style required by their job. This corporeality allows workers to “look good” and “sound right” (Warhurst, Nickson, and Witz 2003; Wolkowitz 2006). Typically, this aesthetic is middle-class and conventionally gendered. In the Western context, it is typically white (Williams 2001). In the Turkish context, considering the racialization of Kurdish identity, it is not typically Kurd but Turk (Ergin 2014, 330)³.

3. Ergin emphasizes that in reality, Turks and Kurds are not identifiable by their appearance. People rely on accents and manners to distinguish a Turk from a Kurd. Nevertheless, Kurds are attributed certain physical characteristics that distinguish them from Turks.

In service sector work, especially when it involves direct interaction with customers, employees' identity becomes an integral part of the job. In these jobs, the embodiment of the service provider becomes part of the service itself (Leidner 1993; Wolkowitz 2006). The rise of service jobs, together with the process of deindustrialization in the neoliberal era (Castells 2000a), has elevated the importance of bodywork for workers (Wolkowitz 2006).

The bodywork practiced by my interviewees in the gym is part of their endeavor to become qualified workers. The bodily capital they accumulate through gym attendance enables them to perform the aesthetic labor demanded by their jobs. My respondents explicitly state that they are expected to embody a certain corporeality as part of their professional roles. They mention attending the gym as a means to meet these expectations.

Murat (33, mechanical engineer) has been going to the gym for over seven years, although with long breaks. It had been four months since he had restarted when we spoke. Despite being "disposed to gaining weight", he struggles to avoid doing so. When I asked him about the impact of going to the gym on his life, he said:

Looking good in a shirt affects the interactions you have with other people. For instance, during a meeting in summer, if you sweat and your belly sticks out and your butt looks fat, it doesn't look good. In the eyes of people, the image of a successful, business-savvy man is always fit, he wears slim-fit shirts. As you climb the corporate ladder, you need to pay attention to your weight. You're always posing, your look must be suitable to your position. That's why people get up at 5 am and allocate time to the gym. Something I can't do. It's out of my comfort zone. Even in job interviews... in a recent job interview, I was heavier than in the photo on my CV; the first thing they said was, 'You look different from the photo.' In that sense, appearance matters.

Murat's remarks highlight the association of a fit body with desirable employee qualities. He views a fit body as essential for creating the desired impression on others at work. Thus, the fit body he aspires to achieve becomes part of the labor required for his job, particularly for the managerial position he was pursuing at the time. Indeed, from his narrative, his failure to attend the gym regularly and attain this ideal body appears to be a disadvantage hindering his career advancement. Notably, since the aforementioned job interview took place after our conversation, he has intensified his gym workouts and frequently shares gym photos on his Instagram account, which I follow.

Notably, Murat lives in Denizli, a midsized industrial city in western Turkey, and

graduated from Pamukkale University, also located in the same city. In this respect, he differs from the rest of the sample, who reside in cosmopolitan urban centers—primarily Istanbul and, to a lesser extent, Ankara—and have predominantly graduated from more prestigious universities. When I ask whether he knows such a man—the fit, business-savvy figure he described—or whether anyone in his office fits this image, he says no: “It’s not common in Denizli, neither in our office.” Yet his depiction of this figure is vivid, detailed, and highly idealized. This suggests the power of the ideal as hegemonic (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005): Murat strongly desires it, and although he cannot fully attain this ideal, he internalizes it and continues to measure himself against it.

Ufuk (26, master’s student in engineering) says that going to the gym is beneficial for his academic career, as it gives him a healthy appearance—reflecting an approach that equates health with appearance. When I ask him how and why a healthy appearance is beneficial for his career, he replies:

Looking healthy signs that you have an orderly life, and you care about your health from a social perspective. From the evolutionary standpoint, I’ve read a couple of things saying people infer that healthy-looking people live longer, they are more likely to achieve more. They believe these people would adapt to the environment and difficulties more easily.

Ufuk’s association of an “orderly life” with a “healthy appearance” illustrates the strong moral dimension attributed to having a fit body. A person with a healthy appearance is seen as someone who fulfills their responsibility to manage both their body and, more broadly, themselves. Additionally, as a master’s student in engineering with an undergraduate degree in physics, Ufuk—unlike Murat—adopts a scientific discourse to explain the mechanism through which the fit body he builds in the gym becomes a form of labor, specifically aesthetic labor. However, much like Murat, he internalizes the association of a healthy/fit body with desirable employee traits and strives to achieve such a body in order to reap the professional benefits it is believed to offer.

Deniz (25, business analyst) graduated from university in June 2023 and, after three months of unemployment, began working as a business analyst in September—six months prior to our interview. Although he had held a gym membership for more than a year and a half, he only began attending regularly during the first month of his new job. By the time of our interview, he had lost 10–12 kilograms over the past five months through consistent gym attendance and a focus on cardio exercises. In line with Murat and Ufuk, he recognizes the fit body as part of his aesthetic labor:

I believe that one motivation for going to the gym is having a fitter appearance. As a financial consultant, I'm constantly on Zoom. Your appearance is crucial for the impression you create on clients. The image you project is important; you know, there's that phrase that you don't have a second chance for a first impression I guess, the image is important. You know there is that phrase, you don't have a second chance for the first impression. It's like looking good in the media. I've noticed that good-looking consultants, those who appear younger convey a sense of confidence through their clothes, behaviors, and tone of voice. There's this feeling that this man, with his clothes, behaviors, his tone of voice, gives confidence. There is this feeling that this man is going to solve our problem.

Deniz highlights the socially interactive nature of his work as a business analyst, a role that involves providing consultancy to organizations on improving business efficiency. This heightens the significance of his bodily aesthetics. He likens his job to the media sector due to its highly visual character, noting that as a consultant, "looking good" is a precondition for "sounding right." Importantly, his efforts to meet the aesthetic standards of his profession are not limited to gym attendance. He also mentions working on his overall appearance by shifting toward a more "smart casual" style. As a recent graduate and full-time employee, his commitment to gym attendance and efforts to align his body with the visual expectations of his profession are central to his project of becoming a competent worker—one that also includes other forms of bodywork such as cultivating a professional style.

Although Deniz strives to transform the body according to the demands of his job like Murat and Ufuk, he differs from them when it comes to genuinely believing in the association of bodily characteristics with desired employee characteristics. From Deniz's perspective, reading the body as an indicator of the inner self is a result of the superficiality of the business world.

Interviewer: Why do you think that a fit body conveys a sense of confidence in clients?

Deniz: The perceptions deep-rooted in society up to this point likely play a very significant role, most probably. And, you know, how should I say it, in the business world, a profound analysis doesn't take place. The first impression matters: The degree of confidence you convey in a half-hour meeting is who you are." It doesn't last 10 hours. In those half-hour slots, because people need to be their best in everything, I think being good-looking is also important. And what you look good is things like being thinner and fitter, you know.

Deniz differs from the rest of the sample in terms of his suspicion of the authenticity of the value attributed to the bodies not only in the business world but understanding body as the personality. He is the only man who talks about "perceptions of society" by keeping a distance from them, although he tries to transform his body in accordance with social expectations. Deniz's exceptional -although not protest- position, seems to be an outcome of his exceptional educational background. Although the rest of the sample is also highly educated and most of them are graduates of elite Turkish Universities, he is the only one who studied philosophy or any other social science and humanities majors. All other interviewees seem to internalize the discourse of healthist ideology perceiving a fit body as the manifestation of self-control, self-discipline, or related qualities. They adopt a purely apolitical approach toward their bodies while the male body has been increasingly commodified, and they feel a strong social pressure to follow bodily ideals by engaging in various bodywork including gym attendance. Hence, the male body becomes increasingly visible but remains apoliticized.

5.3.2 Bulky Men as Incompetent Employees

The stigmatization of hypermasculine physiques as markers of low intellectual capacity and uncivilized character renders them incompatible with the aesthetic demands of white-collar jobs. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, urban middle-class men often despise bodybuilder bodies as symbols of unprofessionalism. They emphasize the time-consuming nature of maintaining such physiques and criticize men with these bodies for having excessive time to devote to the gym—time perceived as stemming from a lack of a proper career or from neglecting other, predominantly intellectual, aspects of their human capital. In this framework, large and highly muscular bodies are not seen as attributes of white-collar workers, who are expected to “look good and sound right.”

This logic is also evident in Monocello's (2023) study, which demonstrates that in South Korea, “small muscles” are socially valued above “big muscles.” The assumption underlying this hierarchy is that men with demanding, high-paying jobs would be too exhausted to engage in intense workouts after work, and thus men with large muscles are presumed to lack stable or prestigious employment. For example, one young man reported that his mother warned him against getting too big because it appears unprofessional. Similarly, a senior student explained, “I lift weights with low weight and high repetitions so my muscles tone without getting too big. I don't want people to judge me, because I graduate soon and will need to find a job”

(Monocello 2023, 457).

My interviewees expressed similar judgments. Many noted that men with bulky bodies would not be respected in their workplaces if they were their coworkers, since it is business knowledge that commands respect in the office. When I asked Sinan (41, college instructor), who refers to men with bulky bodies as "meatheads," whether the appearance of a coworker would matter if he had the chance to choose, he replied that he could choose someone with an unfit body. Although a fit body positively reflects on one's personality, he emphasized that having an unfit body does not necessarily mean a person would be an unqualified coworker. However, when I asked specifically about men with bulky bodies, he smiled mischievously and said he would not choose someone with that physique as his coworker.

Alperen (32) works in a managerial position at a global company and is one of the men in my sample whose body most closely aligns with the male bodily ideals of society. He participates in group training sessions at a boutique gym. Hence, unlike the rest of the chapter, his gym sessions involve much more intense social interaction. When I asked him whether there is a hierarchy among men at the gym, he answered without hesitation, "Absolutely. Just like in every area of life, there's one there too." When I asked him where he sees himself in this hierarchy, he smiled and said that he feels he occupies a high position in the gym. He mentioned that this might be partly because he performs well during training sessions but emphasized that it is more about his personality.

Interviewer: What kind of personality? Can you describe it?

Alperen: What kind of personality... Alpha? Beta? (mocking tone) I: It doesn't have to be like that. What do you have in mind? Like, can you say, "this trait of mine"?

Alperen: I always approach questions focused on sports? I: No, you may go with other things as well

Alperen: I mean, as a personality trait—maybe you'd call it *seytan tüyü*⁴, I don't really know. But ever since I was a kid, somehow, in almost every social setting I've been in, I've tended to stand out, so to speak. It's not like I do it on purpose—well, okay, sometimes I do—but it's something I seem to be good at. I think I have good communication skills. I'm not exactly sure what you'd call that, but even outside the gym, I'm someone who's generally confident with himself. That's the kind of thing I can say about myself.

4. A Turkish phrase for an undefinable charm that makes someone naturally and effortlessly captivating.

Alperen recognizes the hierarchical relations among men both in the gym and in other areas of life. He does not adopt a critical stance toward this hierarchy and positions himself high within it. Significantly, to explain this situation, he primarily refers to soft skills such as self-confidence, communication skills, and charm. These skills are often discussed as feminine performances that new service sector jobs demand from men. In Alperen's words, these traits are valued for elevating him to a higher position within the male hierarchy. Notably, he mocks the alpha and beta discourse, which is mainly propagated by the red pill culture—a reactive, anti-feminist online community that frames male hierarchy based on masculine dominance, assertiveness, and control over women.

Alperen also reports that his gym attendance is respected by those around him. He recalls hearing comments such as, “Respect, man, you’re working out like crazy, seriously.” He believes that going to the gym has enhanced his social standing—though he doesn’t attribute too much importance to it, as he has always seen himself as someone with high status. At this point, I ask him whether a man with a large, muscular body would be respected in his workplace or social circle, or if such a physique would help someone advance in status. He replies:

I wouldn’t [respect him], to be honest. (he smiles slightly, half-teasing half-embarrassed as if he says something inappropriate) But would it move him upward? I can’t really say. Because of the reasons I just mentioned. I’m probably going to jump from topic to topic... but even when I think about letting someone into my life, people usually have a checklist, right? Like this and that, the usual stuff, X, Y, Z, whatever. For me, one of the most important criteria has become whether that person consistently works out. It’s something that’s really become a priority for me. What really matters is that they’ve made that workout routine a part of their life. But those others [bodybuilders with big and muscular bodies], I feel like for them it’s not so much about integrating sport into their life, but more about integrating *their life* into sport, if that makes sense. So it doesn’t really create that kind of ‘wow’ effect for me.

This distinction between "integrating sport into life" and "integrating life into sport" captures a widely shared boundary among the men. Alperen values fitness as a component of a well-organized, disciplined and efficient life. In contrast, those who prioritize muscular development are perceived as having misplaced priorities—investing too much time in their bodies and not enough in career, intellectual growth, or social adaptability. In this conceptualization, bulky bodies become emblematic of professional inadequacy.

5.4 Gym As a Catalyst of Body Consciousness for Men

5.4.1 Men's Bodywork Beyond the Gym

My interviewees' engagement with bodywork is not limited to gym attendance. A heightened concern with fashion, a desire to look stylish, body depilation, the use of skincare products, aesthetic surgeries, and hair transplantation were also topics raised during the interviews. Notably, these concerns typically emerged *after* the start of gym sessions. That is to say, gym attendance stimulates not only further gym attendance but also other forms of bodywork. Interviewees' accounts suggest that gym attendance often serves as the first step that initiates a broader interest in bodily care and appearance. For instance, Deniz (25, business analyst) mentions that following the start of his gym routine, he also changed the way he dressed, began visiting the hairdresser much more frequently, and started asking his girlfriend for advice on skincare products. Additionally, he mentioned plans to undergo laser hair removal for the hair on his shoulders.

Significantly, Deniz is not the only one who speaks of the gym as a catalyst for broader bodily concerns. For instance, Kaan (29, data analytics professional) says, "I started to take care of myself better [after I started going to the gym] in terms of my dressing style, diet, hair, and beard." He also mentions that he has recently become more attentive to skincare and has started practicing it more regularly. Bartu (20, computer engineering student) also notes that going to the gym made him more well-groomed. Following gym-related content on social media, he explains, often leads to recommendations about clothing, fragrance, and personal care more broadly. Even when such suggestions are not explicitly made, he says, one naturally becomes more interested in these topics. "When you start to take care of yourself, all other things follow like a package," he adds. In a similar manner, Alperen (32, sales and business development manager) says:

It [my dressing style] definitely changed [after I started going to the gym.] I mean, think about it—once your body starts shaping up a bit like your belly shrinks, you get more toned, your shoulders broaden, your chest fills out, and you end up looking more V-shaped. So, now I can wear stuff I couldn't wear before, like slim-fit clothes and all. I move away from oversized stuff. But even oversized stuff somehow works better. You know, when I do wear oversized, I seem to stand taller, you catch my drift. So, yeah, it's different, it's evolving, maybe not a total makeover. But there's a change.

The change Alperen mentioned might be interpreted as increasing bodily satisfaction encouraging men to wear clothes, they previously did not feel comfortable in. However, the explanatory power of this factor appears limited to changes in clothing style. It does not account for why gym attendance also leads men to become more interested in skincare and haircare, to follow social media content about perfumes, or to consider body hair removal. Gym attendance seems to enhance bodily consciousness among men which further stimulates beauty consumption among them.

5.5 White-Collar Masculinities in the Gym: Not Reactive but Hybrid

The picture I have drawn so far is meaningful against the literature that interprets the increasing popularity of men's gym attendance as a reactive masculine response to a masculinity crisis triggered by the rise of feminism, women's entrance into formerly male-dominated domains, and the feminization of labor (Dworkin and Wachs 2009; Pope Jr. et al. 2001). It suggests that gym attendance is not a pure scene of conventional masculinity in line with scholars Hakim (2015, 2018), Hiramoto and Lai (2017) and Marshall, Chamberlain, and Hodgetts (2020) who emphasize self-objectifying practices of gym attendants.

It must be noted that, due to the urbanized and middle-class characteristics of my sample, this finding is not generalizable to Turkish men. My interviewees are not typical masculine losers of feminization labor (McDowell 2003). Additionally, as middle- and upper-class professionals, the weight of physical power in the construction of masculinity has been lower than the manual laborer. Therefore, the feminization of labor in the sense that the declining importance of physical power in the job market with the deindustrialization process does not have an influence on their masculinities as it did on working-class men.

In addition to not being reactive, gym attendance of Turkish white-collar men reflects hybrid masculinities phenomenon. Men desire not a hypermasculine body that will stress the natural difference between male and female bodies but a leaner one which is slimmer and prioritizing aesthetic look. They openly engage in practices coded as feminine, enjoy self-objectification. Gym attendance goes along with and even inspires beauty concern, which is associated with women, for my interviewees. They distance from hypermasculinity. Moreover, even masculinity has negative connotations for some of them.

The concept of hybrid masculinities has largely been explored in relation to gender relations, often neglecting the influence of economic structures and labor market

dynamics. Yet, scholars have also examined men's adoption of feminine-coded performances as a requirement of the new economy (De Casanova 2015; McDowell 2003), including in the Turkish context (Bora et al. 2011; Ozbay 2016a). Wolfman, Hearn, and Yeadon-Lee (2021) explicitly link hybrid masculinities to the neoliberal economy, framing them as a mode of masculine subjectivity interpellated by new service economy. Similarly, for my interviewees, going to the gym is a form of aesthetic labor. They are acutely aware of the embodied expectations tied to their white-collar positions and struggle to meet these demands.

Significantly, hybridization is not a frictionless or coherent process; rather, it carries its own risks. In the rest of this chapter, I explore the ambiguities and gendered risks involved in hybridization—particularly the risk of feminization—and examine how men navigate these tensions.

5.6 Not All Hybrid: Divergences Within the Sample

As noted in the introductory section, the emergence of new masculine ideals does not imply the disappearance of traditional ones. Rather, traditional and emerging masculine ideals—and the masculinities they inform—coexist in a state of tension. Indeed, despite the strong presence of hybrid masculinity in the practices and narratives of my informants, my sample shows a diversity in this regard. This diversity is observable not only across different participants but also within the practices and statements of individual informants.

It is also remarkable that, although my sample falls under the umbrella of white-collar, middle-class masculinities, certain divergences in the informants' narratives reflect broader divergences within the sample itself. Two of men discuss in this section are Onur (44, accommodation manager) and Murat (33, mechanical engineer). Murat, who lives in Denizli, is the only participant residing outside İstanbul and Ankara. He and Onur are also the only ones in the sample who studied outside these two cities and did not attend prestigious universities, having graduated from Pamukkale University and Kocaeli University, respectively. Two other men, however, Kaan (29) and Ali (33), resemble the rest of the sample. Kaan, a data analytics professional who graduated from METU, was preparing to begin a master's degree in the field in Germany. Ali graduated from Bogazici University and was working as a marketing manager at a tech company.

Murat (33, mechanical engineer), echoing the general tendency in the sample, devalues bulky bodybuilder physiques and the masculinities they represent. However, he

differs significantly from the others in the basis of his criticism. He states, “Because they use [anabolic] steroids, they’re much worse in bed. If the essence of manhood is being able to satisfy a woman, they can’t do it like I can. Their bodies might not even allow them to.” However, although talking about essence of masculinity, he later says “I cannot masculinity in a box. For example, a masculine guy might even paint his nails just to entertain his daughter.” Additionally, unlike the men who enjoy compliments and the attention of other men, and those who comfortably touch each other’s bodies, Murat—although claiming not to be homophobic—displays a homophobic attitude by saying, “I’m not homophobic, but there are guys in the gym who caress each other, and that feels a bit bothering.”

Interestingly, Murat also adopts a somewhat negative stance toward the notion of masculinity at one point. He reports that during his college years, he used to go to the gym aiming to become more muscular, unlike today when his goal is to have a slimmer, low-fat body. According to him, back then he was a more masculine guy because “we were a bunch of slackers.” In this respect, he echoes the rest of the sample, which positions muscularity and hypermasculinity in tension with professional white-collar masculinity. Now, as he has grown older and entered professional life, Murat distances himself from the laddish masculinity and muscular bodies he associates with that phase.

Ali (33, marketing manager) differs from the rest of the sample by framing his gym attendance as an effort to stay healthy, without mentioning any concern about his appearance. This is despite the fact that he appears to be one of the most bodily preoccupied men in the sample, as suggested by his having undergone both hair transplantation and rhinoplasty. Additionally, he assumes a conventional and hierarchical approach in relationships with female partners. He describes a masculine man as someone who is “protective” of his partner, while explicitly emphasizing that he is “not macho.” His emphasis on “not macho” mirrors Murat’s statement, “I’m not homophobic.” It seems that both seek to distance themselves from the extremes—such as militant homophobia or physical abuse—while still enacting discourses of conventional or patriarchal masculinities.

Onur (44, accommodation manager) reports that he enjoys looks and compliments of others including men and shows a self-objectifying attitude toward his body. He mentions how looking good increase his self-confidence and he started to be more into fashion as his body gets fitter. However, he also relates self-confidence to physical power and fighting. After he says that he used to kickboxing in his early twenties and continues:

You don't learn sports to beat someone. First, you learn to defend yourself, and that gives you confidence — you feel more at ease. Like, if someone comes at me with 2 or 3 people, and they start making moves, raising their hands or whatever, and I think, "Are they gonna mug me or something?" At that point, you feel like, "Okay, I can handle this guy alone, I'll get through the three of them, I got this."

In a similar manner, Kaan (29, data analytics professional), recalls that he used to do boxing and would beat bodybuilders in the ring at the time. That's why, he says, he thinks, "*What are your muscles even for, man?*" when it comes to bodybuilders. He adds that he boxed in "backstreet" gyms and also played water polo in similar settings during his high school years. In fact, his water polo coach used to beat him and the other boys. Although he tried middle-class gym and mentions that they had good facilities, he reports to feel threatened there:

I didn't like how people at MacFit (the most popular and widespread middle-class gym chain in Turkey and many of my informants go there) kept checking each other out. It feels aggressive. It's hypocritical. It's a kind of aggressiveness—but at the same time, everyone acts like they're British lords or something. It feels contradictory.

Significantly, Kaan comes from a working-class background and has been shaped by a laddish, working-class sports masculinity. Although he now belongs to the white-collar professional group, his approach to masculinity differs notably from others in the sample. He openly values physical strength and expresses pride in having beaten bigger men. Moreover, unlike other participants who feel uncomfortable in "backstreet" gyms and associate them with the meathead stereotype, Kaan feels uneasy in middle-class gyms. He perceives the aesthetic gaze of other middle-class men—who evaluate his body's appearance—as disturbing and even threatening. This stands in contrast to the rest of the sample, who either enjoy the gaze of other men or, at the very least, do not report feeling disturbed by it.

Nevertheless, Kaan is not entirely inconsistent with middle-class masculine values. In line with framing the bodybuilder physique as unprofessional, he argues that these men develop only their bodies but neglect their minds. As a result, they are excluded from professional work life. Additionally, he describes these men as looking "scary," suggesting that women generally do not prefer them unless they have a "specific taste" for that type of man.

Remarkably, these men are not a complete antithesis to hybrid masculinities. By highlighting the divergences within my sample, I am not suggesting that some men

embody hybrid masculinities while others represent something entirely different. In fact, these men also engage in practices and adopt discourses that are compatible with hybrid masculinities. Rather, I argue that these internal divergences indicate that hybrid masculinity is not a coherent or unified configuration. Indeed, even those informants who appear more comfortably situated within hybrid masculinity often voice contradictory views. For example, although Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader) associates masculinity with vulgarity and distances himself from it, he also suggests that a man without facial hair—a *köse*—cannot be masculine. Similarly, Ufuk (26, master’s student in engineering) calls non-egalitarian men as primitive, yet he also states that muscularity cannot be an indicator of masculinity since there are masculine gay men as well. Hence, what is remarkable in my informants’ ideas on masculinity is strong internal inconsistency. One of the most pronounced sites of such tension concerns men’s increasing aesthetic investment in their appearance and the potential social risk this carries: being perceived as vain. This tension is particularly manifested in their increasing aesthetic investments, which carries the gendered risk of being perceived as vain.

5.7 Risk of Vanity

5.7.1 Unfinished Bodies

When I ask men about what bodily changes they expect from gym attendance, they usually mention very modest goals. They usually say words like "a little bit more muscular than what I have now", "get a bit fitter", "develop one step what I already have", and "lose some weight". At first glance, I interpreted this as a 'kind' approach to the body.

However, as I conducted more interviews and examined them more closely, I began to notice that these initial goals often serve as entry points. Once achieved, men tend to revise and expand their bodily aspirations. Their perspective on the body resonates with Giddens’ (1991) and later Shilling’s (2003) accounts, which conceptualize the contemporary body as an ongoing project—one that individuals continuously work on. It never reaches a final state of “being,” but is instead “an entity that is in the process of becoming” (Shilling 2003, 4).

For instance, Onur (44, accommodation manager) started going to the gym three months before our interview due to his dissatisfaction with weight gain. At the time, he weighed approximately 88 kg and was about 178 cm tall. When I asked him how

he had decided to start working out, he explained: “I thought it would be good to lose weight, my body would take on a more masculine shape—you know, I’d get rid of body fat and have a lower body fat percentage.” By the time of our interview, he appeared to have achieved this initial goal: he weighed around 80 kg, and his body aligned with dominant societal standards of fitness. He explicitly expressed satisfaction with these bodily changes. He also shared—enthusiastically—how he had been receiving compliments from others, including coworkers, his daughter, and, most notably, his new girlfriend, whom he spoke of with admiration. Despite having achieved his initial aim, Onur remained highly motivated to continue going to the gym:

I am happy about my body now. But I’d like to shape it a little bit more. I’m working on this in the gym. I mean I want to make my shoulders a bit more prominent to my biceps a bit more defined.

Onur is not the only one who revised his bodily goals after achieving his initial target. Bartu (20, computer engineering student), who initially started going to the gym to lose weight, now reports that he is working toward a V-shaped body. Similarly, Deniz (25, business analyst), who also began gym training with the goal of weight loss, reduced his weight from 100–102 kg to 88–90 kg within five months by focusing on cardio exercises and following a diet—albeit not a strict one. Like Onur, Deniz spoke about his bodily transformation with satisfaction and described how he enjoyed receiving approving looks:

Interviewer: Do you receive any positive feedback about how you look?

Deniz: Yes, people say I lost weight, I look thinner. I noticed this change also quantitatively. That’s why I guess, a shift happens now. (I thought that) “Ok, I do cardio, maybe, I can do something else now, a shift toward muscling up.” . . . I have been doing weight training in the last two weeks. . . . In this shift, my motivation is like “OK, I lost weight since I started (to go gym). Now, (my motivation is) growing muscle a bit and achieving a more balanced body structure.”

I: Would you like to have a different body than what you have now?

Deniz: I have suffered from body fat percentage, since my childhood. So, I do not expect to be a muscular person, but I do expect to be a fit one Actually, you know, I have been expecting it for a long time. For the first time, I’m as close to it as I’m now.

I: So, do you think that it is achievable for you?

I guess, yes, because I don’t have huge expectations from myself. For

instance, if I work out for four more months, I think I can achieve a moderate body. ... but I can't make a *projection* (he used the exact English phrase). In the last four to five months, that much (change in my body) happened. It would be okay for me if there was more like this in the next four months. But it's possible that at the end of four months, my (bodily) standards might change. I don't know currently.

Deniz speaks not only about how his bodily goals evolved after achieving his initial target but also about his awareness that his "bodily standards" may further advance if he reaches his current goal. In line with Deniz, Utku (26, supply chain specialist) emphasizes the importance of "achieving one step further" in the gym. As mentioned in the second chapter, Selim (25, doctoral student in an engineering major) describes how he always buys clothes one size smaller to motivate himself—and as he succeeds in fitting into each new size, he continues to purchase even smaller ones. Almost all the men I interviewed describe the bodily changes they have experienced through gym attendance as a key source of motivation to keep going and to train even harder, investing more time and energy into their workouts. Thus, their growing satisfaction with their leaner and more muscular bodies becomes a driving force that pushes them to become even leaner and more muscular.

5.7.2 Navigating the Risk of Vanity and Chronic Reflexivity

When I bring up to women that my master thesis will focus on the gym and masculinities, many of them begin to talk about a stereotype called "gym-bro" with a mocking tone. Several women say they do not find gym bros attractive. When I asked Zeynep, one of these heterosexual female friends and a senior undergraduate student, why she finds gym bros unattractive, she told me it's because they are overly concerned with their appearance, which she does not see as manly. However, when I asked her what type of male body, she finds attractive, she described a lean physique with low body fat and 'not too big' but defined muscles. Achieving this body type requires intensive bodywork, typically involving regular and disciplined gym attendance. Therefore, for a man, it is not possible to have such a body without being highly concerned about his appearance. Indeed, it is not uncommon that when I am on campus with one of my female friends with whom I've had similar conversations, she points out a boy that she finds attractive, and it ironically turns out that I know this boy from the gym.

Although a fit and muscular body is highly valued, the traditional gender norm that understands concern with appearance as feminine is still strong. Men who seem to

violate this norm are at risk of being labeled as vain and therefore feminine (Barber 2008; Gill, Henwood, and Mclean 2005). Numerous studies discuss the tension between the desire to look good and the fear of being seen as vain (Beagan and Saunders 2005; De Souza and Ciclitira 2005; Grogan and Richards 2002). Additionally, Gill, Henwood, and Mclean (2005) in their study drawing on interviews with 140 young British males belonging to diverse ethnic, racial, and class backgrounds, delve into the question of how men navigate this tension. They demonstrate that framing bodywork as an instrumental act is the main strategy men apply. That is to say, men point out the motivation behind going to the gym as increasing the health and utility of their bodies or they account for the use of skincare products in terms of not looking good but the health of their skin. Significantly, the interviews I conducted suggest a divergence from these studies to a large extent in the sense that my interviewees usually do not make a concerted effort to avoid appearing vain, despite the traditional masculine norm against vanity. Although they mention the improvement of health as a benefit and motivation for attending the gym, the desire to look better often dominates the interviews. Moreover, in my respondents' view, the healthy often overlaps with being good-looking. In most cases, they talk about 'looking healthy'.

Kaan (29, data analytics professional), who says he goes to the gym to improve his appearance, also expresses skepticism towards people who claim they go to the gym for health reasons: "Some people spin a tale about going to the gym for health purposes. I don't believe them. If it was for health, we'd do jogging or stuff like yoga." Corresponding to Kaan's words, my interviewees' stories of starting gym attendance generally begin with a reference to dissatisfaction with their bodies, which may be a long-term issue such as being undesirably skinny or overweight since childhood, or a recent one such as rapid weight gain, often accompanied by negative comments about appearance from others. For instance, Sinan (41, college instructor) went gym at college to "get rid of being skinny" although that time it did not last for a long time. The second time he started was when he was doing his master's degree. At that time, he gained weight in a short period. This change made him happy to not be skinny anymore but to "fill t-shirts". Nevertheless, after seeing a shirtless beach photograph of himself making him discomformable about being overweight this time, he started to go gym again. After telling this story Sinan says "Now, while talking with you, I better understand that my motivation was always about physical appearance".

Bartu (20, computer engineering student) started going to the gym on medical advice following a serious cardiovascular disease. However, he acknowledges that his desire to enhance his appearance also played a motivating role in his decision.

Furthermore, he regards his dissatisfaction with his appearance almost as crucial as the health issue he encountered in motivating him to attend the gym:

Interviewer: How did you decide to start going to the gym?

Bartu: It was partly due to health reasons as well. In my last year of high school, there was this health issue called DVT, that thing, it caused a blood clot in my leg. I was quite overweight at the time. That was also a reason. It had caused a clot, and the doctors advised it. Honestly, I was also uncomfortable with my appearance. I was not looking good. I was overweight and, well, I wasn't very comfortable. I wasn't pleased with my own appearance.

Although Bartu could have portrayed his gym attendance solely as a health-related matter to mitigate the risk of vanity, he underscores the importance of his aesthetic goals as well. Indeed, he openly mentions that he has become more interested in fashion and perfumes recently. At the time of our interview, Bartu was quite good-looking and fit, far from being overweight. He spoke about the bodily transformation he had undergone in the gym with satisfaction. Significantly, he mentioned that he had just modified his exercise program. He decreased the cardiovascular exercises he initially focused on and started to apply a workout program concentrating on weight training. He said that this modification stemmed from his desire to become more muscular and have a more 'V-shaped body' emphasizing his concern about appearance without hesitation. Hence, he does not seem to avoid being seen as vain despite traditional norms dictating men to distance themselves from feminine aspirations to look good. But are the men I've spoken to completely free from this traditional norm of masculinity?

Despite the insights gleaned from my interviews, the masculine code banning vanity in men still prevails among some of my respondents. For instance, Bartu, while acknowledging his desire to look better, dismisses vanity as unmanly:

Interviewer: Do you think that men who are more muscular than you are also more masculine than you?

Bartu: If we consider their testosterone levels, they might be. Testosterone is generally linked to muscularity, right? So, I suppose it's likely (that more muscular men are more masculine). But when we think of masculinity as something more abstract... they might always be unpleasant with their bodies regardless of the progress they made. Despite their muscles, they might not like their bodies. This might be unmanly.

I: So, you think being displeased with your body is something non-

masculine?

Bartu: Yes. When it reaches a certain point, you should be... I mean you shouldn't exaggerate it.

Despite his own self-consciousness about his body – his discomfort with his appearance initially motivated him to gym and although he made significant progress in the gym that improved his body image, he continues gym to go to the gym to further improve his physique-, Bartu highlights a 'certain point' of bodily self-consciousness that a true man should not surpass. However, contrary to his assertion, this point remains uncertain. Paradoxically, the ambiguity of the legitimate degree of being self-conscious about appearance, requires a man to be always conscious about his body and his bodywork to ensure that he is still within the legitimate borders in terms of self-consciousness of his body.

Considering the difficulty of keeping within the legitimate border, Kaan (29, data analytics professional) talks about the need to manage the impression. Although he openly accepts that the main motivation to go gym too look better "one should act like he does not take gym seriously" he says since "this is the vibe women give [about what they expect from men]". Again paradoxically, his words imply that men should be conscious about their presentation of bodywork so that they do not appear overly conscious about their appearance since this is undesired in a man by society, especially by women.

I argue that this condition resonates with what Shilling (2003) calls *chronic reflexivity*. Drawing on Giddens (1991), who argues that the design of the body has become a central element of identity construction through consumption in contemporary society, Shilling (2003) specifically highlights the expansion of body technologies. Their proliferation—both in variety and scale, including workout regimes, specialized diets, and cosmetic operations—he argues, drives today's body-conscious individuals into a state of chronic reflexivity: they continuously navigate numerous bodily options, often feeling uncertain about the type and extent of interventions to pursue.

This state of chronic reflexivity takes on a distinctly gendered character in the case of men's bodywork. On the one hand, hybrid masculinities have become increasingly mainstream, allowing men greater acceptance in engaging with bodily practices—both in kind and intensity. On the other hand, while men are now expected—even encouraged—to participate in practices traditionally associated with femininity, they also constantly and reflexively question whether they have gone too far, and which practices they can adopt without appearing "too feminine."

5.7.3 Can Masculinity Be Insured?

De Visser, Smith, and McDonnell (2009) offer masculine insurance as a conceptual tool to explain men's enactment of feminine practices without considered feminine. This concept refers to men accumulating masculine credits or capital that later compensate for some feminine behaviors they engage in. In this way, a man can display some feminine behaviors and still be considered to be masculine (De Visser, Smith, and McDonnell 2009; De Visser and McDonnell 2013; see also Anderson 2002, 865). To exemplify, De Visser, Smith, and McDonnell (2009) point out that David Beckham is seen as a masculine figure – idealized as a superstar football player and happily married with children – although he is also called a 'metrosexual man' which might imply effeminacy. Importantly, the masculine insurance concept imagines qualities and behaviors as having a certain degree of masculine and feminine credits. Therefore, a minor feminine trait, just like "a drop in the ocean", did not have a significant effect that can damage one's masculinity.

Skeggs (2004), who does not place men at the center of his analysis, similar to De Visser, Smith, and McDonnell (2009), underscores the significance of the whole rather than the individual elements that compose it. However, she offers a more nuanced perspective than De Visser et al.'s somewhat calculative, credit-based model. She highlights that the meaning of a single quality varies according to the body that embodies it. Therefore, the gendered meaning of a trait does not stay static across bodies. Weitz (2001) shows that female workers prefer short and inconspicuous hairstyles that are not in line with traditional feminine norms, as a strategy to look more professional. Barber (2008), on the other hand, in this study on middle- and upper-class white straight men, going to female hair salons, shows that these men think that the stylish haircuts they have there, give them a professional look. Hence, a feminine trait turns into a symbol of masculinity when it is adopted by straight middle-class men rather than this trait being compensated by the embodiment of other masculine traits.

In these respects, men can *hybridize* their identities through incorporation of feminine coded elements and can remain to be considered masculine. However, I argue the masculine insurance does not work with a real contract. The compensability of feminine traits, allowed degree, and kinds of femininity of them, are ambiguous. Neither men can be fully sure about how "the hybrid whole" looks like while they constantly hybridize themselves. Therefore, incorporation of feminine elements into masculinity is a risky practice. It might result in feminization. Therefore, men's construction and maintenance of masculine identity requires a careful navigation around an ambiguous border. That is why, as I showed above, the ambiguity of a

legitimate degree of vanity requires men to be constantly vigilant about their bodies and bodywork so that they do not cross the line.

It might be argued that once a feminine gendered element is appropriated by men, its social meaning will change and eventually it will no longer carry the risk of feminization. However, conventional gendered ideals are not easily eroded. Indeed, I showed that men strongly feel the tension between conventional ideals and emerging masculinities. Still, although this shift does not happen immediately, the meanings of gendered elements—both masculine and feminine—do change over time. This process is strongly reflected in men's uncertainty when it comes to talking about the meaning of masculinity: one of the most prominent themes in my interviews was men's confusion about their gendered identities.

5.8 Discussion: Risk as a Positively Constitutive Dimension of Hybrid Masculinities

As I explained in the introductory section, in the texts of neo-classical economists', risk is framed as an essential component of entrepreneurial action, given the inherent unpredictability of markets. The entrepreneur is characterized as someone who takes financial action despite the risks it involves, in pursuit of profit. As a result, self-confidence or self-reliance is celebrated as one of the core traits that enable individuals to take risky entrepreneurial actions (Hayek, 2001; Mises, 1944; Knight, 1921; see also Brockling and Black, 2016 for a broader analysis).

If the result of the new combination of masculine and feminine elements is never fully predictable, the safest choice for men is to strictly stick to the strategy of avoiding femininity at all costs. In fact, the risk of feminization has always been a constitutive part of masculinities and folk masculine strategy for this risk was "flight from femininity" (Kimmel 2016, 65). However, I argue that hybrid masculinities differ from conventional masculinities in the sense that the risk of feminization is positively intrinsic to hybrid masculinities as a form that belongs to the neoliberal era. Just as entrepreneurship requires risk-taking due to market unpredictability, the self-entrepreneurial male subject takes symbolic risks by incorporating feminine elements into his masculine identity. Although the outcome of this risk-taking is not certain, men hybridize their masculinities to create a marketable masculine self—both professional and progressive.

In this framework, it is particularly telling that self-confidence emerges as one of the most highly valued qualities and is strongly linked to masculinity throughout

my interviews. As the border between masculine and feminine becomes increasingly blurred—and as men are encouraged to enact feminine performances to appear progressive in the face of feminist challenges and to meet the demands of the new economy—confidence in one’s masculine identity becomes the key masculine quality.

Remarkably, men’s engagement with behaviors traditionally coded as feminine, such as an interest in fashion, is frequently interpreted as a demonstration of confidence. For instance, Whitmer (2017), in his study on middle- and upper-class American men’s consumption of fashion and cosmetics, reveals that these practices make men appear more masculine precisely because it indicates self-assurance: these men “were not afraid to do things other men might not” (122–123).

A similar point is made by a contributor on Eksi Sozluk (2022), a popular online dictionary, in reference to the fashion trend of colorful socks:

What you found cool wasn’t the colorful socks themselves, but the confidence of the men who wore them back when colorful socks weren’t so commonly worn. Now that it’s become more widespread, people can wear them with much less need for confidence—so their "coolness" might have faded.

This entry suggests a critical dynamic: as feminine-coded practices become more widely appropriated by men, they lose their status as markers of confidence. Their symbolic value stem from the gendered risk it entails.

This dynamic between gendered risks and self-confidence also explains why gym attendance—repeatedly cited by my interviewees as a key source of confidence—further encourages engagement with different kinds of beauty practices and interest in fashion. For example, Cafer Efe (26, high-frequency trader), who defines masculinity as “being confident and feeling comfortable with yourself” yet considers himself lacking in this regard, notes that after he started going to the gym, he began wearing a belt he previously would not have worn. By boosting their self-confidence, the gym enables men to act as gendered risk-takers.

6. CONCLUSION

Utku (26) graduated from Bogazici University and is working as a supply chain specialist at a food delivery company. Like many young professionals who cannot afford a place of their own in Istanbul—where a long-standing housing crisis has drastically increased rents (Ucarol 2023; IPA 2025)—he is still living in a shared flat near the university from which he graduated. He has been going to a gym located in Etiler, an affluent neighborhood close to both Bogazici University and his home. This gym is one of the higher-segment branches of the most popular gym chain. Indeed, some other interviewees also go to this gym chain—both to its regular and high-segment branches.

Utku mentioned that this gym is a luxury consumption for him, and he was able to afford it thanks to a yearly membership discount. He reports that, in the sauna, he sometimes talks with other men who are senior professionals in their forties or early fifties, and he sees this as a networking opportunity. Additionally, he says that when they talk about their daily lives—specifically their consumption habits, such as where they hang out or travel—it becomes clear that “they don’t belong to the same socioeconomic level,” and he adds, “I’m a new graduate.” However, as he continues, it becomes apparent that he doesn’t attribute this gap solely to seniority, and he does not expect to reach the same standards even later in his career. He says that these men were in a much better financial position when they were new graduates, just as he is now. He notes that “at their time”—referring to the 2000s, when those men, now in their forties, had just graduated—living conditions for white-collar workers were significantly better: they could, for instance, travel abroad much more easily, unlike him.

Utku’s account reflects how the promises of neoliberalization in Turkey—which began in the 1980s and were consolidated under Erdogan’s AKP in the 2000s—have evolved over time for white-collar professionals. Once called the “new middle class” of neoliberalization, white-collar professionals working in globally integrated private firms were often seen as the winners of neoliberalization. Significantly, they were

characterized by Western-patterned urban consumption habits enabled by their high purchasing power. However, the short-term economic prosperity of the rapidly neoliberalizing 2000s gave way to a decline in the 2010s, and the prolonged economic crisis that has continued since 2018 has particularly impoverished middle-class professionals. Utku, like many white-collar workers, can now afford neither private housing nor the kinds of Western-patterned urban consumption that once symbolically defined white-collar professionals—except for the upper-middle-class gym he considers a luxury, made accessible only through a discounted membership.

It is not only economic promises that have failed. Today, as I showed in the empirical chapters, white-collar workers are subject to long and flexible working hours, constant anxiety over job insecurity, and pervasive performance pressures that often amount to mobbing—alongside a broader sense of meaninglessness. The 1990s’ aspirational ideal of blending work with leisure, once promoted as liberating and fun (Bora et al. 2011, 20-22), is notably absent from my interviewees’ narratives. They describe the office as a site of mental and physical exhaustion. The moment of rush hour is often described as a sense of getting free, yet it is shadowed by physical and mental fatigue. This exhaustion leaves not only no time but also no energy for leisure. As I showed for many of my interviewees, the motivation to go to the gym is to release job stress due to demanding jobs and long working hours, and to cope with anxiety about the future due to insecurity.

In this thesis, I show that despite the ongoing crisis of neoliberalism and the erosion of its promises for white-collar professionals, my interviewees continue to adapt to its logic and aspire to neoliberal subjectivities. Chapter 2 demonstrates that, in this context of crisis—both in Turkey and globally—they turn to the gym as an embodied neoliberal self-making project to restore their diminishing capacity to perform as self-governing, self-confident subjects. The following chapters reveal that their attempts to reconstruct themselves as neoliberal masculine subjects in the gym involve various gendered risks, tensions, and contradictions—from bodily limits to temporal conflicts, as well as the demands of feminine aesthetic labor entailing the risk of feminization. Yet rather than developing a critique of neoliberalism, they navigate these tensions by adopting its very logic. In the end, this navigation itself becomes a performative practice that reconstitutes them as neoliberal subjects. I therefore conclude that the gym practices of white-collar men exemplify the endurance of neoliberal ideals of subjectification, even amid debates about its possible end.

Significantly, I also showed that the lean body stands at the core of this subjectification process, serving as the idealized embodiment of the neoliberal masculine subject. Despite being idealized, the meaning of “lean” remains highly ambiguous. This ambiguity becomes a form of flexibility, allowing it to take on different—even

conflicting—meanings. By adopting such contradictory meanings of “lean,” men navigate diverse crises and tensions embedded within masculine self-making in the gym.

I think it is productive to consider my analysis alongside Erkmen’s (2021) study of urban middle-class yoga practitioners—almost all women—in Istanbul. Like my male gym-goers, the yoga practitioners in Erkmen’s study experience neoliberal Turkey and Istanbul under the shadow of precarization and autocratization in the late 2010s. Similarly, they turn to an individualistic, body-centered self-project grounded in consumption and “lifestyle” practices, such as yoga. However, while yoga is often discussed as a practice that reproduces neoliberal norms and selves, Erkmen’s study suggests that it can also provide individuals with discursive tools to question neoliberal norms—potentially enabling alternative and even resistant, forms of subjectification rather than solely reproducing neoliberal subjectivities.

Unlike my interviewees, who talk about how the gym helps them maintain stressful white-collar careers and makes them feel more aligned with their bodies, personalities, and emotions in relation to their jobs, Erkmen (2021) shows that yoga can intensify alienation for white-collar practitioners—sometimes leading them to drop out of the corporate world. While Erkmen (2021) emphasizes that yoga is experienced as “a process of self-examination and without obsessing over the end product,” and that most women yoga practitioners openly reject competitiveness, perfection, and productivity orientation in their engagement with yoga (45), the male gym-goers I examine are highly goal-oriented. As I revealed, they constantly calculate the efficiency of their gym attendance—assessing how much they invest in their bodies and how much return they get in pursuit of the optimum. This theme of bodily control is so strong that the body’s limits often become a source of frustration for them. They frequently compare themselves with other men, and even when they do not, they express, in line with the neoliberal ethos of “being the best version of oneself,” that they are competing with themselves. Erkmen discusses that yoga might lead to a shift in temporality away from neoliberal accelerated and commodified time, articulated through themes such as slowing down (*yavaşlamak*) or staying/stopping (*durmak*). In contrast, my interviewees talk about how the gym helps them use their time more efficiently, control it, and improve their time-management skills. They frame time as a resource they invest in their bodies at the gym, and their gym time is often discussed in terms of hurried yet efficient schedules.

In the second chapter, I discussed that men’s turn to the gym—as a body-centered practice of self-making—might suggest a tension with the disembodied masculinity of the Cartesian legacy, in line with Hakim (2015, 2018). However, I also emphasized that the nature of their relationship with the body in the gym is characterized

by control or a desire for control over it, reflecting the conventional masculine way of perceiving the body. For instance, while Erkmen's yoga practitioners talk about "turning inward" through connecting with and paying attention to the embodied self, my interviewees usually speak of disciplining or manipulating their bodies. When they pay attention to, or try to better understand their embodied existence, it is in order to control it more effectively. Hence, the gym's character as a masculine mode of body-work might explain why it does not have the potential to lead to an alternative subjectification—especially considering the masculine character of the neoliberal subject—as in the case of the yoga practitioners Erkmen analyzes. To deepen our understanding of gendered subjectification through gym, future research could productively examine women and queer gym-goers. Such research could explore whether their gym practices also take a masculine form or represent alternative forms of body-work, and whether they reproduce neoliberal subjectivity like heterosexual male gym-goers or cultivate alternative subjectivities.

Having outlined the main arguments and situated them in relation to existing research, I now turn to the study's limitations and directions for future inquiry. In addition to the financial and work-related problems my interviewees describe, the political dimension of neoliberalism in Turkey is also an influential aspect of the lives of urban middle classes. The earlier narrative of neoliberalism as a path to democratization in the early 2000s, during the first years of Erdogan and his AKP, ultimately ended up in an openly authoritarian neoliberal regime (Tansel 2019). This conservative and authoritarian turn has become a significant source of discontent and perceived threat for the predominantly secular urban middle classes. This discontent is a significant part of the urban middle-class experience of neoliberal Turkey today, and, together with financial constraints, encourages a tendency among them to emigrate. In fact, it is meaningful to note that six of my eighteen interviewees have emigrated—five to Europe or North America, and one to Dubai. While this finding suggests the significant role the authoritarian and conservative character of neoliberalism in Turkey might be playing in shaping the lives of my interviewees, it is a limitation that this research does not explore the political dimension as fully as it deserves.

One limitation of this study arises from the analysis in Chapter 5, where I conceptualize gym practice as a hybrid masculine practice that integrates certain conventionally feminine performances with masculine ones yet carries a risk of feminization. This theme emerged inductively during fieldwork rather than from the initial research focus. As such, the argument that the risk of feminization is positively intrinsic to hybrid masculinities as a neoliberal mode of masculinity represents a novel and potentially generative line of inquiry but remains largely speculative within the

scope of this study. A more systematic exploration of these dynamics would require a research design specifically oriented toward them. Future studies could build on these insights to examine such themes in greater depth.

A further limitation relates to the study's limited engagement with what Ozyegin (2018) calls a dialogical approach to gender, which emphasizes the need to theorize gender relationally. Ozyegin underlines that men and women are "co-producers of masculine and feminine ideals", and that romantic and sexual relationships are important sites where patriarchy is both reproduced and challenged (247). As I noted in the introduction section, my focus has been more on the construction of men as neoliberal subjects than on masculine identity construction. Accordingly, this thesis centers on the workplace and neoliberal capitalism rather than on family, romantic/sexual relationships, and patriarchy. Yet, as I have repeatedly emphasized, the neoliberal subject is also a gendered one, and neoliberalism and patriarchy, while distinct systems, are intertwined and mutually reinforcing in many fields. Moreover, the heterosexual men I interviewed desire women's affirmation and attraction, and, if not all, almost all of them openly seek or maintain romantic and sexual relationships. Women's perspectives therefore matter greatly to these embodied masculine self-making projects. Consequently, a study that examined these men's relationships with women and, if so, how gym attendance transformed them—as well as women's perspectives on men's turn to the body through gym practices—could yield a deeper understanding of these processes.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Information

Name	Age	Profession	University	City
Ali	33	Marketing Manager	Bogazici University	Ankara
Berkay	26	Financial Auditor	TOBB	Ankara
Utku	26	Supply Chain Specialist	Bogazici University	Istanbul
Arda	24	Art History Student & Content Creator	Koc University	Istanbul
Ufuk	26	Master's Student in Engineering	Koc University	Istanbul
Tamer	26	Financial Data Analyst	Koc University	Istanbul
Kaan	29	Data Analytics Professional	METU	Istanbul
Yigitcan	28	Information Management Officer	Bogazici University	Istanbul
Kerem	26	Master's Student in Economics	Koc University	Istanbul
Bartu	20	Computer Engineering Student	Sabanci University	Istanbul
Onur	44	Accommodation Manager	Kocaeli University	Istanbul
Alperen	32	Sales and Business Development Manager	Bogazici University	Istanbul
Cafer Efe	26	High-Frequency Trader	Koc University	Istanbul
Sinan	41	College Instructor	Hacettepe University	Istanbul
Selim	25	Doctoral Student in an Engineering Major	ITU	Istanbul
Murat	33	Mechanical Engineer	Pamukkale University	Denizli

Name	Age	Profession	University	City
Deniz	25	Business Analyst	Koc University	Istanbul
Sercan	21	Computer Engineering Student	Sabanci University	Istanbul