

### Extreme Wellness at Work: Whose body counts in the rise of exceptionalist organisational fitness cultures

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Abstract:	<p>Management has long concerned itself with controlling workers' bodies, with organisational wellness discourses being its latest fixation. This article's purpose is to introduce and understand 'whose body counts' – a discourse of bodily exceptionalism in performative organisational cultures. Using ethnographic methods, this article presents an analysis of a CrossFit workplace health promotion at an underperforming US corporation, to identify a complex process of empowerment, self-exploitation and disciplinary regulation to produce performative outcomes. This research illustrates how the workplace health promotion generates a pervasive discourse of exceptionalism underpinned by workers' reflexive exploitation, overarched by peer-surveillance and reflexively embraced through extreme individualised performativities. Critically, it is revealed how individuals competitively engage in communicative labour to demonstrate devotion to self-care that is translated into organisational commitment. Specifically, unquestioned discursive ambiguities are shown to cunningly empower limitless meritocratic striving that pits workers against each other, creating constant negotiation of 'whose body counts' by subjugating others.</p>

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3 **Extreme Wellness at Work: Whose body counts in the rise of exceptionalist**  
4 **organisational fitness cultures**  
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11 wellness discourses being its latest fixation. This article's purpose is to introduce and  
12 understand 'whose body counts' – a discourse of bodily exceptionalism in performative  
13 organisational cultures. Using ethnographic methods, this article presents an analysis of a  
14 CrossFit workplace health promotion at an underperforming US corporation, to identify a  
15 complex process of empowerment, self-exploitation and disciplinary regulation to produce  
16 performative outcomes. This research illustrates how the workplace health promotion  
17 generates a pervasive discourse of exceptionalism underpinned by workers' reflexive  
18 exploitation, overarched by peer-surveillance and reflexively embraced through extreme  
19 individualised performativities. Critically, it is revealed how individuals competitively engage  
20 in communicative labour to demonstrate devotion to self-care that is translated into  
21 organisational commitment. Specifically, unquestioned discursive ambiguities are shown to  
22 cunningly empower limitless meritocratic striving that pits workers against each other,  
23 creating constant negotiation of 'whose body counts' by subjugating others.  
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45 **Keywords:**

46 Communicative labour; CrossFit; Discourses of exceptionalism; Empowerment; Performative  
47 organisational cultures; Organisational wellness; Reflexive exploitation; Self-care.  
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## **Introduction**

Management's history of controlling the body and its functions has remained a consistent theme within organisational strategies (Hassard et al., 2000). Techniques of bodily control continue to evolve with the most recent shift linked to the use of physical fitness to promote employee wellbeing (Conn et al., 2009; Parks and Steelman, 2008). A key feature of contemporary organisational wellness initiatives is incentivising workers to exercise as part of a healthy lifestyle via workplace health promotions (Marshall, 2004). Extreme fitness regimens go further – enticing workers to push beyond perceived physical and mental limits (Meyer et al., 2017) through new popular workouts such as CrossFit®. Importantly, organisational cultures of extreme fitness provide participants with resources to enhance their organisational status and career prospects (Author B, 2018). Yet they also create, for many, new sources of stress and anxiety linked to meeting intense expectations - ones which encompass not simply being a 'good worker' but also being physically exceptional.

Whereas some studies have suggested fitness/sport as a means to market a professional self (Costas et al., 2016), this study suggests extreme fitness at work increases hierarchical ordering, where exceptionalist discourse informs and ultimately transforms what it means to be professional. Extreme fitness work cultures reflect an emerging form of managerial control and self-disciplining that combines neo-normative strategies of personal expression (see Butler and Harris, 2015; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009; Riach and Cutcher, 2014).

This article extends current critical understandings of organisational wellness, offering a novel approach to reflecting on its problematic potentialities by highlighting the transformation of bodily fitness into a discourse that combines professional and personal empowerment with commodified forms of embodied capital, exploitation, and managerial control – linked to specific capitalist discourses of personal exceptionalism. On the one hand, extreme fitness workplace health promotions are indicative of problematic societal discourses

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3 of exceptionalism that promote body reconfiguration in pursuit of idealised lifestyles (see Ford  
4 and Brown, 2005); on the other, they provide valuable resources for workers to engage in self-  
5 care that can empower them professionally (Author B, 2018). In this respect, this research will  
6 show how workers exemplify the exceptionalist discourses of capitalist empowerment (Author  
7 C, 2009), while also permitting them access to quantifiable work-based resources (Moore and  
8 Robinson, 2016) for enhancing their organisational status. In doing so, extreme fitness  
9 workplace health promotions serve as competitive forces exacerbating existing inequalities as  
10 well as producing new ones between workers, while offering management fresh resources for  
11 strengthening its authority.  
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24 To critically examine this sophisticated fitness phenomenon at work, a conceptual  
25 framework is developed by implementing Cremin's (2010) concept of reflexive exploitation to  
26 show how employees participate in organisationally encouraged extreme fitness regimens to  
27 maximise their professional status. The research attempts to further understand the bodily  
28 dimension of contemporary strategies of neo-normative control that rely upon moralistic  
29 discourses of exceptionalism. It asks: how do workplace health promotions further neo-  
30 normative control systems through self-regulating projects of bodily discipline associated with  
31 values and desires of exceptionalism?  
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42 Theoretically, this research reveals the increasingly complex ways in which workers  
43 are incentivised to demonstrate their professional value through processes of bodily self-  
44 discipline. Empirically, it extends understandings of the extremes to which contemporary  
45 workers go to reshape their bodies to be perceived as valuable to an organisation. The subject  
46 of this research is the extreme fitness lifestyle, CrossFit, implemented as a workplace health  
47 promotion by a US sports apparel manufacturing and retail organisation. By ethnographically  
48 investigating how workers in that performative organisational culture discuss their bodily  
49 entanglements with extreme fitness, this article **specifically addresses the aim of this special**  
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3 **issue to trace lines of flight beyond managerial versions of wellness, to provide original**  
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5 insights into how such workplace health promotions afford certain workers a sense of  
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7 professional empowerment by communicating moral belief in fitness as central to  
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9 organisational and individual success through their bodies. **Yet, as with any form of escapism**  
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11 **that subscribes to mass-consumerism, these ‘intensely lived’ lines of flight are shown to**  
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13 **be fantastical (Author C, 2009; Wood & Brown, 2010:518). These cultures of**  
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15 **exceptionalism, paradoxically, help strengthen the limits of organisational possibility and**  
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17 **personal wellness linked to their labour. While promoting the ability to push oneself**  
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19 **beyond one’s physical limits, they reinforce a culture of managerial control and capitalist**  
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21 **self-disciplining. Completely marginalised are non-capitalist lines of flight and potentially**  
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23 **more emancipatory organisational relationships fostering more democratic and holistic**  
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25 **forms of wellness that could subvert or even directly challenge these exploitative regimes**  
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27 **of workplace exceptionalism.**  
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33 This article first explores the rise of extreme wellness and the intensification of  
34 individual labour through organisational wellness. It will be followed by critical analysis of the  
35 underexplored corporeal dimension of reflexive exploitation that is specifically linked to  
36 discourses of bodily exceptionalism. The subsequent section will introduce CrossFit as a  
37 paradigmatic case of extreme wellness associated with bodily exceptionalism. The research  
38 methodology is then discussed to elucidate the reflexivities and analytical specificities in  
39 studying this case, before presenting findings that illustrate how bodily reflexive exploitation  
40 is discursively negotiated. These findings are then explored to better understand the seemingly  
41 limitless disciplining possibilities for workers to reimagine their bodies as a key means for  
42 career success. The article concludes with a broader critical discussion of how this reflects an  
43 emerging form of bodily control, reinforcing both managerial authority and capitalist values  
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3 that equate success and worth with hard work and competition while masking deeper structural  
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5 inequalities.  
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### 8 9 **Extreme Wellness at Work**

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12 Workplace health promotions are a response to an increasingly unhealthy 24/7 work  
13 environment (Zoller, 2003), reportedly offering ways for employees to cope emotionally and  
14 physically with intense pressures, competition and precarities in contemporary work (Pronk  
15 and Pronk, 2017). Ostensibly, the goal is ‘enhancing the quality of our working lives’ (Hillier  
16 et al., 2005: 419). Workplace health promotions are an outcome of the privatisation of public  
17 health (Kristensen et al., 2016; Zoller, 2003). Critically, the incorporation of extreme fitness  
18 regimes such as CrossFit reveals, though, how these strategies extend far beyond the promotion  
19 of basic health. Instead, it facilitates an organisational discourse for identifying workers who  
20 go the *extra mile* (Nash, 2018). Total commitment to the CrossFit ‘lifestyle’ includes extreme  
21 workouts and dietary regulation through high protein, low fat consumption via the Paleolithic  
22 diet, leveraging workers’ desires to promote their embrace of it, which in turn disciplines and  
23 rewards their bodies (Author B, 2018).  
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41 Employers have traditionally promoted various forms of workplace health regimes to  
42 ensure a healthy – and, therefore, more ‘sustainable’ – workforce. These have been bolstered  
43 by the harsh realities of the capitalist workplace which have necessitated ongoing struggles for  
44 greater health and safety regulations for employees. Because all work is embodied and  
45 reproducing (Wolkowitz, 2006), the social production of workers’ bodies is a site for power,  
46 discipline and discrimination at work (French et al., 2019). Dominant employment ideologies  
47 become manifest in and through corporealities. Specifically, bodies are organised to conform  
48 to prevailing managerial values such as productivity and profitability (see Hassard et al., 2000).  
49 Hence the body is a means for modelling organisational success – the successful managerial  
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3 body modelled as athleticism, for example, which foregrounds idealised performativities like  
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5 sportiness, health-mindedness and fitness (Johansson et al, 2017).  
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8 The recent focus on wellness at work reflects the need to create more resilient  
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10 employees who can mentally and physically cope with the greater economic insecurity and  
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12 intensified work cultures associated with neoliberalism. Cederström and Spicer connect this  
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14 with contemporary embodiments of puritanism, citing departure from the protestant work ethic  
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16 and the rise of the 'workout ethic' as the 'price of today's secular heaven' – continued  
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18 employment (2015: 40). Their insights suggest how values of hard work and thrift are  
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20 appropriated as contemporary management expectations to produce a 'wellness syndrome' that  
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22 represents a pathological desire for bodily alignment with organisational goals (Cederström  
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24 and Spicer, 2015), which can be traced to the precarities that stem from work intensification  
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26 (Boxall and Macky, 2014). The absence of physical toil in contemporary post-Fordist  
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28 communicative labour instigates management to occupy the body through organisationally  
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30 provided leisure, sporting or fitness activities under the guise of wellness to produce the docile,  
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32 conformist, competitive subjectivities it requires. Put differently, the need to be fit becomes an  
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34 internalised demand on workers, thus overcoming and ameliorating themselves for  
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36 withstanding the 'sickening' labour conditions of neoliberalism and a means for obtaining  
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38 advantage over co-workers in an ever more competitive hyper-capitalist marketplace (Cremin,  
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40 2010).  
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47 Costas et al. (2016) point to such commitment to sport as a way for the professional  
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49 body to be the disciplinary site not only for displaying the ambiguous professional self, but  
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51 also for enacting an autonomous self. In other words, having a sporting outlet can be a medium  
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53 through which employees can burn off steam and ready them for what professional obstacles  
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55 come next. In this sense, sport functions to simultaneously take care of two competing  
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57 discourses that when combined serve one another. And yet, importantly, Costas et al. note that  
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3 there is a limit – when the embodied ideals become more of ‘an aspirational fantasy rather than  
4 an accomplishable state’ (2016: 18) that renders the subject hopeless and more ‘aware of how  
5 their well-being is compromised at work...’ (2016: 18). Hence, the duality of sport unlocks  
6 possibilities for empowerment/constraint. Workers ‘manage and shape the way they look to fit  
7 the desired image of their organisation or profession’ (van Amsterdam, 2017; 339). A complex  
8 process of normalising conformance through reflexive exploitation and bodily judgments is at  
9 play, necessitating closer examination.

### ***Communicative labour and organisational wellness***

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22 Performing wellness at work is entangled in organisational branding (Endrissat et al,  
23 2016; Land & Taylor, 2010). In post-Fordist organisation, where the circulation of information  
24 about brands, products and services are the most distinctive organisational preoccupation,  
25 communicative labour to reinforce brand identity has evolved as a key concern (Mumby, 2016).  
26 Such branding strongly influences contemporary occupational dialectics of exclusion/inclusion  
27 within a given profession (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Here then, the performativity of wellness is  
28 crucial to perceived individual success and marketability within organisations. Significantly,  
29 the branding of oneself as physically fit is core to gaining a wider sense of professional  
30 empowerment and a key source, therefore, for contemporary employee disciplining (Endrissat  
31 et al, 2016). These discursive practices, furthermore, bring together the ways that work  
32 intensification becomes foundational to neoliberal consumption. There is expectation that  
33 individuals not only complete job tasks but are also demonstrating a commitment to an  
34 insatiable appetite for self-improvement and wellness.

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What emerges are increasingly extreme workplace health promotions. They can be  
considered extreme in several senses. The first is that they are never completed – in that health  
just like work-life balance (see Author C, 2016) is an always unobtainable and unfinished ideal.  
Fitness lends itself to be constantly intensified - as both organisations and individuals compete



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3 to demonstrate their commitment to wellness. The second is that this ever-expanding and  
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5 intensifying dimension of organisational wellness translates into actual marketing outputs often  
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7 based on ever more extreme forms of non-economic bodily labour. The adoption of athletic  
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9 and physically demanding regimens is a visible way to display commitment to health and, as  
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11 such, investment in the organisational brand. The next section critically explores this neoliberal  
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13 intensification of workplace health promotions and its entanglements to disciplining discourses  
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15 of bodily exceptionalism.  
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### ***Bodily exceptionalism and extreme wellness***

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22 Organizational wellness is a contested space in which neo-normative discourses  
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24 produce dialectically opposed subjectivities of being ‘well’ versus ‘unwell’ and therefore fit or  
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26 unfit for work (Bloomfield and Dale, 2015; Cederström and Spicer, 2015). Dale and Burrell  
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28 (2013) note how wellness discourses engender a self-responsibilisation to fit in at work – lest  
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30 it be morally judged and relegated for having a ‘deviant’ body. What counts as a deviant body  
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32 purposefully remains ambiguous to empower individuals to strive not to be so, to fit into  
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34 organisational culture (van Amsterdam et al., 2022). Such conspicuous consumption of  
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36 wellness produces idealised subjectivities such as ‘the corporate athlete’ (Costas et al, 2016;  
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38 Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007: 269). The fit body at work embodies professionalism,  
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40 and importantly a normative way to distance itself from bodies perceived unhealthy or unfit.  
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42 This trend seems most prevalent in regional contexts where exceptionalist discourses prevail,  
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44 notably in the US and the Nordic region (see, for example: Kelly et al., 2007; Johansson et al.,  
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46 2017; Costas et al., 2016). This research therefore introduces the concept of extreme wellness  
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48 by critically examining the discursive overlaps between organisational wellness discourses and  
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50 discourses of exceptionalism, to understand how together they problematically generate hyper-  
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52 competitive organisational cultures.  
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3 As discussed, aesthetic transformation of the body has become a means to communicate  
4 individual employability and marketability. Cremin (2003) frames this as reflexive exploitation  
5 in which individuals utilise resources and talents for their own competitive advantage.  
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7 Connecting this argument with that of exceptionalism, the body is therefore viewed as an object  
8 to invest in and communicate belief in something beyond the everyday, echoing Fleming and  
9 Spicer's notion of 'how objects believe for us,' whereby 'belief does not only reside inside the  
10 individual subject but also in an external economy of objects and rituals' (2005: 181). However,  
11 those perspectives risk missing the profound corporeal aspect of such self-exploitation.  
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13 Individuals do not just inhabit a workplace but a relational bodyscape, which:

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15 '...alerts us to the entanglement of landscape, embodied dispositions of the habitus,  
16 pathos and practice, in other words to the integration of body work, "body appearance"  
17 work, objects and spatial displays as well as to some of the contextually based power  
18 dynamics and tensions involved' (Simpson and Pullen, 2018: 182).  
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25 Significantly, Wacquant develops the concept of bodywork to show how boxers sculpt their  
26 bodies to produce surplus value – new value in excess of their labour cost that can be profited  
27 from – necessary to improve their professional standing (1995). Such accumulation of bodily  
28 capital (Pedersen and Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2017; Wacquant, 1995) reveals how the body  
29 functions as a means for maximising one's value, exploiting physical appearance and existing  
30 bodyscapes to enhance upward mobility. This understanding of bodywork critically reflects the  
31 corporeal aspects of professional employment. Organisation Studies scholars have long noted  
32 that discourses of empowerment can be used as a force for organisational self-disciplining  
33 (Author C, 2013; Hardy and Leiba-O'Sullivan, 1998; Trethewey, 1997). These are commonly  
34 associated with ideas of personal exceptionalism – belief in individuals' ability for self-  
35 improvement to gain a meritocratic sense of achievement over others (Hughes, 2015).  
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3 By understanding how empowerment serves as a function of exceptionalist discourses,  
4 this analysis will explore how extreme workplace health promotions such as those linked to  
5 CrossFit are promoted not just as sporting pursuits but as organisationally sanctioned lifestyles  
6 that demand self-alignment with exceptionalist discourses to be seen to be mastering their  
7 extreme regimens and therefore the self. For example, managers who perform elite athletic  
8 ideals at work conflate their talk about work with their workouts as lifestyle discourses  
9 (Johansson et al., 2017). Although their athletic pursuits may be dismissed as alleviating their  
10 frustrations with work (Costa et al, 2016), the fitness ideals manifested in their bodies visibly  
11 promote discourses of authenticity and personal self-hood interpreted as representations of  
12 organisational goals (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011). Equally, such discursive idealisation of  
13 specific bodies informs executive recruitment practices, privileging particular embodiments  
14 (e.g., the sporty body or the ‘corporate athlete’) (Meriläinen et al, 2015). Hence, fitting in to an  
15 organisational bodyscape determined by managers that associate extreme bodily  
16 transformation with professional subjectivities, workers’ reflexive exploitation can be  
17 dangerously pushed to its limits.

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19 Discourses of exceptionalism are commonly understood in political science as being  
20 mobilised by those in positions of power to exempt themselves from laws and norms that others  
21 abide by (Crozier, 2020; Hughes, 2015). They are historically constituted in relation to  
22 perceptions of power, moral superiority and exemption (Hughes, 2015). Everyday self-  
23 perceptions of individual exceptionalism are therefore informed by entrenched moral attitudes  
24 to how society is governed and by whom (Crozier, 2020; Hughes, 2015).

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26 With specific relevance to this research, US exceptionalism is generally retraced to the  
27 founding of the US constitution to show how contemporary moral attitudes are informed by  
28 dated puritanical ideals (Hughes, 2015; Konings, 2018). Moralistic protestant puritanism is  
29 written into US law and thus embodied in the everyday but cannot be ontologically verified –  
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3 ‘US exceptionalism rewrites history to produce US identity as something innately virtuous and  
4 incorruptible in the name of which all suspensions of domestic and international law can be  
5 justified’ (Hughes, 2015: 534). Hence, Konings (2018) shows how exceptionalism reinforces  
6 neoliberalism in the US, where authoritarian governmentalities bypass the normal rules of  
7 democracy via moral justification alone. ‘US exceptionalism is routinely defined in terms of a  
8 set of values that go under the banner of “the American creed”’ (Hughes, 2015:548).  
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11 Discourses of exceptionalism are thus rooted in mythologised beliefs entangled in  
12 rhetorics of power, rather than in historical fact – they are empty signifiers produced by and  
13 generative of collective self-actualisation around a certain political will rather than a rational  
14 decision (Hughes, 2015; Konings, 2018). Hence, US exceptionalism courses through the veins  
15 of contemporary American society, as moralising political manifestos and speeches are  
16 translated into everyday acts of empowerment guised as lifestyle choices. For example, Greg  
17 Glassman, founder and previous CEO of CrossFit, makes clear that to do CrossFit, is to enter  
18 an exclusive club:  
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21 ‘Virtuosity is defined in gymnastics as “performing the common uncommonly well.”  
22 Unlike risk and originality, virtuosity is elusive, supremely elusive. It is, however,  
23 readily recognised by audience as well as coach and athlete. But more importantly,  
24 more to my point, virtuosity...is always the mark of true mastery (and of genius and  
25 beauty)’ (Glassman, 2005: 1).  
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29 The puritanical virtuosity of Glassman’s exceptionalist rhetoric has two features that this  
30 research will explore. Firstly, CrossFit is not grounded in the true materialities of what a body  
31 is capable of but in a belief that the body can achieve an exceptional moral standing by gaining  
32 a mastery over itself not to render it docile, but to empower it. Secondly, that empowerment  
33 felt by the CrossFit body is elusive in so much as it is an empty signifier. What constitutes  
34 mastery can easily change through adjustment of the discourse by those with the power to alter  
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3 it. Discourses of exceptionalism circulate in ways that both include and exclude (Hughes,  
4 2015). They must be inclusive enough to gain support and control, and sufficiently exclusive  
5 so as not to become the norm (Patman, 2006 cited in Hughes 2015: 52). Discursive shifts are  
6 therefore critical to the maintenance of exceptionalist discourses. Their material effects are not  
7 deemed salient; all that matters is that they are believed in (after Hughes, 2015).  
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16 **What makes these exceptionalist discourses so dangerous, furthermore, is that**  
17 **they put veritable limits on organisational relations, confining them within specific**  
18 **ideological and disciplining boundaries. The emphasis is on personal transcendence, an**  
19 **insatiable drive to always push oneself beyond their existing limits, ironically, dictated by**  
20 **prevailing societal and managerial norms. In effect, a person becomes centred on their**  
21 **own self-exploitation rather than exploring and struggling for alternative and potentially**  
22 **more emancipatory workplace wellness outlets. The complete and obsessive absorption**  
23 **with extreme wellness at the very least blinds them to the possibility of adopting holistic**  
24 **strategies for coping with the pressures of capitalist work. Fundamentally, it traps them**  
25 **in a narrow view of what it means to be well that leads them away from exploring**  
26 **different types of workplace relations, such as those of worker-owned cooperatives or**  
27 **collectives, that put values of egalitarianism, democracy, and radical care for one another**  
28 **at the core of wellbeing (see Kruse, 2020; Resch and Steyaert, 2020).**  
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#### 47 **CrossFit as a case of extreme wellness at work**

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50 CrossFit demands extreme bodily exertions through intense workout regimens,  
51 occupying the body with desires to prepare for and perform athletic excellence. Enthusiasts  
52 believe they can achieve exceptional levels of fitness by following strict dietary regimens and  
53 lifestyle choices that privilege the workout in their everyday (Dawson, 2017). CrossFit is a  
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3 process of intense bodily regulation and transformation that aims to produce exceptional  
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5 physiques.  
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8 The CrossFit ‘box’ — where workouts happen — is sparse, stripped back and without  
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10 decor or mirrors to construct a pseudo-industrial workout contrasted as counter-cultural  
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12 functional fitness against conventional, supposedly less authentic gyms (Dawson, 2017).  
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14 CrossFit fetishises industrial labour through repetitive high-intensity functional exertions and  
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16 competitive group dynamics (Dawson, 2017). Coaches programme intense daily workouts. As  
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18 individual goals come within reach, additional extreme goals are created. Significantly,  
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20 coaches ‘mandate for participants to commit to the CrossFit philosophy which emphasises  
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22 neoliberal physical and psychological self-improvement as a pathway to “health” and “fitness”  
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24 (Nash, 2018; 1448).  
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29 In the CrossFit bodyscape specifically, the intensities of the workout combined with a  
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31 nuanced dietary regime can rapidly render the body distinguishable by its lean yet muscular  
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33 contours. The CrossFit body receives greater external validation the more it reflexively exploits  
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35 itself. Extreme rituals create rites of passage and camaraderie (Dawson, 2017). To workout to  
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37 the point of vomiting is applauded (Dawson, 2017). Mastery over the body is valorised as  
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39 virtuous. Glassman’s rhetorical notion that CrossFit is common invites anyone to uncritically  
40  
41 engage in its disciplinary regimens. In society, we have a choice whether or not to participate  
42  
43 in such reflexive exploitation. In extreme fitness work cultures, workers do not necessarily  
44  
45 have that choice.  
46  
47  
48

49  
50 Crucial for this analysis is a deeper understanding of how the body can be shaped and  
51  
52 disciplined by organisational culture in dialogue with broader societal discourses of  
53  
54 exceptionalism. Specifically, the next sections will examine how discursive embodied  
55  
56 subjectivities conform to, contest and complicate organisational wellness when implemented  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 as workplace health promotion, to understand how individuals negotiate the CrossFit discourse  
4  
5 and explore their material bodily limits.  
6  
7

### 8 9 **Research methods**

10  
11 This research analyses how participants discuss their bodies in relation to a CrossFit  
12 workplace health promotion. Anonymised data are drawn from an ethnographic case study to  
13 analyse managers' and workers' accounts of workplace health promotion participation to  
14 understand how they engage in reflexive exploitation.  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19

### 20 21 *Entrée for critical scholars*

22  
23 Gaining access to large organisations is difficult, particularly for critical scholars. To  
24 negotiate access, Author B contacted SportsCo (a pseudonym for a large sports apparel  
25 manufacturing and retail organisation), but attempts at contacting coaching staff proved  
26 unsuccessful. However, Author B spoke with a friend who knew someone at SportsCo about  
27 their proposal. From there, Author B was put in contact with senior management and human  
28 resources who reviewed the research proposal and gave consent. As per Institutional Review  
29 Board guidelines, Author B confirmed that the organisation's name would not appear in any  
30 official publications and would be represented as a pseudonym. Interestingly, one member of  
31 the task force seemed disappointed that SportsCo's name would not appear in publications,  
32 wanting to market SportsCo's fitness culture.  
33  
34  
35  
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41  
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44

45  
46 Drawing from principles of engaged scholarship (Dempsey & Barge, 2014), Author B  
47 asked what problems or dilemmas the organisation was hoping to understand better, and  
48 management responses pointed to a need to increase participation in the CrossFit workouts.  
49 During the fieldwork, Author B worked out and ate lunch with various employees and CrossFit  
50 coaches in SportsCo's fitness and dining spaces. Upon completion of the data collection, they  
51 compiled a critical report describing unintended consequences of the extreme workplace health  
52 promotion, to promote dialogue. SportsCo did not respond to the report nor repeated attempts  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 by Author B to schedule a discussion. The ethnographic case study conducted by Author B,  
4  
5 was used, in part, for a larger research project investigating managerial control and workplace  
6  
7 health promotion.  
8

### 9 10 ***Reflexive practice***

11  
12 Author B encountered challenges in the research process, namely, how they were  
13  
14 perceived as an outsider to the organisation – sentiments expressed similarly by Kunda (2009).  
15  
16 However, they had attended a CrossFit coaching seminar and was well-versed in the CrossFit  
17  
18 methodology, which is perhaps one reason why they gained access to SportsCo. Having been  
19  
20 working out and eating a low-carbohydrate diet for some years, Author B's body had been  
21  
22 sculpted accordingly and they were fluent in the nutritional talk that tended to initiate every  
23  
24 CrossFitter's lunch hour.  
25  
26

27  
28 Author B's distinguishable embodiments were both a privilege and a curse. Managers  
29  
30 viewed Author B as an ally with a rapport around health and fitness evidenced by their active  
31  
32 participation in workouts. Yet, the impetus behind the study was to focus on managerial control  
33  
34 through organisational wellness discourses. Building trust with employees that could offer  
35  
36 critical perspectives took time and came later in the fieldwork. While Author B initially  
37  
38 recruited participants from the CrossFit box by asking when they could talk in more depth after  
39  
40 a workout, that approach did not work with more resistant employees.  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 A realisation occurred two weeks into the research when Author B recognised that the  
46  
47 time spent exercising with CrossFit advocates and evangelists may have isolated them from  
48  
49 the group they wished to interview. So, instead of doing CrossFit workouts, Author B  
50  
51 proceeded by working out in the traditional gym and wellness centre. Yet their body bore the  
52  
53 scars typical of CrossFit, such as shin burns from climbing and sliding down. Attempting to  
54  
55 distance themselves from the CrossFit box was not sufficient to gain the necessary rapport with  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 participants – time proved to be the key factor, as this transcribed voice memo by Author B  
4  
5 illustrates:

6  
7  
8 ‘...just in general it seems like it has taken six weeks to generate some element  
9  
10 of rapport with the coaches and other employees there. I don’t know why it has  
11  
12 taken so long. Today was probably the first day that I felt comfortable, and it  
13  
14 was apparent that other folks felt comfortable too, in that [a coach], talked with  
15  
16 me for over an hour....’

17  
18  
19 This relationally reflexive approach (Hibbert et al., 2014) did eventually diversify the  
20  
21 population sample.

22  
23  
24 Later, it became clear that initially unresponsive employees were stigmatised by being  
25  
26 labelled as resistant to CrossFit or for living a more sedentary lifestyle and were attempting to  
27  
28 distance themselves from controversy. After interviewing two of the more reticent employees,  
29  
30 Author B exchanged contact information and requested their assistance in the recruitment  
31  
32 process via snowball sampling (Lindloff and Taylor, 2017) to gain a breadth of perspectives  
33  
34 and give voice to their (anonymised) concerns.

35  
36  
37 Author B’s situating themselves in the same communicative labour as SportsCo  
38  
39 employees was crucial to critically understanding how different participants made sense of  
40  
41 their unfolding shared somatic experiences (after Cunliffe, 2008). Entering into intimate  
42  
43 dialogue with individuals enabled Author B to understand their sense impressions, gestures,  
44  
45 emotional expressions and responses, not just intellectual interpretations (Cunliffe, 2008; van  
46  
47 Amsterdam, 2017). The research therefore engages with participants’ lived experiences to  
48  
49 provide a rich picture of the process through which they experienced CrossFit. For example,  
50  
51 after each interview, Author B made detailed notes and created voice memos at the end of the  
52  
53 day that reflected on salient events. Memos assisted Author B in formulating connections  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 during axial coding of the data, as well through conceptual conversations with Authors A and  
4  
5 C.

### ***Research context***

6  
7  
8  
9  
10 SportsCo's head office spanned 500,000 square-feet near a major Northeastern US city.  
11  
12 The CrossFit box was located just 100 yards from the main building. Besides conference  
13  
14 rooms, showrooms and product testing labs, the campus contained a 400-metre running track,  
15  
16 tennis courts, football pitch, softball field, Zumba/Yoga/Spin studios, a basketball court, locker  
17  
18 rooms, traditional exercise equipment, employee apparel store, coffee bar and cafeteria with  
19  
20 multiple food stations. SportsCo introduced the CrossFit-based workplace health promotion  
21  
22 two years prior to fieldwork. Author B collected ethnographic data for two months using a  
23  
24 contractor badge that granted unrestricted access to all fitness areas, cafeteria and general  
25  
26 employee gathering locations. Before each workout, they were announced as a researcher and  
27  
28 employees were informed of the observations.  
29  
30  
31  
32

33 SportsCo employed more than 1000 workers on-campus at that time. Significantly, it  
34  
35 had experienced declining sales, including the loss of major contracts with professional  
36  
37 sporting leagues. Despite being acquired by a larger sports apparel group, anonymised as  
38  
39 Nakatomi, SportsCo continued to lose significant partnerships. Consequently, Nakatomi  
40  
41 considered SportsCo to be an underperforming asset. In response, SportsCo implemented a  
42  
43 new marketing strategy centred specifically on fitness, rather than mainstream sports. CrossFit  
44  
45 remained essential to SportsCo's strategy, hence why it formed the basis of its workplace health  
46  
47 promotion. Author B was also invited to business meetings, which shed light on SportsCo  
48  
49 leveraging employees' participation in CrossFit to enhance the branded consumer experience.  
50  
51  
52  
53

### ***Data collection***

54  
55  
56 Besides immersion in workouts, in situ conversations and making fieldnotes and  
57  
58 memos, Author B conducted 28 semi-structured interviews with 13 female and 15 male  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 employees, ranging in age from 19 to 68, from executives to interns. Interviews were designed  
4  
5 to ask open-ended questions about employees' understandings of wellness discourses at  
6  
7 SportsCo, to draw out specific themes (Johansson et al., 2017). Interviews were digitally  
8  
9 recorded and transcribed verbatim. Questions like, "What has changed since the wellness  
10  
11 initiative began?" and "In what ways has the introduction of the CrossFit workplace health  
12  
13 promotion affected work and personal life?" gained participant perspectives on the workplace  
14  
15 health promotion and its impact on their lives. Hence, the data exhibit a wide range of attitudes  
16  
17 to the SportsCo workplace health promotion.  
18  
19  
20

### ***Data analysis***

21  
22  
23  
24 Empirical data analyses drew out themes that reflect and reproduce characteristics of  
25  
26 the organisational discourse (Fairhurst and Putnam, 2004). Two phases of coding and thematic  
27  
28 analysis were conducted (Bryman and Bell, 2015). The initial phase – open-coding– yielded  
29  
30 180 categories through constant comparison between data. The second phase – axial coding  
31  
32 (Lindloff and Taylor, 2017) – identified relationships between sets of codes and data, which  
33  
34 informed conceptualisation of how wellness discourses were negotiated at SportsCo. It was  
35  
36 here when Authors A and C joined the project to provide conceptual illumination of the  
37  
38 relationships between the empirical data and extant debates in the discipline. By engaging in  
39  
40 discussions of the data, all authors participated in the final round of analysis and argument  
41  
42 development.  
43  
44  
45

46  
47 Each participant had the opportunity to edit or clarify the typed transcript from their  
48  
49 interviews, providing trustworthiness of findings (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Author B solicited  
50  
51 personal emails to avoid using SportsCo's email server to review transcripts. Several  
52  
53 participants clarified comments but, overall, content remained the same.  
54  
55

56  
57 Author B coded participants based on their self-perceived predispositions to the  
58  
59 SportsCo CrossFit workplace health promotion (see Table 1). Twelve participants were coded  
60

1  
2  
3 as advocates for CrossFit. Five were coded as CrossFit evangelicals – those who, for example,  
4 were CrossFit trainers, opened their own CrossFit gym, competed in tournaments, or stressed  
5 the nutritional-lifestyle components to friends/family). Such moralistic zeal has been described  
6 in previous studies of normative control systems (see Barker, 1999; Kunda, 2009), and  
7 connects with the puritanism within exceptionalist discourses described above. Meanwhile, six  
8 employees were openly resistant to the programme for various reasons, three were indifferent,  
9 two had mixed feelings (coded as fragmented) about CrossFit.

10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19 [Insert Table 1 here]

### 20 21 22 23 24 **The CrossFit body at work and its discursive implications**

25  
26 The following findings represent the discursive tensions in extreme wellness discourse  
27 at SportsCo, to show participants' complex moral and embodied entanglements in self-  
28 exploitative communicative labour. Three intersecting discursive tensions (i.e., themes)  
29 emerge from analysis of coded participant perceptions such as: authenticity, body colonisation  
30 and health (*underpinning/entrenching* discourses); evangelism, paternalism and surveillance  
31 (*overarching/inescapability* disciplining discourses); body image, gender and elitism  
32 (*embracing/performing* discourses) – see also Table 2. These themes are delineated to draw  
33 out how empowerment and exploitation are experienced but they are understood as  
34 intersecting, overlapping, and indicative of the 'messiness' of the dialectics (Johnson and Long,  
35 2001: 30).

36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
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42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49 [Insert Table 2 here]

#### 50 51 ***Underpinning/entrenching discourses***

52  
53 The entrenched moralistic CrossFit ideal of 'performing the common uncommonly  
54 well' was pervasive at SportsCo. This included racing upstairs instead of taking the elevator,  
55 and recording fastest times on the whiteboard provided, for example. Every moment held  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 potential to climb or slide down a leaderboard. Such competitive opportunities colonised bodies  
4  
5 with notions of constantly honing them into archetypal physiques representative of authentic  
6  
7 functional fitness.  
8  
9

10 When Harper (who also owned a CrossFit gym) applied to SportsCo, she was concerned  
11  
12 that her body belied her CrossFit commitment and worried that she would not be hired because  
13  
14 her body appearance did not conform to the bodyscape:  
15

16  
17 ‘I said to my parents, “I don’t know if they’re going to hire me.” And they’re  
18  
19 like, “Why?” “Well, because I don’t look like a CrossFitter.” That’s really what  
20  
21 I said even though I’ve been CrossFitting for almost two years at that point. “I  
22  
23 don’t look like a CrossFitter.” And they’re like, “What’s a CrossFitter look  
24  
25 like?” I’m like, “...it’s someone who doesn’t have a lot of body fat and someone  
26  
27 who’s toned. That’s what people think a CrossFitter should look like.”’  
28  
29

30 Harper was hired, but the concerns of this CrossFit advocate are indicative of how  
31  
32 exceptionalist CrossFit discourse is. Harper jokingly (but heard with some truth) wondered  
33  
34 whether her body would fit into an organisational culture underpinned by its extreme  
35  
36 bodyscape.  
37  
38

39  
40 Exceptionally ‘authentic,’ healthy bodies were often on-campus. On at least two  
41  
42 occasions, Author B observed sponsored athletes (from CrossFit and other professional sports)  
43  
44 in the hallways, there to test or endorse products but also to entrench the competitive  
45  
46 bodyscape, giving employees something exceptional to strive for. Yet, presenting a sculpted  
47  
48 body was not always enough for potential employees. SportsCo’s lead CrossFit coach, Bill,  
49  
50 recalled his hiring an intern:  
51  
52

53  
54 ‘We have the type A [personality]... which [are] the go-getters... I think you  
55  
56 have both introverts or extroverts that come in, but I think it’s the type of people  
57  
58 who realise that they really have the power to really do what they need to do to  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 make a change, ...a perfect sample is [the intern]. [They] came up here, to ask  
4  
5 if they could interview... like drove up *and slept in their car!* They figured it  
6  
7 out... you're going to work here, you're going to intern – done!  
8  
9

10 The intern was hired on the spot because of his risk-taking, ambition and demonstrated  
11  
12 commitment to CrossFit. His 'go-getting' was, for Bill, the ultimate demonstration of a moral  
13  
14 belief in CrossFit, where exertion and tolerance of fatigue were embodied in interview.  
15  
16

### 17 ***Overarching/inescapable discourses***

18  
19 There was no place to hide from CrossFit at SportsCo. Any space on- and off-campus  
20  
21 could potentially be a site of puritanical judgement. Eating in the cafeteria invited conversation  
22  
23 about individuals' nutritional choices. Hence, some employees preferred to eat at their desks.  
24  
25 However, even being seen with a sugary beverage in the corridors, as observed by Author B,  
26  
27 invited ridicule (veiled in humour). Conformance to the Paleolithic diet was surveilled by all.  
28  
29 One meeting started with an in-jest comment about sweetening coffee and turned serious when  
30  
31 one employee boldly declared the healthiest choice was simply black coffee. Such evangelical  
32  
33 rhetoric led to critical reflections on self. Sarah, for example, reflected on learning to conform  
34  
35 during a meeting at a restaurant with brand ambassadors:  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 '... It was our global marketing meeting [with Nakatomi] ...we had a lot of  
41  
42 [CrossFit] staff on their end. Two guys from Europe were on the [Nakatomi]  
43  
44 staff [and] *they're just gorgeous, buff guys ...good representatives of CrossFit...*  
45  
46 I remember we all went up to dinner and ... – it was all sort of that Paleo [diet]  
47  
48 and not Paleo and everyone ... started to learn the language ....'  
49  
50

51 Here, 'good representatives of CrossFit' appeared to embody a moral standard set by the parent  
52  
53 company for SportsCo to follow. Sarah and other SportsCo employees saw Nakatomi  
54  
55 employees' bodies as cues to conform to the bodyscape signified by their dietary choices.  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

*Extreme Wellness at Work 22*

1  
2  
3 The dietary dogma that valorised protein-rich foods and shunned carbohydrates proved  
4 inescapable. Rob remembered feeling belittled for ordering bread at a company function:  
5

6  
7 ‘...we went to dinner at this beautiful steakhouse and I like bread, [another  
8 colleague] likes bread, so we got bread. And [other SportsCo employees] were  
9 like, “you guys can’t eat bread, that’s ridiculous.” They were...belittling us for  
10 eating bread.’  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15

16  
17 Such taken-for-granted utterances were common. Pointing to others’ non-conformity enabled  
18 individuals to identify their own choices as virtuous and those like Rob’s as not.  
19

20  
21 Meanwhile, employees on-campus would drag their exhausted bodies back to the main  
22 office from the CrossFit box – some bearing fresh cuts or popped callouses from the workout  
23 that invited commentary. Employees like Danny would ask ‘what was the WoD [workout of  
24 the day]?’ and conversation would ensue:  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29

30  
31 ‘...I always kid with the new hires, “Congratulations on your new jobs,”  
32 because when you work with SportsCo, you usually have two or three jobs... I  
33 pretty much take probably an hour and a half out in the middle of my day  
34 between working out and lunch, but I’m here ten, eleven hours a day so I make  
35 up for it.’  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41

42  
43 Danny’s surveillance of others combined with his own self-disciplining is indicative of how  
44 employees’ bodies were colonised not through managerial directives but by each other’s moral  
45 judgements. Opportunities to work out on-campus overlapped with daily work tasks, with  
46 employees working harder for longer. Moreover, some committed further. For Zeke, discussing  
47 CrossFit was a way to connect to his colleagues. The daily workout was so important that he  
48 ritualistically prepared himself for each WoD before bed each evening:  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54

55  
56 ‘I check [the next day’s workout] out every night before I go to bed, and I think  
57 about it a little bit, but I didn’t really think about it too much yesterday going  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 into it... It is funny. My performance yesterday in the WoD probably wasn't on  
4  
5 par with where I would rate my top performances. That doesn't mean I [was],  
6  
7 you know, never one, two, or three, you know, in my class or in the company;  
8  
9 [I] just didn't [know] how hard I actually put out. I feel like I kind of took it  
10  
11 easier on myself, and it could have been partly a result [of] the fact that I, you  
12  
13 know, was distracted or focused on... other stuff, work.'

14  
15  
16  
17 Zeke's puritanical commitment was in the name of camaraderie. He sought to fit in with other  
18  
19 CrossFit enthusiasts. Harper and Sarah did too, while Tony felt excluded. The inclusive-  
20  
21 exclusive functioning of exceptionalist discourse was at play in how individuals made sense of  
22  
23 their bodies in relation to others, knowingly or not. Danny's jokes did not explicitly include or  
24  
25 exclude, but how they were received arguably did. SportsCo's campus was ostensibly panoptic,  
26  
27 in the sense that the moralising gaze of colleagues, not necessarily management, was  
28  
29 inescapable.  
30  
31

### 32 33 *Embracing/performing discourses*

34  
35 Although management did not formally monitor the bodyscape, that did not stop  
36  
37 employees demonstrating to them their commitment. In one interview, Tony mentioned, '[The  
38  
39 CEO] noticed when I've been in [a] couple of classes... [they were] thrilled that I was joining  
40  
41 CrossFit and... I really aligned myself with [them].' Later, when Tony applied for promotion,  
42  
43 he remembered:  
44  
45

46  
47 '...if I interviewed and was a finalist for the position with [the CEO], I probably  
48  
49 would start going to that 6:30am class for a couple of reasons... there are couple  
50  
51 of... subtext messages about going to that class.'... 'in the sense that the 6:30  
52  
53 class has tangible networking but also has kind of a subtext of – I'm able to do  
54  
55 CrossFit because I'm inventing the time by coming here at 6:30 instead of oh,  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 yes, in the middle of the day I'm going to go at 11, but I'm in a transition phase.  
4

5 So, I don't have anyone watching me...'  
6

7  
8 Tony clarified that attending the 6:30am class might imply that he was too busy to workout  
9 during work hours but could come in before work as a way to communicate his moral  
10 commitment to CrossFit and, by proxy, his dedication to SportsCo.  
11  
12

13  
14 Exceptionalist discourse was also embraced during meetings but not always rewarded.  
15

16  
17 A fieldnote excerpt from one meeting noted:  
18

19 'The manager forgot his notebook on his desk. [Zeke] springs up: "I'll get  
20 it...time me, I will be fast." Upon returning, he asks his time, but nobody set  
21 their stopwatch. He is assured he was *fast*.'  
22  
23  
24

25  
26 Zeke appeared proud of his elite performance, but his eyes drooped showing disappointment  
27 that the moment had passed, and his colleagues had already moved on.  
28  
29

30  
31 In another interview, SportsCo fashion designer Leanna recalled being at a market,  
32 when the cashier asked if she was 'here for the CrossFit thing?' Leanna replied, yes, to which  
33 the cashier nodded, 'I can tell.' Author B asked Leanna if it was because of the food she was  
34 buying and she replied, 'No, by looking at me.' That exchange undoubtedly emboldening  
35 Leanna's commitment to CrossFit. Leanna recalled another flattering encounter:  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40

41  
42 Leanna: 'It's like you want to stay in a certain size jeans and now it's strong and  
43 muscles are beautiful and they're good looking so being curvy as long  
44 as it's that muscular tone, it's different. I think that's attractive. I think  
45 that's more impressive than a model, skinny look.'  
46  
47  
48  
49

50  
51 Author B: '...sounds like you're saying that your conception of body image has  
52 changed since doing CrossFit?'  
53  
54

55  
56 Leanna: 'Totally! It's great. Just like the other day I went into LensCrafters to get  
57 some sunglasses and right when I walked in someone said, "You have  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 an amazing body" [Laughter]. It made me blush, it's great to hear those  
4  
5 compliments.'

6  
7  
8 Unlike Tony and Zeke, Leanna was not explicitly performing, but her embrace of CrossFit was  
9  
10 identifiable from her body.

11  
12 However, not all employees embraced the discourse. Those who felt comfortable  
13  
14 discussing their contempt for the workplace health promotion lamented its introduction.  
15  
16 Barbara remembered being told, "if you don't do CrossFit, you don't exist." She clarified, "I've  
17  
18 actually been told by higher-ups, "If you want to get ahead, you need to do CrossFit. You need  
19  
20 to lose weight." Author B never witnessed explicit threats during fieldwork but heard more  
21  
22 implicit gendered neo-normative control. For example, Sarah recalled that management did not  
23  
24 take everyone's circumstances into consideration; she was told: 'you have to make this work'  
25  
26 – indicating the importance of the first workout. Sarah explained a multitude of reasons for not  
27  
28 working out at work, including someone 'not want[ing] to shower in front of her colleagues'  
29  
30 but saw both sides to the workplace health promotion, admitting she was happy that some  
31  
32 employees were able to enjoy it, but she remained sceptical of its 'one-size-fits all lifestyle  
33  
34 approach.'

35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40 Not all could achieve CrossFit's elusive bodily ideals, and some did not wish to; yet all  
41  
42 were subjected to them. Huge posters of CrossFit athletes on corridor walls complemented the  
43  
44 performativities to reinforce the exceptionalist discourse – idealised body images were  
45  
46 inescapable. Individuals sought to find their place in its puritanical social strata by deciphering  
47  
48 how to communicate and perform extreme fitness. Both complex and ambiguous, the  
49  
50 indecipherability of how exceptional their commitment needed to be was at once empowering  
51  
52 and disempowering, as Zeke's efforts in the meeting show. Discourses at SportsCo about  
53  
54 otherwise mundane things such as Rob's eating bread or Danny's banter created arbitrary moral  
55  
56 distinctions between those seen to be virtuous and those who were not, which could shift and  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 change. The empty signifier of the CrossFit body was a lens through which SportsCo  
4  
5 employees were hired, monitored and managed.  
6

7  
8 In the two years since its introduction, CrossFit ideals had become so embedded in  
9  
10 SportsCo culture that CrossFit bodies offered Zeke a way to infer employee's commitment to  
11  
12 hard work:  
13

14  
15 '[CrossFitters are] just the type of people that would be willing to roll up their  
16  
17 sleeves and get dirty.....which are the type of people I want to work with.  
18  
19 [CrossFit] exposes those types of people that – I'm not saying folks that don't  
20  
21 CrossFit wouldn't... but someone who does CrossFit, if they're committed and  
22  
23 consistent with it, are the types of people that you want to get into a foxhole  
24  
25 with and into projects with... because they're willing to grind it out. They're  
26  
27 willing to deal with that discomfort and anxiety... I have more confidence in  
28  
29 my co-workers that CrossFit because I know what that entails.'  
30  
31  
32

33 SportsCo needed to turnaround its flagging business performance, focusing on fitness products.  
34  
35 A preliminary objective of implementing its CrossFit workplace health promotion may have  
36  
37 been to leverage the communicative labour of employees such as Leanna, to promote its  
38  
39 lifestyle products. What these findings draw out is that the reflexive exploitation embodied in  
40  
41 CrossFit subjected employees to intersecting moral and discursive tensions, which produced a  
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43 performative organisational culture that found new ways to empower employees to be seen to  
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45 be capable of being more productive.  
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### 50 **Concluding Discussion: Empowering Extreme Bodily Exploitation**

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54 This article aimed to reveal the deep and often overlooked relationship between  
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56 wellness discourses and organisational strategies on the one hand, and reflexive strategies of  
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58 bodily exploitation and managerial control on the other. In this case, the expectation for  
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3 engaging in extreme fitness produced a form of bodily empowerment and moral discipline  
4 within the organisation through which personal physical health was made into a tangible  
5 organisational commodity that could be used for career advancement or maintaining individual  
6 organisational status. Here, the imperative to perform wellness, or more precisely to embody  
7 exceptional physical capacity through an intensive fitness regime was a common source for  
8 individual employees to exploit for their own professional advantage. Yet like all forms of  
9 capital accumulation, it reproduced inequalities based on problematic pre-existing cultural  
10 tropes of individual achievement through competition and toil that are embedded in  
11 meritocratic societies informed by discourses of exceptionalism. The organisational  
12 expectation and increasingly viewed demand to be bodily exceptional was ultimately a potent  
13 means for reinforcing and expanding managerial authority and control within the organisation.  
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28 This research asks: how do workplace health promotions further neo-normative control  
29 systems through self-regulating projects of bodily discipline associated with values and desires  
30 of exceptionalism? Wellness initiatives have the potential to produce and reproduce narrow,  
31 yet limitless fitness ideals, where self-regulation becomes extreme moralised attention to self-  
32 care. Cremin (2010) observes that there is little choice in such an exploitative system, noting  
33 that workers subscribe to the conditions or risk being unemployable. The contribution of this  
34 research is to show how bodily exceptionalism becomes a means of showcasing one's potential  
35 and discipline – a moral commitment to self-care that is translated into a visible and  
36 performative commitment to the organisation overall. What makes this such a dangerous  
37 discourse is that self-care is a rarely questioned universal good. Neo-normative control systems  
38 can therefore operate under a guise of wellness, while exploiting working bodies to extents that  
39 know no bounds.  
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56 Organisationally, The CrossFit workplace health promotion offered SportsCo a means  
57 through which to develop its performative organisational culture at a time when it was  
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3 considered an underperforming asset by its parent company. With CrossFit apparel being core  
4 to its business, SportsCo had a vested interest in promoting it as the lifestyle choice of its  
5 employees. In doing so, it produced an on-campus prototype for how to become immersed in  
6 that lifestyle. The institutionalised discourse of bodily exceptionalism served to foster a neo-  
7 normative culture of control in which people were morally judged by other employees and their  
8 managers on the degree to which they performatively engaged in this extreme fitness regime  
9 and to what extent they were physically transformed by it.

10  
11 While there was resistance to the culture, its totalising effect came from the  
12 complexities and ambiguities of conflating workouts with work and in doing so physical fitness  
13 with professional fitness. Employees preoccupied with being seen to embrace the  
14 organisational culture became engrossed in assessing their relative value against each other,  
15 based on comparisons of their bodies. Critically, this ethnographic case draws out how  
16 communicative labour and neo-normative control combine in cunningly taken-for-granted  
17 ways to produce individualistic forms of bodily reflexive exploitation in the hope of  
18 organisational recognition and reward. Hence, this research extends the findings of previous  
19 studies that problematise workplace health promotions and claims of inclusive wellness  
20 practices while promoting the often-deleterious conditions embraced by exclusivity (Author B,  
21 2018; Zoller, 2003).

22  
23 More specifically, this research seeks to understand how workers engaged in embodied  
24 forms of reflexive exploitation linked to workplace health promotions. While complex neo-  
25 normative inculcations were at play, the empirical findings illustrate how workers consistently  
26 engaged in discourses of exceptionalism in order to ultimately determine ‘whose body counts’  
27 and ‘whose does not’ at SportsCo. It provided workers a concrete and visible form of  
28 empowerment to assess themselves and each other, in this respect. Rather than just being  
29 understood to be inscriptive or disciplining, it also paradoxically provided a clear and all too  
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3 transparent way to judge one's success and status within an organisational climate that is  
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5 marked by ambiguity with respect to decision-making.  
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8 This research reveals how individuals feel empowered to constantly compare, contrast  
9  
10 and comment on their bodies to negotiate their overall value to the organisation. These are  
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12 presented as thoroughly meritocratic encounters in which anyone can believe they will become  
13  
14 successful if they work hard enough on their own self-improvement. It is precisely, here, that  
15  
16 discourses of exceptionalism come critically into play as they represent both the hierarchical  
17  
18 manner in which subjects reflect their agency and the masking of the inherent genetic and  
19  
20 societal structural inequalities that actually determine these disparities. The over-arching goal  
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22 was to show how one is physically, and therefore professionally, exceptional.  
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26 The outcome of SportsCo employees' agency is conceptualised as bodily  
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28 exceptionalism. With health/fitness promoted as a universal good, employees' bodies became  
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30 artefacts for demonstrating their belief in SportsCo organisational values of extreme physical  
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32 fitness to promote their individual value. While Thompson and Van den Broek (2010: 9) point  
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34 to neo-normative control as possibly being 'dangerous,' this research shows it may be more  
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36 embodied and more dangerous than previously thought. Whereas previous understandings of  
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38 neo-normative control draw on Foucault's docile bodies (1995) to emphasise individual consent  
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40 to discursive health practices, the introduction of extreme workplace health promotions and  
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42 bodily forms of reflexive exploitation reflect how such disciplining is actively and inexorably  
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44 associated with feelings of empowerment and moral agency. In a wellness-based performative  
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46 organisational culture, the body is always on display and communicates its relative  
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48 organisational value to other members, potentially creating a spectrum far broader and less  
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50 decipherable than simply healthy versus unhealthy bodies (after Dale and Burrell, 2014).  
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55 Bodily exceptionalism becomes a key means through which individual value and power  
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57 are communicated. It knows no bounds and its reach is far. The extent to which workers can  
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3 discipline their bodies may counter-intuitively cause more harm than health benefits. Lamb and  
4 Hillman, for example, observe extreme obstacle race enthusiasts crawling under barbed-wire  
5 and sprinting through live electricity wires to emphasise a ‘rhetorical proof of fitness’ (2014:  
6 81). Completing the obstacle race is simply not enough; one must have the scarred body and  
7 torn shirt to communicate its accomplishment. Yet as Bauman discusses, ‘the pursuit of fitness  
8 is a chase after a quarry which one cannot describe until it is reached; however, one has no  
9 means to decide that the quarry has indeed been reached, but every reason to suspect it has not’  
10 (2013: 78). Bodily exceptionalism or ‘whose body counts’ is, therefore, a dangerous rhetorical  
11 practice of workers going well-beyond perceived limits of what constitutes work. While this  
12 case may currently seem extreme, such bodily horse-trading is indicative of ever more  
13 competitive standards being set in innumerable organisational contexts as markets become  
14 more volatile and working conditions more precarious.

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31 **New approaches to understanding not only wellness but exceptionalism in**  
32 **organisational cultures are therefore encouraged to enable not only further critical**  
33 **questioning of the shifting limits of organisational expectations of working bodies but also**  
34 **to explore the potentialities of the lines of flight through which workers feel empowered**  
35 **to redefine the relationship between the body and work. Workplace wellness offers**  
36 **opportunities for experimentation. In NGO and non-profit contexts, holistic models**  
37 **emphasising structural change via employee leadership in workplace health promotion**  
38 **has increased wellness participation, avoided surveillance and elitist/managerialist ideals**  
39 **from promulgating (Zoller, Strohlic, & Getz, in press). And so there is scope to move**  
40 **beyond consumerist demands to be individually “exceptional,” to discover new more**  
41 **emancipatory forms of personal and organisational wellness.**

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Table 1

*Interview Participant Demographic and Coded CrossFit Disposition*

Pseudonym	Gender	Age	Tenure (years)	CrossFit Disposition
Tony	M	50	11	Advocate
Bobby	M	51	7	Advocate
Leanna	F	25	2	Advocate
Fletcher	M	45	25	Advocate
David	M	21	1	Advocate
Franklin	M	45	12	Advocate
Harper	F	31	2	Advocate
Lynn	F	68	12	Advocate
Henrietta	F	31	7	Advocate
Aaron	M	23	3	Advocate
Anthony	M	32	10	Advocate
Danny	M	55	23	Advocate
Adia	F	29	1	Evangelical
Bill	M	26	3	Evangelical
Jayson	M	45	19	Evangelical
Paloma	F	34	2	Evangelical
Zeke	M	37	2	Evangelical
Sarah	F	37	6	Indifferent
Luke	M	23	4	Indifferent
Cassandra	F	34	3	Indifferent
Osha	F	37	12	Resistant
Cameron	M	32	10	Resistant
Katie	F	31	7	Resistant
Ellen	F	44	6	Resistant
Stella	F	60	25	Resistant
Heinrich	M	30	4	Resistant
Katrina	F	45	8	Fragmented
Paula	F	45	3	Fragmented

**Table 2.** *Discursive Entanglements of Extreme WHP*

<b>Discursive Tensions</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Codes</b>	<b>Implications</b>
Underpinning/entrenching	Structural lifestyle foundations and yet, immutable lifestyle and fitness ideals	authenticity, body colonisation, health, evangelical	A strong foundation or intractable mythos?  Ubiquitous wellness promotion or relentless exposure?
Overarching/inescapable	Linked to corporate mission and ubiquitous throughout SportsCo with artifacts, communication utterances	peer-pressure, surveillance, panopticism, discipline, meritocracy	Embracing fully or performing authentically?

Note: We recognize the entanglements between the discursive tensions– this table is meant to show a representation of our findings, not necessarily summarize all data.