



‘The industry will tell you what you’re good for:’ theatrical typecasting, information embodiment, and body capital

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Abstract

Introduction. Theatrical typecasting is a commonly used practice in the entertainment industry. Job-seeking performers are influenced by the appearance-based culture surrounding role types. Typecasting practices categorise according to physical characteristics such as body size, race, or gender. The industry standard structure of typecasting offers an opportunity to understand the information embodiment of performers as they navigate a precarious labor market. This information embodiment amid typecasting can be further understood via the critical-sociological notion of body capital (Shilling, 1991).

Method. Ten pilot unstructured interviews (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022; Swain & King, 2022) were conducted with professional musical theatre performers in New York City. The conversations held with performers detail the overall information behaviour of theatre performers as they sustain careers in the arts and grow their creative skills.

Analysis. Three of ten interviews (those that were held within the timeframe of this writing) were analysed deductively within the framings of information embodiment and body capital.

Results. Preliminary results show that participants are aware of their embodiment of information as it conveys both type and subjectively desirable physical characteristics. They make strategic role-seeking decisions based on information about type as it is conveyed via industry members such as other actors or casting directors. Bourdieu’s (1986) theory of cultural capital along with library and information scholars’ work on information embodiment (Olsson & Lloyd, 2017), can be leveraged to understand the aesthetic and social processes influencing the information behaviour of musical theatre performers.

Conclusion. Future research directions, including ethnography or participatory observation, are discussed.

Introduction

Theatrical typecasting (typecasting) is the common theatrical entertainment industry practice of casting according to physical characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, age, gender, or body size, or according to performance skill sets (such as vocal ranges or dance training). These physical characteristics are overtly connected to traditional archetypal roles (types) in musical theatre, such as the young ingenue, leading man, motherly older woman, comedic sidekick, or the villain. In tandem with the common practice of typecasting in professional theatre contexts, theatrical contracts are more often offered to white, thin, young, cisgender, able-bodied, and conventionally attractive performers (Actors' Equity Association, 2020; Donovan, 2023). I argue that the process of typecasting, and the labor conditions that compel actors to embody information according to typecasting and classification practices, provide a unique opportunity to study performance artists' information behaviour in the face of embodied classification practices.

Theories from both inside and outside of the library and information science (LIS) canon may provide useful lenses by which to view the information behaviour of actors. Information embodiment, which has been explored in the theatrical context (Olsson 2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013), offers an opportunity to connect the inherent physicality of performance with the traditional conceptualisations of information behaviour. The underlying political-economic impetus for typecasting, which is deeply rooted in neoliberal conceptualisations of attractiveness (Donovan, 2023), adds additional opportunities for understanding the embodied information of performers who seek roles within industry structures that emphasise type. The sociological construct of body capital, stemming from Bourdieu's (1986) theories of cultural capital, can shed light on actors' information embodiments as they navigate the image-based entertainment industry.

This short paper first details the framings of information embodiment, classification, and body capital as they relate to theatre performers' information behaviour. It then shares preliminary findings on typecasting and information embodiment, which were produced via interviews on the wider information behaviour and information practices of ten theatre performers.

Conceptual framing

Information embodiment can be viewed as a 'corporeal expression' (Bates, 2018, p. 242) of information. Olsson (2010a, 2010b, 2012, 2013) has explored theatrical communities' information behaviour in order to more deeply understand information embodiment, focusing primarily on theatre professionals' practices as they made sense of Shakespeare's works. Character-driven and onstage information embodiment studies demonstrate great promise for the study of theatre performers in the LIS context, and show that theatrical communities are uniquely using, seeking, and making sense of information in both textual and corporeal ways in order to realise a character. However, less is known about how industry pressures in neoliberal labour environments (such as the American professional theatre industry) might influence theatre performers' information behaviour. Specifically, no information science research has explored performers' information embodiment as it relates to appearance-based casting.

Bourdieu's (1986) theory of cultural capital posits that capital is accrued outside of pure economic assets. Capital can be present in dispositions, abilities, qualifications, and traits that allow for ease of navigation in particular social worlds. Bourdieu's cultural capital splits into three forms, including embodied cultural capital, which can manifest through qualities such as accents, shared vocabulary, or 'artistic taste' (Bourdieu, 1990). For performers, embodied capital may be artistic skill or physical traits. By extension, in the case of musical theatre performers, the embodiment of their type via both extrinsic (cultivated traits such as dress style) and intrinsic (inherent traits such as race or ethnicity) physical qualities can be considered forms of capital. Bourdieu's work has been explicitly extended into the realm of physical capital, with scholars examining how human aesthetics and appearance can be leveraged as capital in various social settings (Kukkonen, 2021; Loesberg, 1993).

The sociological notion of body capital has emerged from Bourdieu's theorisation of cultural capital. The notion of body capital holds that physical characteristics such as race, body size, gender, sexuality, or conventional attractiveness contribute to ease of social navigation or experience of social inequality (Shilling, 1991) and are inherently connected to both economic and cultural mobilities in the Bourdieusian sense. In their review of their collective information embodiment research, Olsson and Lloyd (2017) directly connect LIS research to Shilling's (1991, 2012) work on the body as viewed through critical social theory. Olsson and Lloyd conclude that LIS researchers must view the body as '...central to knowledge construction and not just an absent or silenced presence'.

Kuric Kardelis (2023) applies this body capital lens directly to the experience of working actors and establishes that body capital is accrued via the possession of desirable embodied traits. Actors modify their bodies to better suit neoliberal beauty standards that beget greater body capital and, therefore, more desirable roles. In this way, they embody information about physical desirability originally conveyed by the theatrical entertainment industry.

Performers are also forced to be deeply aware of their own physical capital and the embodied information projected to theatrical casting. Actors are frequently encouraged to remove themselves from audition opportunities where pre-published role breakdowns do not fit their type. Actors' Equity, the theatrical performers' union, has gone so far as to encourage actors to 'type themselves' in order to streamline the casting process (Actors' Equity Association, 2023). Donovan (2023) also notes that actors that meet these neoliberal appearance standards of whiteness, thinness, ability, or cisgender characteristics are often called upon to don marginalised identities which are not their own, all while talented actors that are fat, trans, older, disabled, or racialised are routinely 'typed out' or excluded from auditions altogether.

As 'people and categories converge', (Bowker and Star, 1999, p. 225), type-based classifications are set by institutions and organisations (the theatrical entertainment industry), maintained by individual bureaucrats (casting directors along with actors' self-typing), and affect individuals (in this case, performance artists). I contend that actors are operating within classification systems that are based around body capital accrual. These systems of classification link desirable physical characteristics to capital in the form of performance opportunities. By modifying their physical bodies, exemplifying type via performance choices, dress, and job-seeking habits, and simply by existing with specific physical identities and traits, performers are embodying information that is interpreted within the confines of industry typecasting.

Preliminary research

A pilot study was designed to explore the information behaviours of US-based theatre actors as they sustain their careers and develop and support their creative practices. The study was approved by the Rutgers University Institutional Review Board.

Unstructured ethnographic interviews were conducted (Rinaldo & Guhin, 2022; Swain & King, 2022). These conversations occurred with professional musical theatre artists based in New York City. Interviews were held in public locations of the participants' choosing. Following an unstructured approach that allows the researcher to be a 'knowledge-producing participant in the process itself' (Brinkmann, 2015, p. 286), a list of conversational prompts took the place of a strict interview guide. Performers were recruited via snowball sampling through the researcher's community ties, and through an advertisement on Playbill.com, a popular theatrical job-seeking website. Professional musical theatre performers with varying levels of experience, from Broadway veterans to recent conservatory graduates, are included in the sample, although the three interviewees whose responses are discussed below skewed toward being fairly experienced and familiar with the New York theatre industry.

At the time of this writing, ten in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted, and three have been analyzed and reported on. Interviews lasted about 75 minutes on average. Perceived type and the practice of typecasting were discussed, along with the wider embodied, affective, material, and situational information behaviours of performance-related labour, such as intuition or emotion, both onstage (Olsson, 2010b) and during job or role-seeking (Medaille, 2010).

Results

Preliminary deductive analysis shows that industry standards and type-based categorisations are upheld by both those being categorised and by those individually enforcing type-based casting (most often casting directors or casting assistants). Theatre performers are consuming information about types desired for particular shows or roles, *and* what traits those types possess. Embodiment occurs when performers develop specific physical characteristics or skill sets, or recognize specific types in their inherent physical traits. Participant 2 discussed the importance of consistently embodying information about ascribed type: *'if [casting directors] don't know who you are or where to place you, they say no. A confused mind says no. Specificity is key'*.

Out of necessity, typecasting was widely accepted and ascribed to by the three performers, although they regularly critiqued its rigidity. Participant 7, a self-described *'white, straight-passing man,'* reflected on similar experiences of being typecast via advantageous embodied characteristics that are imbued with information about role suitability: *'...[casting directors] say 'oh, he should be the lead of our musical because of [those characteristics]'*. Participant 7 also demonstrated a distinct awareness of the embodied information of his *'castability'* as a white man, disclosing:

casting will recognize [me] across a spectrum of roles, because people that look like me have played every [expletive] role in the book. I don't have to pave a new path. I could cut my hair tomorrow and play totally different roles.

These statements by Participant 7 are a distinct acknowledgement of the cultural capital and advantageous embodied information that is imbued in both his whiteness and perceived heterosexuality. Theatrical casting structures historically have privileged whiteness, thinness, ability, heterosexuality, and cisgender characteristics as a *'blank canvas'* upon which theatrical stories of marginalisation can be applied (Donovan, 2023). Participant 7's remarks point to another casting reality; the inherent baseline for *leading* roles are white actors with characteristics that are perceived as traditionally *masculine* in western contexts. This casting-related (or self-imposed) exclusion due to embodied characteristics that do not fit pre-conceived archetypes echoes Bowker and Star's (1999) observations of classification as *'political and ethical texturing'* (p. 322).

The internal decision to *type oneself* out or exclude oneself from auditioning for certain roles is also based on information projected by other actors in their embodied manifestation of type. Participant 6, an experienced musical theatre performer in her early 30s, discusses her experience with self-exclusion and self-typing:

It was just socialised in me that ingenues were tall and skinny...I really struggled with knowing if I could play an ingenue, because ingenues are really beautiful women. Which is sad to say, because I am a beautiful woman. But I didn't know if I had the right look. So, I think I typecast myself...I think I had an internal pressure when I first started, seeing the other kinds of young actresses around me.

Kuric Kardelis' (2023) findings surrounding the body capital of theatre performers demonstrated that information between the industry and the body of the performer manifests in a two-way exchange. Theatre performers, in many cases, strive for conventionally attractive and appealing bodies in order to accrue the body capital that grants a greater chance at roles. In the same way,

theatrical casting ascribes information onto the bodies of performers, placing them into role categories based on age, gender, skin color, size, ability, and other near-immediate embodied characteristics.

The three interview participants similarly demonstrate a deep awareness of the information they embody, either via inherent identities (such as race or gender) or via body modification (such as weight loss, facial hair growth, or a hair colour change), in order to meet the typological expectations of an appearance-based industry. They also show a deep knowledge of their inherently embodied information to strategically seek roles that fit their 'type.' As Participant 2 notes, *'the industry will tell you what you're good for'*.

Conclusion

Three of ten interviews were analysed, and future analysis of the full dataset may point to other theoretical frames or perspectives on physical embodiment of information in typecasting. Additionally, all three participants discussed here are fairly experienced theatre professionals. When responses of individuals newer to the field are analysed, different perspectives on type and embodiment of type may arise. Other theoretical lenses not explored here may also be useful frames.

Future research beyond unstructured interviews may involve deeper methods, such as critical ethnography in moments of 'critical incident' (Flanagan, 1954), such as audition scenarios. As the researcher is a performing artist with a musical theatre degree, participant observation may also be a way to deeper understand the embodied information of theatre performers.

The physical work undertaken by theatre artists combined with the appearance-based typing system present in the American theatre industry provides a unique setting within which to socio-politically examine information embodiment. These preliminary findings demonstrate that the information behaviour of theatre performers is of interest to the LIS field, especially as these behaviours relate to theoretical framings both within and outside of LIS. In detailing some preliminary qualitative research with this population, embodied information can be clearly linked to notions of body capital within a classification-based, neoliberal typecasting system.

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