Fashion v. Style: The Repudiation of Fashion in Online Menswear Communities

Introduction

Although they have since been eclipsed by social networks, online forums dedicated to the discussion of niche interests remain key sites for online sociality. One of the niche interests that online discussion forums cater to is men's clothing, with forums for discussion of a range of styles, from suiting to Japanese denim. Members of these online menswear communities spend their leisure time engaged in extensive textual discussions of men's clothing, contributing to online forums by reviewing garments, describing experiences with tailors, recounting visits to specialist boutiques, comparing manufacturers, providing information on garments they have purchased and posting photographs of their daily outfits in 'What Are You Wearing Today?' discussion threads. At first glance, the existence of online forums where thousands of avowedly heterosexual men go to discuss clothing seems to bear out the notion that there has been a blurring of the lines between gay and straight male dressing. But my contention is that men's fashion remains so strongly associated with femininity that many participants in online menswear communities reject it altogether. Unlike some scholars in fashion or marketing studies, I do not think that this resistance is something to be overcome, but I do think that it is worth understanding. Forum users' rejection of fashion tells us a great deal about how culturally-constructed notions of masculinity shape aspects of everyday life such as consumption and dress.

In the sections that follow I first disambiguate 'fashion' from 'clothing' and 'style', terms that are often used interchangeably. I then situate my research within the literature on menswear, masculinity and online clothing communities. Finally, after brief descriptions of methods I discuss the findings of my research, which was carried out through online ethnography and in-depth interviews. I demonstrate how online menswear communities offer a democratic, inclusive

and participatory alternative to men's fashion. Yet this article is not just an uncritical celebration of these communities. Its argument is that while online menswear communities offer a productive critique of the temporality of fashion, this critique reflects fashion's persistent gendering. As spaces for the discussion of clothing, not fashion, they allow men to enjoy clothes and consumption without their masculinity being tainted by fashion's perceived femininity.

Clothing, not Fashion

This article makes a distinction between fashion and style. The geographer Wilbur Zelinsky offers a concise definition of fashion as '[a] system of artificially induced change in the character, design, or perception of an item subject to individual preference, a change sufficiently great to be detected readily by the casual observer' (Zelinksy 2004: 88). Fashion is so bound up in notions of change that it is seen as an integral facet of modernity (Lehmann 2000; Lipovetsky 1994), with fashion studies scholar Elizabeth Wilson writing 'Fashion, in a sense *is* change' (Wilson 1985: 5). Fashion is not a process exclusive to clothing, but in everyday English the term is used to refer to the garment industry, or at least those aspects of it that are driven by the fashion cycle (Kaiser 2012). While often confused with fashion, style is something different. Fashion scholar Carol Tulloch (2010) points out that fashion is a social process whereas style is individual, referring to an individual's active and personal manner of dressing. I follow sociologist Julia Twigg's example in addressing 'clothing, not fashion' (Twigg 2007: 5). This means turning attention away from retail and the catwalk to look at how clothing is used by men who are neither fashion-forward nor involved in spectacular youth subcultures. In so doing, this article contributes to efforts to redress the over-representation of the cutting-edge and youthful in fashion studies (Buckley and Clark 2012; Twigg 2018).

Where fashion studies has been concerned with menswear, this work has tended to be concerned with the more contemporary, fashionable or youthful aspects of men's clothing such as the new man (Edwards 1997; Mort 1996; Nixon 1996), the metrosexual (Shugart 2008), youth subcultures (Hebdige 1979; Polhemus 2010), cutting-edge designers (Geczy and Karaminas 2017), self-identified followers of men's fashion (Barry 2015; Barry and Martin 2015; Barry and Phillips 2016; Rinallo 2007) and gender rebels (Barry and Martin 2016). At the other end of the spectrum there has been research on men with ambivalent feelings towards fashion, such as men who struggle with the fits on offer (Barrie 2014), are more concerned with practicality (Galilee 2002; Green and Kaiser 2016; Noh et. al. 2015; Twigg 2016) or have anxieties about fashion's perceived femininity (Bakewell, Mitchell and Rothwell 2006; Kaiser Looysen and Hethorn 2008). This article addresses a wholly separate category of male clothing consumer, one highly-interested in clothing yet still sceptical of fashion. They are not the fashion-engaged men who are indicative of the increasing appetite for men's fashion, nor are they the fashion-indifferent men who play down their concern with appearance.

Masculinity v. Fashion

As a system of change for change's sake, with overtones of vanity and frivolity, fashion has historically been gendered as female (Crane 2000; Edwards 1997; Featherstone 1998; Jones 2004). Fashion implies a kind of feminised victimhood, of being taken in by a vast apparatus of commercial manipulation (Bowlby 1985; Wilson 1985). Since what Flügel (1930) described as the Victorian period's Great Masculine Renunciation, it has been thought that men are too serious and rational to concern themselves with the trivialities of fashion (Edwards 2006; Steele 1989, 2000). The idea that men suddenly stopped following fashion is historically inaccurate

(Breward 1999; Ostberg 2012; Rizzo 2015), but the notion that men are not interested in fashion

persists (Crane 2000). As sociologist Tim Edwards writes,

> [...]fashionable, image-conscious or simply 'dressy' men are often seen to arouse anxieties
> in gendered as well as sexual terms, being perceived not only as potentially gay or
> sexually ambiguous but as somehow not fitting in, particularly in terms of rumbling any
> wider belief in masculinity as a form profoundly 'un-self-conscious being-ness' or in
> undermining the notion that 'real' men just throw things on or just *are* men (Edwards
> 2006: 113).

Masculinity and femininity are socially constructed, residing in culture and society rather

than the body. Masculinity is neither stable nor monolithic; it is culturally and historically

variable (Reeser, 2010; Whitehead, 2002). With masculinity understood as the repudiation of

femininity (Buchbinder 2012; Reeser 2010), the femininity of fashion put it at odds with

hegemonic notions of masculinity (Edwards 2006; Steele 1989). Homosexuality has historically

been associated with effeminacy, resulting in the common conflation of femininity and

homosexuality in dominant ideas of gender and sexuality (Edwards 2006). Gay culture's

adoption of both fashion and femininity as gay signifiers has further compounded the idea that

fashion is somehow gay (Cole 2000; Kates 2002; Stines 2017). Despite many gay men's

rejection of effeminacy and adoption of hyper-masculinity in the 1970s clone look, this

perception persists (Edwards 2006). The most culturally-exalted way of being a man - what is

known as hegemonic masculinity - is heterosexual, while gay masculinity is a subjugated

masculinity (Connell 1995). It follows, then, that fashion's association with the subjugated

masculinity of gay men makes it threatening to heterosexual men's masculinity (Tuncay and

Otnes 2008).

This is somewhat of an over-simplification, as there are numerous examples of straight

men embracing gay-coded aspects of fashion and consumption, such as the new man moment of

the 1980s and the metrosexual moment of the 2000s (Mort 1996; Nixon 1996; Rinallo 2007;

Shugart 2008). However, each of these moments was followed by a period of revanchism where the blurring of lines between gay and straight was replaced with a reassertion of the boundaries of traditional heterosexual masculinity: new lad in the first instance, and übersexual in the second (Atkinson 2011; Clarkson 2005; Edwards 2006; Gill 2003). That notwithstanding, men's fashion remains a growing market (Barry and Phillips 2016). The fashion industry is currently embracing a wider cultural shift away from rigid gender boundaries, and recent research has shown how some young men are actively challenging gender binaries through clothing (Barry and Martin 2015; 2016; Jordan 2017).

Despite these incremental changes, clothing retail remains thoroughly binary (Ostberg 2012). As critics have pointed out in regards to previous shifts in men's fashion, there is a disjuncture between how men actually wear clothing and the commercially-oriented representations of men's clothing found in magazines, on the catwalks and in stores (Edwards 2006; Galilee 2002; Ostberg 2012). There is now a growing body of empirical work on this subject and much of the research suggests that despite the changes in men's fashion outlined above, many men still avoid a fashionable appearance because of its connotations of effeminacy (Bakewell et. al. 2006; de Casanova 2015; Frith and Gleeson 2004; Galilee 2002; Kaiser 2012; Noh 2015). Participants in American and British studies on the subject emphasised comfort and quality over having a fashionable appearance.

Because of the gender anxieties discussed in the Edwards quote at the beginning of this section, heterosexual men work to cultivate an appearance that, paradoxically, does not draw attention to their concern with appearance. This is what was discovered in research on rural and suburban American men's attitudes towards clothing (Kaiser, Looysen and Hethorn, cited in Kaiser 2012). The participants in this research study expressed disinterest in fashion, with the

authors of the study arguing that this reflected men's desire to leave their gender and sexuality unmarked. Scholarship on gender and sexuality tells us that heterosexual masculinity is the taken-for-granted, default option in Western cultures (Edwards 2006; Richardson 1996; Seidman 2009). This means that to embody hegemonic masculinity through dress, men need only worry about not standing out (Edwards 1997).

Research carried out with urban heterosexual men in the United States by marketing scholars Linda Tuncay and Cele C. Otnes (2008) found that the research participants perceived fashion and grooming as feminine even while shopping for fashion and grooming products. So even for so-called metrosexuals there is discomfort with the effeminacy of caring a little *too* much about appearance. In his research on heterosexual Italian straight men's engagement with fashion, consumer culture scholar Diego Rinallo (2007) has identified a 'danger zone' where men's fashion consumption can be sanctioned as 'illegitimate' for violating the norms of masculinity. The way in which masculinity is defined against femininity means that this 'illegitimate appearance' is that which is 'effeminate/homosexual'. This shows that while the parameters of men's consumption of clothing and beauty products may be shifting, there is still ongoing boundary work to define what is and is not legitimate for heterosexual men to shop for.

Those heterosexual men who do actively seek out a fashionable appearance have been found to take measures in order to reconcile their interest in fashion with the masculine norm that this interest breaks. In their research into how men engaged with fashion advertising, fashion scholar Ben Barry and marketing scholar Barbara J. Phillips identify how some of the men they interviewed characterized fashion as labour. These men used the metaphor of 'investing' to describe their fashion buying, describing it as part of a process of developing expert knowledge. This made recourse to the masculine trait of rationality. Barry and Phillips write '[c]haracterizing

fashion as labour allows men to link the dignity and traditional masculinity of work to their

fashion behaviours and helps to alleviate the gender identity tension arising from behaviours that

could be perceived as feminine' (Barry and Phillips 2016: 449). They note the similarities

between this characterisation of fashion as labour and marketing scholars Cele Otnes and Mary

Ann McGrath's finding in their research on male shopping that many of their participants

shopped 'deliberately and pragmatically in order to fulfil one of the most pervasive tenets of the

masculine ideal - achievement' (Otnes and McGrath 2001: 128). Both fashion-as-labour and

shopping-as-achievement involve boundary work to masculinise behaviours otherwise coded as

feminine. This allows heterosexual men to enjoy clothes and shopping without experiencing any

gender anxieties.

Clothing in Online Communities

In fashion scholar Ben Barry's research on Canadian men's attitudes toward fashion, he

found that because an interest in men's fashion is associated with gay men, his heterosexual male

research participants saw online menswear communities as a safe place to discuss fashion

without their sexuality coming into question (Barry 2015). Yet while a great deal of work has

been done on fashion blogging (Findlay 2017; Luvaas 2016; Pedroni 2015; Rocamora 2011), the

older form of online sociality found within online menswear communities has received less

attention. Only three studies have been carried out on online clothing forums, a decidedly web

1.0 forbearer to fashion blogging and social networks. The first is sociologist Peter Corrigan's

(2008) study of an online fashion forum, but his study is female-specific and based on research

carried out over a decade ago on the now-redundant Usenet system. The second is merchandising

scholars Kelly Reddy-Best and Alexandra Howell's study of a brand community dedicated to a

type of kilt manufactured by a brand called Utilikilt. They found that because kilts, as un-

bifurcated garments, are coded as female, the fans of Utilikilts worked to emphasise their masculinity (Reddy-Best and Howell 2014). The men on the forums I studied also worked to emphasise their masculinity, but that is not the focus of this article. The Utilikilts community is quite different from the online communities I studied as it is based around a specific garment rather than an aesthetic. As the authors of the study acknowledge, their findings were limited by the lack of in-depth interviews, which would have offered insights into the Utilikilt fans' motivations for participating in their online community.

The third is sociologist J. Slade Lellock's study of the Male Fashion Advice section of the popular news aggregator and discussion forum Reddit (Lellock 2018). Using a virtual ethnographic method Lellock found that the openness with which the men discussed clothing on it reflected a shift in masculinity allowing for more open engagement with fashion. On the other hand, the ways in which these men engaged with fashion supported Barry's assertion that when heterosexual men do engage with fashion, it is done strategically in order to obtain the power that comes with conforming to masculine ideals (Barry 2015). This is an important insight, but dress motivations are not what I look at in this article. Like the online clothing communities observed for this article, the site of Lellock's research was characterised by knowledge-seeking and a concern for following dress norms. But while there are many similarities between Male Fashion Advice and the forums where I conducted my research, as the title of their subreddit suggests, the users of Male Fashion Advice were actively engaged with men's fashion. They sought to understand and follow fashion trends in order to conform to the norms of fashionable dress. As I will detail in the sections to follow, the men who participated in the online communities from which I recruited were much more skeptical about the value of fashion. My

research also differs from Lellock's in its use of qualitative interviews to gain insights into online menswear community members' perspectives and motivations.

Methods

The article is based on findings from a larger research project that employed qualitative interviews and online ethnography. 51 in-depth interviews with a trans-national sample of menswear forum users were carried out in-person in the greater metropolitan regions of London, New York, San Francisco, Toronto, Montreal and Ottawa with the exception of three interviews carried out over Skype with respondents in Albuquerque, NM, Boston, MA and Corpus Christi, TX. Participants were recruited from a purposive, non-random sample of six menswear forums that were selected for their representativeness of the range of style niches found online. I recruited by posting on the forums asking for research participants and offering a small incentive payment. All of the interview participants were cisgender men, with 49 out of 51 identifying as heterosexual, one as 'mostly straight', and one as gay. They were ethnically diverse and ranged in ages between 19 and 63. While they came from a range of class backgrounds, all but a few of the research participants were middle to upper-middle-class, mainly working in creative or white-collar occupations. All were cisgender and none identified as having a disability. The interviews were transcribed and then coded using textual analysis software. All the names of the interview respondents have been changed.

The interviews were supplemented with an online ethnography of the forums from which the interview respondents were recruited. All of the forums were public and the names of the forums have been changed for purposes of confidentiality. The online ethnography was carried out over the course of three years, through regular observation of the forums. Online ethnography is a form of ethnography adapted for the study of online cultures, involving the experiential, rather than physical displacement of the researcher. Online ethnography is

considered to be the preferred method for engaging with online sites where social interactions take place (Hine 2000; Lindlof and Shatzer 1998). Like ethnography, online ethnography is concerned with coming to an understanding of a culture. Memos were made while observing the forums, and these memos were used to generate interview questions and coding categories. I approached the online ethnography from a position of an informed insider, having participated in online clothing forums before undertaking the research. An iterative approach was taken to research design, with interview questions generated in response to an initial stage of online ethnography, and findings from the interviews followed up with further observation of the online forums. This ensured that rather than taking a top-down approach where my own interpretations were imposed upon the culture being studied, I took a bottom-up approach that used the perspectives of forum participants to make sense of their culture.

The online communities discussed in this article are as follows:

Brit Forum: While the other forums are oriented around particular styles, this forum's main unifying feature is that it is UK-based. It is best described as a Streetwear forum. Streetwear is a rather ambiguous term referring to a brand-driven style with roots in dance music, hip-hop, surf and skateboard scenes (Sims 2010; Vogel 2007). Whereas visible logos used to define Streetwear, in recent years Streetwear has taken a turn towards a subtler, minimalist look associated with Scandinavian brands such as Acne Studios, Our Legacy and Norse Projects. This is a look sometimes referred to as Scandinavian Streetwear. To the outside observer, it is best described as very plain, but well-designed and well-fitting casual clothes such as jeans, chinos, cardigans and button-down shirts, but distinguished by slim fits, patterning, vibrant colours and more fashion-forward choices of material (Woolf 2014).

Clothes Forum: This is one of the oldest and biggest clothing forums on the internet. My interview participants used section of the site dedicated to the discussion of Classic Menswear. Classic Menswear describes formal and time-tested aspects of men's dress such as suits, sports jackets, slacks, dress shirts, dress shoes, ties and so on.

Denim Forum: A site primarily for the discussion of raw jeans. Denim is referred to as 'raw' when it has not been washed. This means that the indigo will rub off of different parts of the garment at different rates, creating personalised 'fades', which are highly sought after by forum users. Often, raw denim has not been sanforised, meaning that it will shrink upon the first wash. While raw denim is a material, rather than a style, it is associated with a rugged, pre-War American blue-collar look and often paired with heavy boots, flannel shirts and military-reproduction jackets. This is a style referred to as Heritage and its revival can be traced back to Japan, where raw denim developed a cult following in the 1980s and 1990s (Marx 2015).

Steel Soul: Dedicated to a Japanese brand known for well-crafted and expensive heavy-weight clothing in the Heritage style such as raw denim jeans, work shirts and military reproduction jackets.

Style Questions: The men I interviewed participated in the 'Trad' section of this forum. Trad is a term used to refer to a style originally associated with students at American Ivy League schools in the 1950s and early 1960s. This style became mass fashion for American men in its mid-1960s heyday. It is also known as Ivy Style or the Ivy Look and is better-known as the roots of preppy (Marsh and Gaul 2010; Mears 2012).

Tailored Forum

Classic Menswear forum started in 2013 by disgruntled Clothes Forum members.

Fashion v. Style

I embarked upon this research project expecting to find that through their embrace of clothes and consumption, online menswear community members were challenging the gendered stigma of fashion. What I discovered was more complex. On the one hand, forum users challenged the idea that there is a stigma attached to male enthusiasm for clothes and shopping. My research participants strongly rejected the suggestion that they might be embarrassed by the degree to which they cared about their appearance. They told me that they were not concerned about being perceived as less-masculine or gay. This bears out suggestions that men have become more integrated into consumer culture and fashion (Barry 2015; Mort 1996; Nixon 2001; Rinallo 2007). Barry has suggested that heterosexual men's engagement with online clothing forums has to do with anonymity, but many forum users post photos of themselves on forums with their faces visible and disclose personal information about themselves. Granted, this does not account for the majority that lurk or do not post photos, but it challenges the notion that the main appeal of clothing forums is anonymity.

However, most of the online menswear community members I interviewed did not embrace fashion, they actively rejected it. Articulating verbally what is a frequent mantra in the textual discourse of the forums, these men made a rhetorical distinction between fashion, of which they were sceptical, and clothing, of which they were big proponents. So, for example, Britforum member Barry, a 29-year-old London librarian told me 'I'd say I like clothes, but not fashion *per se*'. When I asked him what the difference was, he explained 'I just don't really think I'm fashionable. I like what I think is good-quality, nicely made clothes, good knitwear and shoes, button-downs and things but I don't check what's hot or the latest trends'. This was a common refrain, and it echoed Twigg's (2007) distinction between clothes and fashion. Fashion was seen as something to do with trends and branding, rather than the innate quality of clothes.

Edward, a 31-year-old Clothes Forum member who worked in the finance industry in Toronto, stopped buying designer brands after researching raw denim on menswear forums: '[s]o that was a big eye-opener towards looking for quality stuff instead of just finding fashion brands and paying whatever for them…' As in Tulloch's (2010) definition, style was seen by my research participants as a matter of personal competency rather than following trends. Justin, a 29-year-old New York analyst recruited from Clothes Forum, told me that 'fashion is about trends, what's in right now' while style 'has more of a personal aspect to it'. To Jovan, a 38-year-old IT consultant recruited from Clothes Forum, fashion was something imposed from outside, whereas style came from within: '[s]tyle is… something that is part of you, fashion is something that's not part of you. Others impose [it] on you'.

The men I interviewed also distanced themselves from fashionability in their description of their personal style with adjectives such as 'boring', 'conservative', 'simple', 'subtle' or 'understated' to describe the way they dressed. This was at odds with dominant ideas of fashion as a site for creativity and self-expression. It seemed as if menswear forum users had taken Flügel's (1930) notion of the Great Male Renunciation to heart, preferring a form of dress that was sombre and restrained to more expressive looks. Talking about 'peacocking', a term that describes dressing for attention, 34-year-old New York project manager and Clothes Forum member Eugene told me 'I don't like to do what they call on the forum, peacocking. Dressing like "wow you look like a guy from a magazine cover or something", I don't like to do that - I like to fly under the radar'. Such attitudes were common amongst those who wore Classic Menswear or Trad styles, but I was surprised to find them amongst users of the more Streetwear-oriented Brit Forum. At the time of my interviews, members there were moving towards what they described as 'conservative' looks. Getting 'a lot plainer' as Noel, a 33-year-old London

researcher put it. 29-year-old London negotiator Steve talked about how whereas in his youth he wore stuff that was 'quite far out', his style was now 'fairly boring' and 'toned-down'. He explained that he dressed 'safely', focusing on quality and outfit coherence rather than getting attention. 27-year-old London PR worker Brian similarly said he 'wouldn't like to stand out and draw attention'. The Brit Forum users I interviewed tended to favour Scandinavian Streetwear. What Brian liked about the look was how '[i]t's plain, it's simple, it's minimal'. Similarly, 21-year-old London student Kevin wore Scandinavian Streetwear brand Our Legacy because it was 'simple and understated'.

'Understated' styles were contrasted with the perceived flamboyance and showiness of fashion. Edward compared the designer, showy clothes that he wore when he was a follower of fashion to his post-forum wardrobe:

> Before that it was just fashion, whatever's eye-popping, catches your eye, 'hey look at me' sort of thing. Going through Clothes Forum has brought my attention to more timeless pieces, well-fitting pieces, well-made pieces, not something with a big logo that says 'hey look at me!'

Gary, a 32-year-old Toronto teacher from Clothes Forum, similarly explained that he felt more comfortable in 'conservative' pieces than those that screamed 'hey look at me'. Fashion, for Gary, was about demanding attention: 'I prefer a more dignified look than the flashy look. Because I'm a 32-year-old guy, I'm not trying to peacock around here going "look at me, I wanna be mister cool, I want a one-night stand" or something stupid like that. I'm pretty much set in what I'm doing at this point in my life'. Where fashionable clothes would draw attention to them, understated pieces left their gender and sexuality unmarked (Kaiser 2012).

For those who participated in Classic Menswear and Trad forums, there was disdain for what is known as '#menswear'. #menswear is also an internet phenomenon, but it is distinct from Classic Menswear, and is located mostly on twitter, blogs and Instagram. It is characterised

by contemporary and dandified interpretations of Classic Menswear pieces. Where forums were seen by my interview participants as sites of authentic style, #menswear was seen as commercially-driven and ephemeral. It was rejected because it was fashion. 41-year-old New Jersey draughtsman and Tailored Forum user Donald's problem with #menswear was that 'it is very current, that it kind of came out of nowhere and it's very ephemeral, it'll be gone soon'. Luke, a 26-year-old photographer from Hamilton, ON who I recruited from Tailored Forum described #menswear this way:

> […]it would be like these guys who go buy really high-end Italian suits and sports jackets, they'll buy the really nice English bench-made shoes and they're really dainty about it, they'll have really ostentatious ties, really bright pocket squares and they won't wear socks with their shoes, that sort of thing. That stuff is # menswear and the thing is, they're hipsters with money who like to dress in suits.

In Luke's quote above, we see some of the common online menswear community complaints about fashion: blindly following trends ('hipsters'), more money than sense ('hipsters with money'), overly showy ('ostentatious') and insufficiently masculine ('dainty'). Luke complained that this look was inauthentic, describing it as 'goofy' and characterised by 'too much dress-up'. One of Luke's problems with the #menswear look was that in its pursuit of individuality, it discarded with the rules that kept Classic Menswear classic. For example, he was bothered by the wearing of double-breasted suit jackets with the buttons unfastened. Eugene described #menswear as transgressing Classic Menswear norms: 'the jacket is probably a little bit too short, trousers are probably a little bit too tight, hem is probably a bit too short, multi-coloured sock and that would be it'. These suits were doubly-problematic for Trad and Classic Menswear forum users because not only did they break the rules of Classic Menswear, they did so in accordance with the whims of fashion.

The current popularity of 'shrunken suits' is attributed to designers Heidi Slimane and Thom Browne (Bowstead 2015; Rees-Roberts 2013). Such suits were subjects of scorn because of how fashionable they were. Raymond, a 50-year-old lawyer I recruited from Clothes Forum told me

> […]today you won't find me in the super slim-cut ultra shrink wrap two-sizes-too-small button-pulling short jacket suits that define the cutting edge of the menswear trend because to my eye, those things look good only within their immediate temporal context and start to not look good very quickly once you moved a little bit further along in time so it just doesn't appeal to me for that reason.

Justin's clothes were severely critiqued on Clothes Forum when as a new member he posted photos of himself wearing #menswear-style suits. Because the #menswear suit's figure-hugging silhouette emphasises the contours of the body, it breaks with the more traditional suit silhouette, which is meant to de-sexualise the body, emphasising the mind's control over the body (Collier 1998). Suits that are tightly cut draw attention to the wearer's body, deviating from masculine norms in the process. The suits produced a look that was in Luke's words 'dainty' and in another interview participant's words 'effete'. While none of my interview respondents expressed homophobic views or used the term, there was a latent homophobia to the joking use of the term 'Pitti Homo' on the forums. This reflected the idea that #menswear was effeminate in its tight cuts, expressive style and temporality.

Timeless Style

With its emphasis on individuality, style could potentially involve any number of eccentric outfits that broke with the current dictates of fashion. But the men I interviewed stuck to a handful of codified styles. And it was not just style they sought, it was what they called 'timeless' or 'classic style'. Whereas fashion was seen as ephemeral, certain forms of style were seen as having the potential to last a lifetime. Gordon, a 41-year-old Toronto economist recruited

from Clothes Forum, told me 'classic is often a counter-point to trendy'. Asked to elaborate on what he meant by this, Gordon articulated a common understanding of fashion within these online communities: '[…]for me the difference is – style should be very timeless, someone who has style, whether it's from 75 years ago or from yesterday, should look stylish at any point. Versus someone who is into fashion probably runs the risk of looking absurd [a few years] from now'.

Jimmy, a 41-year-old Toronto communications strategist recruited from Style Questions liked Trad because it was '[c]lassical. You can look stylish without being fashionable'. Jimmy saw fashion as something that changed every two or three seasons, suggesting that it was driven by marketers trying to get people to buy things they did not really need. Raymond wished to transcend fashion in order to avoid future embarrassment:

> I try to think of myself as dressing in a way that when I look at a photo of myself 20 years from now I won't be giving myself a face palm going "what were you thinking wearing that?" And I think the more that one pursues the ragged edge of the envelope of menswear at a given time, the more future face palms await.

Jose also explained the appeal of Classic Menswear in terms of not getting caught out by changes in fashion:

> It's classic. You can't go wrong. Right now, I'm wearing a seersucker button-down, it's not oxford-cloth, but I've got a button-down collar. It's classic. I can wear this shirt for 20, 30 years if it lasts that long. It would still look the same, I would still be considered dressed well.

The same approach was taken by those whose interest was in Heritage style. Mike, a 34-year-old cook and Steel Soul member from a small town near Hamilton, ON explained why he loved the Heritage style: 'it's a cool style, it looks good, it's classic, it doesn't go out of style'.

There were a few exceptions, but most of the men I interviewed thought that they would be dressing the same way in five or ten years. They figured that by standing apart from the

fashion system and pursuing classic styles, they would be happy with their clothes and still look good no matter what changes occurred in fashion. Eugene told me 'I could be out of trend, or not on trend, but it would still look good in ten years - this is just how I'm growing up and I'm going to stick with it'. Jovan similarly stated 'I think I now mostly have a style that's going to last well over ten years'. The desire to have timeless style was closely tied to a more general value-for-money ethos that characterised all of the online menswear communities I looked at. This framed the desired for Classic Menswear pieces in terms of rational reasoning, because it meant buying clothes that would not have to be discarded in accordance with the fashion cycle. Purchasing a suit, sports coat or pair of quality leather shoes can involve a significant outlay of money, and these men were concerned about future-proofing their purchases. Like Barry and Phillip's (2015) respondents, they characterised their clothes as investments. This reinforced their sense of themselves as rational economic actors rather than fashion victims. For example, Jose explained that he head sought out a sports coat of what he called 'classic proportions' so that he would never have to worry about spending money to replace it.

For those who wore Trad or Classic Menswear, timeless style was achieved through forum participation. The vast majority of the men I interviewed had little prior knowledge of clothing before becoming involved in online menswear communities. Where dress is often described in Bourdieusian terms as a type of embodied knowledge reflecting *habitus* (Pedroni 2015; Rocamora 2002), men came to the forums to learn about style in much the same way that men in the 1980s purchased books such as Alan Flusser's *Clothes and the Man: The Principles of Fine Men's Dress* (1985) and G. Bruce *Boyer's Elegance: A Guide to Quality in Menswear* (1986) for guidance. These books were the original source material for notions of classic and timeless style discussed on the forum. As modernisation school theorists have argued, late

modern individuality is characterised by an increasing dependence on the input of experts (Giddens 1990, 1991; Lash and Urry 1994). The growth of digital culture has seen that expertise democratised. In the case, of online menswear communities, expertise was shared amongst users and archived in searchable text. Online communities are principally sites for knowledge sharing, and the collective intelligence (Lévy 1999) of the forums was used by my interview participants to study and master men's clothing.

By the time I started my research, a consensus about what was and was not timeless had already solidified on Clothes Forum and Style Questions. One of the ways in which this consensus was reproduced was through the giving of advice. As Lellcock (2018) found in his study of the Male Fashion Advice Reddit, many discussion threads started with questions. Gary explained that asking questions was an important step in a forum user's development from novice to expert: 'I think the logical progression is to lurk for a little bit, find out what's going on, see if you like the community, then ask questions, then finally being able to answer questions and be an authority'. Critiques of outfits posted in What are You Wearing Today sections also reproduced this consensus, transferring knowledge and opinions about what was timeless style. Wilson's participation in Clothes Forum started with lurking to learn more about how things should fit based on the advice handed out to other users: 'Every day I went to the What Are You Wearing Today thread and it was like 'oh hey! People are saying his lapels aren't meant to match with his tie, or whatever about his trousers, how the coat buttons or how it's too supressed or whatever'. These critiques led him to carry out deeper research on Clothes Forum in order to bring his own dressing in line with the forum consensus.

From Fashion Magazines to 'What Are You Wearing Today?'

Interview participants also rejected fashion because of its exclusivity. Researchers have shown how men, like women, often feel excluded from fashion because they do not fit the body ideals promoted by the fashion industry (Barry 2014; Kaiser 2012). Aside from the occasional snide comment, online menswear communities were much more inclusive to diverse body types than the fashion media is. Jose described himself as 'a bigger guy' with 'some extra weight' on him. Style Questions helped him dress to his body type, whereas he had previously struggled with the trend for slim-fitting clothing. The Trad style that is popular on Style Questions involves fuller cuts and higher-rise trousers, which suited his body type better than the cuts currently in fashion. Trad fan Jimmy complained that fashion magazines catered only to slim men. He compared this with Trad brands that offered clothes suitable to his body type. Slim men also found that most clothes were not cut in a way that was flattering to them. Connecting with other slim men on clothing forums helped them track down slimmer cuts and get advice on having clothes altered to better fit their bodies.

Steel Soul member Phillip, a 42-year-old Torontonian working in advertising, told me that when he was much heavier, he 'could never imagine actually being small enough to actually wear something that's in fashion'. This had gotten him into the habit of wearing jeans and a t-shirt, because fashion did not seem to have any options for him. Phillip was now slim enough to wear fashionable clothes, but they no longer appealed. The Japanese Heritage brands he favoured offered high-quality, well-designed versions of the un-fashionable jeans and t-shirts that had come to define his style. Phillip no longer wore big sizes, but one of the reasons for Steel Soul's loyal following is that it is one of the few Japanese Heritage brands that offers bigger sizes. A number of Steel Soul members told me that they had befriended other larger men on the forum in order to share pointers on finding clothes for their body types. Along with outfit photos in What

are You Wearing Today threads, forum users also posted fit pics to demonstrate how particular items fit. For those whose bodies were different from the models wearing the clothes on e-commerce websites, seeing photos of men with body types similar to their own helped them envisage how the clothes would fit.

Along with body type, some of the men I interviewed felt alienated from fashion because of their age. This echoed Twigg's (2013) research in which she found that 'age ordering' within fashion excludes older people by framing fashion as something for the young. They preferred online menswear communities because these allowed them to see men their own age dressed well. Jerry, a 50-year-old Style Questions user and Bay Area contractor told me that he felt alienated from men's fashion magazines because of his age and body type 'If you open up *GQ* or any of the men's magazines or catalogues they have guys who are young but that's not who I look like, you see they're not marketing for me'. Raymond had similar comments about men's magazines, telling me that he had not looked at them in years because the fashions they promoted were so youth-oriented. This came back to the disjuncture between style and fashion, where style was seen as something timeless for people of all ages, fashion was seen as ephemeral and for the young. Discussing what he described as the 'cutting-edge' look found in *GQ*, Raymond explained that

> […]the cutting-edge tends to be youth-driven. Whatever the cutting-edge of menswear is for a given point in time, it's not driven by the 50 to 60-year-olds of that time, it's driven by the youth of that time so I'm already temporally disconnected from what the cutting-edge will be.

The research participants' alienation from the young and slender image of men's fashion in *GQ* pointed to the wider irrelevance of fashion magazines within online menswear communities. Reflecting wider trends affecting the publishing industry, my research participants saw no need to purchase magazines when much better alternatives were available for free online.

Magazines such as *GQ* were eschewed because they represented the trend-driven nature of the fashion industry . They preferred online menswear communities because they were seen as participatory sites for authentic style rather than top-down, commercially-driven fashion. Gary explained: '[w]hereas *GQ* you've got advertising all over the place, with Clothes Forum you've got some human element behind it. This is actually what people are wearing, it's not just pushed through because someone paid a thousand dollars on advertising'. The posting of users' daily outfits in What Are You Wearing Today threads provides the kind of stylistic inspiration that would previously have been found in fashion magazines.

Limitations

A significant limitation of this research is that there was no way to ensure that the men interviewed were representative of the demographic make-up of the forum. The spread of users across time and space, the fluid nature of forum participation, and the anonymity of users made such representativeness impossible to obtain. Nevertheless, the men I interviewed provided a snapshot of forum user attitudes towards fashion, attitudes that were shaped by the discourse of the forums they participated in. Compared to society-at-large they were a relatively privilege groups along multiple axes of identify, but this reflected the demographic that online menswear communities serve. It should be acknowledged that online menswear communities are not entirely anti-fashion. There are online forums for discussion of cutting-edge, contemporary men's fashion, but I was not able to recruit interview participants from them. Brit Forum and Clothes Forum have sections where contemporary fashion is discussed in positive terms, and there were five men in my research sample who were actively engaged in fashion, favouring avant-garde fashion inspired by designers such as Rick Owens and Yohji Yamamoto. But these

men were a minority, and they have been excluded from this article in order to focus on those men who could illuminate my insights into a group that loves clothes, but not fashion.

Discussion and Conclusion

The findings presented in this article show how some members of online menswear communities worked to distance themselves from fashion. This was, in part, a result of the exclusionary nature of fashion, which was seen as catering only to young, slim men. This supports the findings of previous research on men's perceptions of fashion (Barry 2014; Barry 2015; Barry and Phillips 2016; Barry and Weiner 2017; Elliott and Elliott 2005; Rinallo 2007). As Lellock (2018) notes in regard to the Male Fashion Advice subreddit, this is one of the ways that the internet has eroded the authority of men's fashion magazines such as *GQ*. Online menswear communities offer their users something more inclusive, participatory and democratic than men's fashion. They are a place where men of different ages and sizes can see men like themselves wearing stylish clothing. They are also sites on which they can get support and advice in finding clothes that fit their bodies well. These men have little interest in the youthful and cutting-edge styles that are on-trend, choosing clothes over fashion. Forum users' self-proclaimed resistance to marketing manipulations, critique of fashion's temporality and preference for classic styles produces an online discourse that encourages men to buy better-quality clothes that they are less likely to throw away as trends change. Considering the social and environmental impact of the fashion system, this can only be seen as a positive development.

My findings are consistent with previous studies on men's aversion to cultivating a fashionable appearance (Bakewell, Mitchell and Rothwell 2006; Galilee 2002; Green and Kaiser 2016; Kaiser Looysen and Hethorn 2008; Noh et. al. 2015). In these studies, the research participants espoused antipathy to fashion based on a preference for less expressive, more

practical clothing. Scholars attribute this to the way in which fashion's association with femininity and homosexuality can make the fashionable man fall short of hegemonic masculine ideals. The forum users I interviewed also disliked the expressive appearance of fashionable clothes, preferring the understated appearance of more conservative or classic styles. They avoided tight or cutting-edge styles because these would draw attention to their dressed appearance. This supports Kaiser's assertion that heterosexual men dress to leave their gender and sexuality 'unmarked'. In heteronormative societies, the taken-for-granted nature of heterosexual masculinity means that sexuality is invisible until men call attention to their appearance.

However, unlike the men in the studies cited above, my research participants were *very* interested in clothing, fitting the historical archetype of the vain dandy as they dedicated large amounts of time and money to their wardrobes. While not cutting-edge fashion, the (mostly) expensive clothes that my interview respondents wore fell outside the category of affordable, practical clothing preferred by the fashion-adverse men in other studies. And they had no qualms about being known to care about their appearance. If not for the distinctions that my research participants made between fashion and clothing, my findings could have supported notions of a loosening of gender norms governing fashion consumption. This simultaneous rejection of fashion and embrace of behaviours associated with fashion consumption is contradictory, and fashion's association with femininity remains the issue. At no point in this article have I suggested that my research participants articulated an explicit critique of fashion as feminine. But their perceptions of fashion's temporality, and thus its irrationality, reflected fashion's persistent gendering.

Fashion's temporality means that the follower of fashion is a feminised victim who makes irrational decisions, buying an item of clothing not because it is good or because they need it, but because it is on-trend. This reflects Victorian notions of women as weak and easily-manipulated (Bowlby 1985; Wilson 1985). Just as conservative/understated style is a way to avoid the femininity of fashion's expressiveness, timeless/classic style is a way to avoid the femininity of fashion's temporality. Yet the claim of timeless style was somewhat of a conceit, for no style can be truly timeless. Timelessness is hugely subjective, and forum users' sense of timelessness reflects an ever-shifting consensus produced in the day-to-day textual discourse of the online menswear communities in which they participate. Moreover, any look considered timeless today has emerged from the fashion system. During the time periods in which they originated, the styles worn by my research participants were mainstream mass fashion - not a niche, cult interest but fashions worn by a critical mass of men, introduced by clothing manufactures, sold on high streets and promoted through advertising and the fashion press. While some of the styles may have originated in military clothing or workwear, the popularity of garments discussed within online menswear communities, garments such as selvedge jeans, flannel work shirts, crewneck sweatshirts, sack jackets, 3-button suits, oxford-cotton button-down shirts, penny loafers, knit ties, cagoules, chinos and canvas sneakers, were a product of fashion, of artificially introduced change. The difference is that these garments stuck around. These garments are not timeless, but they *are* 'fashion classics' - what art historian Michael Carter describes as 'those clothing forms that have not succumbed to fashionable destruction' (Carter 2003: 78).

By defining their supposedly timeless and understated style against fashion, my research participants were involved in the kind of boundary work that Diego Rinallo (2007) found in his

study of heterosexual Italian men. Rinallo's research participants set themselves boundaries to avoid the illegitimate appearance that Rinallo labels effeminate/homosexual. The difference is that these men identified as followers of fashion, whereas fashion-oriented looks fell outside the boundaries that my research participants set themselves. What fell within the boundaries was that which was classic, timeless, conservative, understated and so forth. This can be partly attributed to cultural differences between Italy and the Anglosphere countries in which I carried out my research, but the online consensus of online menswear communities played a significant role in shaping my research participants' ideas about fashion, clothing and style.

They distanced their dressing and shopping from the feminised irrationality of fashion, presenting it as rational activity taken towards the masculine goal of 'achievement' at dressing well (Otnes and McGrath 2001). Informed shopping and dressing decisions could be made by using the forums to better understand menswear, ensuring that there was no danger of becoming a feminised fashion victim. With his emphasis on knowledge and research, the forum user could see himself as a rational, masculine, 'man-of-action hero' seeking out clothes that will stand the test of time (Holt and Thompson 2004). This is reminiscent of Barry and Philips' (2015) fashion-as-labour, with dress understood as something that one works at through research and practice. But my research participants went a step further by steering clear of fashion altogether. Where Lellock's Redditors used Male Fashion Advice to achieve a fashionable appearance, my interview respondents used their forums to achieve the impossible ideal of timeless style.

As I have demonstrated in this article, this rhetorical distinction between fashion and style is significant, because it reflects how deeply-gendered fashion still is. Fashion was not derided for being womanly or gay, but this gendering underlay the deriding of fashion for expressiveness and temporality. Style, by contrast, was constructed as timeless and understated.

Fashion's irrationality perplexed them, but style's rationality meant that it was something they could learn and master. As something that is not fashion, the social construct that is 'timeless style' makes it safe for men to take pleasure in shopping, the material culture of clothing and narcissistic concern with self-presentation, behaviours that could otherwise be seen as effeminate. Style trumped fashion by allowing an engagement with clothing whereby clothes-mad heterosexual men's masculinity will not come into question.

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