
Dress Like a Man: Plainly Masculine Dress and Men Who Consume

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to investigate perceptions of men's presentation as unadorned "masculine" through a lens of sociocultural anthropology concerned with the materialization and mattering of bodies in space. Taking on a mix of linguistic, political, and economic factors determining the importance of looking "masculine," this paper then moves to discuss the breakdown of the disembodied, non-consuming male archetype from the Great Masculine Renunciation. This discussion centers around contemporary social discourse regarding American men, engaging various historical sources, discursive writings, and contemporary news and media. This paper concentrates on the deeper meanings of manhood being "at stake" with the issue of male dress and looks at the cultural relevance of the subversive 21st century "metrosexual." Considering the impact and implications of subversion, this paper concludes with a gesture toward the potential of masculinizing consumption to loosen the rigidity of what it means to look or dress "like a man," and, in turn, lessen anxiety for the men of the future.

On November 11, 2012, user "OmgWtfNvm" posted to the forum of bodybuilding.com, a site for bodybuilding news and supplements retail, asking other members of the forum: "is it gay for a man to wear a scarf? no one wears a scarf at my school. just bought a 95\$ cashmere scarf. i like to rock my own style. so is it gay? and how do i wear it?" The ensuing conversation with other users demonstrated that OmgWtfNvm asked in search for affirmation, and overall, the responses reflected that it may be "gay," but it also was not a cause for concern. Other users stated that it would be fine if women liked it, and one noted that the scarf's high price was the reason for it being "phaggy [sic]" (OmgWtfNvm, 2012). Although this forum, laden with homophobic slurs, may be chalked up to toxic hypermasculinity, the young age of the user raise cause for concern as to how men face lifestyle pressure regarding aesthetic choices. If this post is read as desiring affirmation of the separation between masculinity and material consumption, larger questions arise of what it means to look "like a man" and what that image means for the men of the future.

In the 21st century, various novel images of male dress have been received by claims of a crisis of masculinity, owing to sensational trends which blend masculine bodies and feminine style. One needs only to look to the 2010s fascination with the "man bun" and the ironically named men's rompers of the brand RompHim. Likewise, the image of a dress-wearing Harry Styles on the cover of Vogue in 2020 made headlines for weeks. These events suggest there is an amount of spectacle in encouraging dress which is not bound by the wearer's gender, but to grasp the holds of the masculine image, we may examine the consumption of men's fashion media and marketing. In this investigation, adornment, accessorization, and aestheticization are taken to mean any altering of the bodily form in a decorative manner, as includes, but is not limited to, the use of clothing which covers the bodily trunk and

limbs, rings and other jewelry, hats, scarves, piercings, hairpieces, ties, and footwear. The importance of decoration in this context is that it is a social presentation which may be put under scrutiny and be judged against the wearer. It is not the fact of being dressed, as everyone who does not live in a nudist community must wear clothes, but rather, the result of a presumed set of choices, as aspects of dress come together to present a "look" that the wearer may be held responsible for. Rather than concentrating on one specific form of decorative presentation, this piece means to question how the multiple choices made in bodily adornment come together, in an affective milieu, to present men as fashionably dressed in a way that often is thought to conflict with conventions of masculinity. All people who get dressed in the morning can be said to be making deliberate choices, but the focus here is the way in which gendered expectations both deem engagement in fashion anti-masculine and stigmatize men, who are seen as subjects of fashion, in other dimensions beyond the aesthetic; namely, the economic and the political.

Thinking back to the example of scarves, one thecoolist.com article on the "rules" and styles of men's scarves carries similar sentiments of discouraging flamboyance:

Generally speaking, if you are a man going about your ordinary business, your scarf should be a plain color or a simple pattern with a combination of very few hues. Save the feather boa for your weekend club activities or grinding away on parade floats. Like a noisy, garish tie, a flashy scarf reduces your professional estimation in the eyes of others

(Byrne 2022)

Thinking of the normative potential of this kind of statement, is important to remember that there is a person who wrote this

message which warns of men tarnishing their “professional estimation” by dressing gay, as the reference to parade floats communicates. As will be explained, the association of minimal aesthetics with a capacity to engage in business and perform labor is produced and reproduced in many different spaces for men. On one hand, the idea of excessive fashion consumption fits into a direct logic of spending and saving, but beyond suppositions of frugality, the de-aestheticization of men depends on a wide history of gendered discrimination and homophobia that is reproduced in oftentimes discrete ways. In suggesting that men who want to dress well should tailor their image to look untailored, or to not “do too much,” the production of a masculine image, as opposed to a feminine one, is forged in deliberate actions. Yet the result, if successful, should present as if no thought was put in at all. This paradox of de-aestheticized manhood is a trapping of bodily existence that many men come into consciousness of, and as such, teasing out the meanings associated with fashion and manhood is immensely important. Associations of masculinity and simple, “unadorned” fashion have longer historical roots as well.

THE GREAT MALE RENUNCIATION AND LOOK-LESS MASCULINITY

That masculinity should be without elaborate aesthetics can be traced back centuries to historical moments of idealized men who avoid the excessive consumption of luxuries and fashions. As Leora Auslander references in her writings on material culture, the French Revolution coincided with a democratization of male dress, in which loose-fitting full-length trousers, worn by male revolutionaries, replaced breeches which revealed status (Auslander, 2014, pp.165). This context is then understood in what historians like David Kuchta refer to as “the great masculine renunciation.” This term, going back to J.C. Flügel in 1930, refers to the rise of commercial and industrial ideals which conquered class distinction until men’s dress became a mostly consistent “plain and uniform costume” (Kuchta, 1996, pp.55). Connecting the early Glorious Revolution to later changes through the early nineteenth century, Kuchta traces notions of “modest masculinity” being virtuous, in which both middle-class and aristocratic men alike shied away from consumption which may be read as irrational gluttony (including that of fashion), because it was incompatible with political legitimacy.

With the standard suit being worn by men ranging from world leaders to corporate workers to red-carpet-walkers, the standardization of plain male dress as coinciding with power does appear credible. Ben Barry and Nathaniel Weiner in the journal *Men and Masculinities* wrote of four diverse Canadian men who all had similar associations with their suits, “approaching them as ways to embody rationality, power, and social status” (Barry & Weiner, 2019, pp.168). Although other factors such as enjoyment of fashion or fashion influences lead Barry and Weiner to consider their subjects through the lens of hybrid masculinities, the prevailing semiotics reflect patriarchal domination, by men who do not consume for fashion or enjoyment, over matters both political and economic. This may be juxtaposed against women’s dress, which is designed to accentuate and adorn the female figure to a greater degree. Joanne Entwistle explains this as a form

of gendered social differentiation that can be traced through the industrial revolution as well. If male dress that obscures the body coincides with its potential to imbue the wearer with power, one may look to feminine dress as indexical of political and economic exclusion. In this case, donning the “power suit” disembodies women to makes them “suitable” for social participation. At the same time, the entire phenomenon of “power dressing,” scaffolds the idea that women’s bodies are inherently stigmatized, and that asserting one’s power relies on a specific bodily presentation. Given that such notions of “power” in dress hinge on proximity to hegemonic notions of strength, it is not surprising that dress in the workplace witnesses gendered reproduction at many levels.

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The reproduction of gendered disembodiment in professional spaces is immediately visible in a material form through corporate dress codes and guides. In one example, the Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), a career and technical student organization in many high schools across the United States, makes clear a dress code which students must follow when attending conferences at the local, state, and national level. Having attended these conferences in my youth, I understand that this kind of presentation of a business dress code to young students is both influenced by real-world conventions as much as it systematically reproduces them. In most iterations of the dress code, bolo ties are explicitly banned, and women’s dress, including skirt length, has been extensively regulated (FBLA, 2023; ACS FBLA). This evidence suggests that women’s clothing options must be regulated to a higher degree in the workplace, while the discouraging of men from accessorizing is still undertaken, but in more specific cases, as with the bolo tie. At the same time, in a once-official version of the national dress code, which is still viewable on a local school’s FBLA website, the presentation of male and female models of business attire makes this gendered differentiation more explicit: while the male model faces the camera head-on, with his hands by his sides, causing his frame to appear almost rectangular, the female model stands pivoted to three-quarters with her arms folded in front of her—her blazer nips in at the waist and the silhouette is ultimately curved (ACS FBLA). This speaks to both the difference in gender presentation in the workplace as well as the material reality of women’s business attire. Suit jackets designed for women may have similarities with men’s suits in the presence of a lapel, pocket slits, and other such features, but they are frequently designed to curve to the contours of the fleshy body more than those of men’s suits, and are more often available in a cropped length, as of the famous Chanel tweed coats. In more recent years, however, it is worth noting that FBLA’s dress code has become “gender-neutral,” although there remain standards for dress/skirt length (FBLA, 2023). Another student organization,

DECA, or the Distributive Education Clubs of America, maintains a similar dress code. On the webpage of DECA's Texas association, they make suggestions of color combinations in shades of black, gray, navy blue, and khaki, and warn against "excessive jewelry or accessories," any piercings, and makeup that is not "moderate." (Shi, 2021). Presenting this business attire code as an important part of the business world, DECA asserts the real-world professional impact of "doing too much" when dressing oneself while also reproducing that stigma in the next generation of business-minded youth. Given that the workplace and the office space are two domains which are conventionally male-dominated and may be spaces of masculinity contestation, the maintenance and reproduction of gendered differences in business attire reproduces the gender binary. In this reproduction, it is women's suits which are tapered and tailored to cinch and show the contours of the body, and it is men's suits which are squared off. Further, in discouraging accessorization and encouraging students to keep appearances toned down, the gender binary is cross-cut by steps that could be taken toward disembodiment.

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To look at the intersection of gender and disembodiment beyond the suit, an interesting example emerges in the deliberate choice of singer Billie Eilish to wear oversized clothing. Reporting on her drastically different pin-up style Vogue cover, Laura Snapes of British Vogue explains that Eilish's signature style of baggy, oversized clothing emerged from feelings of discomfort with her body which began before the age of 14 (Snapes, 2021). In concealing her body within a shapeless form of fabric, Eilish drew support from conservative voices for her bodily presentation, but Eilish was doubly discomforted by the implication, in this support, that women who wear skimpier clothing should be shamed for showing off. In her own words, Eilish asserts "Don't make me not a role model because you're turned on by me..." while also holding that the novelty of her baggy style "put [her] on such a high pedestal that then it's even worse" (Snapes, 2021). In this case, the moral dimension of gendered bodies is immediately evident. Just as the female body may be sexualized and seen as immoral—restricted from "role model" status—dress choices which hide the fleshy body cause a kind of "disembodiment" which allows a hegemony of dress presentation to persist. This hegemony is conservative and patriarchal, as the fleshy body is sexed, made feminine or potentially homosexual in the case of men, and thus

attaches the stigmas of sexism onto the subject. The bodies which escape this semiotic defilement are thus those which appear disembodied, those which are not "flashy" or "showing off," and those which are made docile by the overwhelming shout of the existing hegemony.

The prevailing unadorned "manly," or at least gender-neutral image, which carries social power, is thus a thing of disembodiment. Just as the men of the "great masculine renunciation" renounced interests in fashion and frills, the fabric which falls on men's shoulders today hides the form beneath, disembodimenting the men. Entwistle touches on how desexualization of the male body in the squarish suit is further reflective of disembodiment (2000, p. 174). Yet, this rejection of the body beneath the clothes is not fully realized, as dress is a "situated bodily practice," relying on the presence of a human body beneath. Even though individuals deliberately tailor and present themselves as dressed forms, an underlying human body persists. Alterations to the obscured, disembodied masculine form prove this persistence repeatedly, and the recent emergence of subversively fashionable men provides a grounding to explore the limitations of rigidly de-aestheticized masculinity. This subversion has led to negative responses among those who see manhood at stake.

MANHOOD AT STAKE

Thinking back to the bodybuilding forum, negative sentiments toward feminine or flamboyant men's dress are clearly visible in what some contemporary scholars refer to as a "crisis" of masculinity. Recognizing the aesthetic dimension to this crisis, is worth considering why adorned and fashionably styled masculine bodies are considered to put manhood at stake. Both preserving masculine hegemony over the economy, and preserving conservative political dominance emerge as pertinent factors.

If the conventions of unadorned masculinity are understood as established and embedded in contemporary cultures of many men, then a politically conservative look at a masculine hegemony over the economy begs that the disembodied professional man avoid fashion, lest it deprive him of his economic capacity. The thecoolist.com article's mention of "professional estimation" comes into play here. Entwistle touches on the disembodied nature of the suit as women must wear formal jackets in the workplace to de-emphasize their breasts, which stand out as a sexual marker (2000, p. 190). One may argue that this means professional bodies must be made asexual, but obscuring sexual characteristics of the body may also suggest that professional women, through disembodiment, make a claim to masculinity. In this view, even if women are present in the workplace, the expectations of disembodiment remain for the preservation of business as a masculine domain. The connection to workplace masculinity is visible in Ben Barry's interviews with male consumers about the "sartorial stress" brought on by dressing for work. One man told Barry that "One high-end store tried to sell me a shirt completely covered in big flowers... No self-respecting men would wear that. He'd loose [sic] all authority at work" (2015, pp.153). In the rest of the interviews, multiple men expressed a desire to dress in other ways, but recognized a lack of diversity in men's clothes and social ex-

pectations to not overdo their engagement in style so they could remain properly aligned with their lifestyles. One man explained he could never wear a bowtie with jeans, which is for “someone who buys Justin Timberlake music and who is in their 20s,” and would undercut his authority, being 49 years old (Barry, 2015, pp.153). Barry situates his findings primarily within notions of hegemonic masculinity. The connection of dress to men’s concerns of power and career are quite evident. Further, considering the historical context above, it must be recognized that this (lack of) engagement with style and fashion emerges from wider historical processes of gendered domination. In earlier moments of liberation by male political figures in the “great masculine renunciation,” notions of manhood became locked into a de-aestheticized state, distinguished from the world of women as subjects of fashion and frills. With the masculine image unadorned for the sake of professionalism, then, it appears that the dominance of professional masculinity hinges on the continued reproduction of this gender-influenced disembodiment.

Beyond the corporate sphere, this extends into the political world. To see political authority compared to dress in contemporary politics, one can look to 2014, when President Barack Obama wore a tan suit at a news conference and was criticized by many, including Representative King, of New York, who claimed it showed a “lack of seriousness” (Farzan, 2019). Others, such as writers at GQ, criticized the suit for being ugly or ill-fitting, but conservative discourse centered around authority—as if choosing tan or blue in the morning took up time that was at the detriment of policy decisions. Material consumption and fashion, once again, are seen as incompatible with power. The unadorned masculinity of the suit is essential for political men, and for women, it can also lead to criticism. Although style mentor and author Tim Gunn praised her policy experience to George Lopez in 2011, he then criticized her suits for showing “cankles” and told Conan O’Brien three years earlier that, “she’s confused about what her gender is. She’s so mannish in her dress” (Tanabe, 2011). Just as political and economic environments demand disembodiment to safeguard professional ability, women who play into this system but cannot hide their form, are undone by a few-inch-long exposure of a fleshy ankle. The tailoring of a disembodied masculine image is, evidently, important in the political world for its connection to conservative notions of masculinity and power. While the maintenance of those power structures explains the upkeep of plainly masculine dress, the implications of its subversion in new “masculinized” consumption may be indicative of this disembodiment falling apart at the seams.

THE METROSEXUAL

To look at the future of the masculine image, it is important to consider shifting attitudes toward a more-indulgent form of men’s consumption. The ridiculing of men who indulge in fashion and material goods can be seen in the macaroni men of the mid-1700s. This idea of an effeminate male who consumes voraciously continued on, carrying semiotics of comedy, into early ideas of dandyism. Looking at the American context, in *Selling Style*, Rob Schorman notes the presence of the “dude,” a stock character, in 1880s American comics. In contrast to depictions of squarish,

masculine men in business suits, this effeminate man, “always wore old-fashioned, occasion-specific, probably custom-tailored clothing; his body was slender and his silhouette curved gracefully” (2003, p. 30). “The dude” informs a history of the rise of ready-made menswear, but also demonstrates that a reorganization of cultural values has caused tailor-made clothing, which makes visible the male form, to reflect emasculation. The prevailing masculine form, thus, is squared off, with less signs of the curved bodily surface which lies beneath the clothes.

To individuals in the 21st century, this idea of effeminate male consumption is more explicitly seen in the analogous figure of the metrosexual. Coined by journalist Mark Simpson and popularized in his Salon article in 2002, the metrosexual is described as a man who shops indulgently and is invested in tailoring his image through material goods. Simpson cheekily toys at this toward-capitalism shift in consumption among heterosexual men who might, in the past, mock similar consumers for being “gay,” describing that “old-fashioned (re)productive, repressed, unmoisturized heterosexuality has been given the pink slip by consumer capitalism” (2002). The acidity behind Simpson’s jabs at men like David Beckham is clearly motivated by his frustration that even into the 1970s, gay men consuming in the same ways had faced ridicule and emasculation while building the social grounds for male aestheticization to go mainstream. Yet, this comic look at new “masculinized” consumption comes from both market trend analysis and social discourse which indicates a shift in the meanings of masculinity.

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20 years after coining the term metrosexual, Mark Simpson declared him dead. In a 2014 *The Irish Times* article, Simpson claimed that the fashion-crazed luxury-brand-fanboys had moved on to tailoring a masculine image not through their clothing, but through their body. He deemed this the birth of the “spornosexual,” named for the glamorization of bodies in sports and pornography (2014). These new men, under “second-generation metrosexuality” still tailor their image based on the masculine body: bodybuilding, plunging necklines, beards, tattoos, piercings, etc. If metrosexuality is seriously considered as occurring in waves, the first wave masculinized material consumption, and the second wave re-embodied the formerly disembodied man of the “great male renunciation.” Yet, this look also has limits.

Metrosexuality may be initially reflective of a new type of male

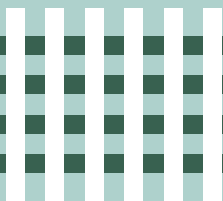
consumption, but this is not the whole picture. It is worth considering how the subversion of rigid, unaestheticized masculinity is itself placed into a defined category. Calling this group “metrosexual” has specific implications that this kind of man is a unique sexual being. Even though metrosexuals may be “straight,” the term can be thought to linguistically validate the conflict between heterosexuality and material consumption. Even if the question of stifling categorization is put aside, “metrosexual” has become a tool of sensationalism. Simpson himself, in another article, discusses a statistic of men spending more money on shoes than women (2013). Although Simpson is not terribly surprised, the shock and confusion meant to be evoked by this statistic illustrates how metrosexuality may be interpreted as anti-masculine rather than an expansion of the meanings of masculinity. Even though individuals with male bodies are indulging in fashion, some may argue that such men are less manly for it, or that indulging in fashion causes heterosexual men to be “othered” like their gay counterparts. Simpson’s “death” of the metrosexual may also lead one to believe that “adorned” masculine fashion is merely a passing fad, but new consumption habits have galvanized conservative voices, as well as shifted mainstream youth aesthetics. The latter of these impacts, mentioned prior with artists like Harry Styles, also manifests in social media’s popularization of men wearing pearl necklaces, skirts, and other feminine dress elements (Jana, 2021; Hills, 2022). Yet, this visibility of adorned male bodies, contrary to “renunciation” manhood, faces the criticism of conservative individuals, immediately noticeable in the case of Madison Cawthorn. In his 2022 final speech to the House of Representatives, Cawthorn expressed discontent with what he saw as a nation which teaches children “that being a soft metrosexual is more valuable than training the mind, body, and soul” (America Reports, 2022). In an ironic twist of events, conservative ideologues appropriate the term “metrosexual,” which was originally meant to describe newly masculinized material consumption which gave men freedom to become “everything,” rather than becoming feminine (Simpson, 2014). Cawthorn drew some ridicule for spending his final speech discussing this, but it is demonstrative of the link between conservative politics and the maintenance of the masculine hegemony. Further, this attention to men’s gender presentation is amplified when considering that Cawthorn himself, amidst other issues of accusing politicians of participating in drug use and group sex, had his reelection marred at the primary stage when pictures of him were released in which he wore women’s lingerie and hoop earrings in a party setting (Bort, 2022). While Cawthorn’s responses to backlash emphasized his adherence to masculine conventions of bodily and spiritual discipline, he failed to secure reelection. Relying on the valorization of rigidly heterosexual, cisgender, disembodied masculinity, his comments about metrosexuals and subversive manhood demonstrate that he may have been hoisted by his own petard.

Plain men’s dress connects to man’s capacity for economic and political power in a society where aestheticized feminine dress greenlights women’s exclusion from political processes. Despite women having more political and economic agency than in the 18th century, this idea of “traditional” masculinity remains a value encouraged by conservative forces, and news outlets sensationalize its subversion. Questions remain concerning how images of men’s consumption may change, but if this sensationalism is driven by concern over a potentially lasting shift with could dismantle conservative images of manhood, there is reason to believe that tomorrow’s men will remain entangled with “masculinized” consumption.

CONCLUSION: MASCLINIZING CONSUMPTION

Having established the connection of masculine dress and utilitarian simplicity, we return to the question of subversion. It may be useful to look at subversion through the lens of what Dipesh Chakrabarty uses to describe contradictions in dress among India’s political men, in which we see it as reflecting “desires for alternative constructions of the public sphere” (Chakrabarty, 1999, pp. 6). From this point of view, when men consume luxury brands and designer clothes as metrosexuals, or hit the gym like “spornosexuals,” their ways of embracing material culture and male embodiment are reflective of a renunciation-free world, even if they wear a shapeless suit at their corporate job. Likewise, men who use their workplace dress to engage in personal expression also test the limits of hegemonic modes of belief. From this view, subversion of what it means to dress or look “like a man” has subtle and discreet forms which do not necessarily challenge sexuality and gender in a radical way. For young people growing up in the 21st century, like the young man in the bodybuilding forum seeking validation to dress as he wants, the continued deconstruction of rigid masculine aesthetics may be essential for easing the stressors of what it means to navigate “manhood.” In the personal sphere, there is still room and opportunity for tailoring manhood to extend beyond the material, and thus imbue individual men with the agency to participate in a masculinized consumption which neither defines manhood nor demands disembodiment.

In this topic of masculinity and aesthetics, further research is warranted in market analyses since the growth of “metrosexualism,” the appropriation of feminine aesthetics to enhance masculine bodies, the potential complicity of queer aesthetic appropriation with masculine hegemony, and how individual men orient themselves as consumers of fashion.



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