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**Looking queer? Gay men’s negotiations between masculinity and femininity in style and dress in the twenty-first century**

**Shaun Cole**, University of the Arts

**Abstract**

Appearance has long been of concern to gay men, whether manifested as an identifiable visibility, an intentional invisibility or a conscious playing with gendered and social signifiers. This ties to Judith Butler’s propositions that gendered identities are performed in relation to external societal and internal personal pressures and considerations, as well as being regulated by cultural discourses. The notions of gay male femininity and the authenticity of a ‘real’ masculinity, that can be presented through choices of clothing and behavioural traits, have traditionally been a perennial concern within the urban gay male communities of Britain and America. However, perhaps given the changes in social, moral and legal conditions for, and attitudes towards, gay people that have manifested in the twenty-first century, the negotiation of this oppositional binary is no longer of such importance. Thus the question of a contemporary gay male visual identity and appearance is interesting to consider. Based on a series of interviews conducted with gay men between the ages of 19 and 46 in 2012–2013, this article will articulate some of the ways in which these British and American gay men have negotiated concerns with their sexual identity and personal appearance. It will consider the ways in which style and dress can signify meanings about the multitude of aspects that make up an individual’s identity, with a particular focus on how the acceptance and articulation of their own sexual orientation has varied between operating as a key motivator and an incidental component of the style and dress of these young gay men.

**Keywords**

masculinity

femininity

gay style

identities

negotiation

dress

Gay people are chameleons; we adapt into the scenery by day and like peacocks we come out with our true colors at night.

(Dave cited in Brekhus 2003: 65)

The notion expressed by Dave that gay men change their appearances over the course of the day, blending invisibly during the day and being more overt at night, goes some way towards reflecting the way in which gay men have historically used their appearance management to articulate expressions of their identity. What Dave does not explicitly articulate but that could be read into his two comparative terms are gay men’s perennial concerns with the authenticity of expressions of masculinity and femininity presented through clothing and behavioural traits. These are expressed by 28-year-old Brooklyn-based artist, Nick when he stated ‘I think that is the huge paradox of the gay world that we’re not traditionally masculine men and yet the masculinity is what we want to uphold and subscribe to in terms of clothes and appearance’. [[1]](#endnote-1) Nick’s paradox reflects Jamie Gough’s observation that ‘Gay masculinity is not in any simple way “real” masculinity any more than “camp” is [real] femininity’ (1989: 125). It is the way that gay men negotiate between the seemingly binary opposites of masculinity and femininity in their style-fashion-dress (Tulloch 2010) that is the major concern of this article.

This article is primarily based on a series of fifteen interviews that were conducted in late 2012 and early 2013 with gay men between the ages of 19 and 46. Ten were conducted in-person and five by written questionnaire. Five were with British men and ten with Americans. This selection of men was chosen as the first stage in a bigger project to examine gay men’s dress styles and relationship with fashion and dressed appearance in the twenty-first century. Initially the imperative for the interviews was in order to provide information for a chapter I had been commissioned to write for the book to accompany the ‘Queer History of Fashion’ exhibition at Fashion Institute of Technology in New York. For this I needed the thoughts and opinions of a generation of men younger than those interviewed for my previous work on gay men’s dress in the twentieth century. I was granted funding for a research trip to New York to undertake this work and as such the participants had to be selected with speed. The majority of the American men were sourced through a snowballing method (Bryman 2012; Kawamura 2011) that began with one of my ex students and a current Doctoral Student at London College of Fashion. Two of the British men were students at Central Saint Martins contacted through their Course leader, one was the flatmate of one of my own students and two were existing friends of mine. All were openly gay and happy to discuss issues around their sexual orientation and fashion, style and dressed appearance. Questions asked centred around the individuals own relationship with clothing and dressed appearance in relation to their sexuality, as well as more broadly about gay style, gay men and fashion and the impact of changing approaches to men and fashion, including the metrosexual. Thus this article forms a facet of a wider planned study.

**Multiple choices**

Historically, dressed appearance, particularly that which is projected in public, has been of concern to gay men and, to simplify somewhat, has manifested itself variously as: an identifiable visibility; an intentional invisibility and; a conscious playing with gendered and social signifiers. These manifestations are inevitably linked to the perceived binaries of male/female, masculine/feminine and heterosexual/homosexual in which gay men had traditionally formulated their visible appearances and identities.

Discussing a new flamboyance in men’s clothing in British newspaper articles from 2002 both Arabella Weir and Zoe Williams equated looking gay with being well groomed or wearing more flamboyant, less masculine clothing that would seem to intimate that there is therefore only one way that gay men dress. However, in reality there is a multitude of styles and fashions worn by gay men, forming what 27-year-old New York nightclub host, who was born and raised in Philadelphia, Joe calls a ‘gay spectrum’ of looks. A 34-year-old writer, Lee, originally from Chattanooga, Tennessee but now resident in New York, reiterated this idea when he described how in New York gay men have separated into cliques and types or subcultures: ‘Twinks, bears, East Village types, Chelsea Queens, Hell’s Kitchen Queens, Bushwick Gays, Williamsburg Hipster Gays’. Sociologist Colin Campbell (2012) argues that fashion presents an opportunity to discover personal identity since the process of evaluating and selecting clothing pieces and styles is relevant to who we are. In other words, by making choices regarding clothing we are building our identity. Sociologist Dick Hebdige (1979) suggests that ‘style’ can be interpreted as a form of signifying practice that expresses meanings about an individual’s class, status, gender, and a host of other more personal qualities, such as confidence and attractiveness. Lee identifies that there is a natural relation for some men who opt to fit specifically into certain groups and others who move between groups, echoing sociologist Katherine Sender (2001) who, employing Pierre Bourdieu’s concepts around habitus and taste, has discussed the way camp, kitsch, masculinity, dress and grooming, all function as gay-specific subcultural capital, but also that there is no one single gay habitus. I would like to propose that, based on my set of interviews, there are common grounds in gay styles and across multiple gay habitus in major cities in the United Kingdom and United States in the early twenty-first century.

**Hegemonic muscles**

Observing the clothing styles and body shapes that both gay and straight society deem attractive inevitably has an impact upon gay men’s appearance. Brian, 33-year-old architect, who grew up in the Southern states of the United States and now resides in New York, believes gay men pay more attention to ‘sculpting themselves into different types of archetypes depending on which one they associate with most’. If habitus is the way we come to live in our bodies and how our body is structured by our social situation, then the gay body as habitus reflects a specific lifestyle and a set of values or appearance variables that are praised and expected within gay (sub)cultures or communities. Health and Physical Education scholar Brian Pronger (2000) contends that in the move away from effeminacy as an outward sign of homosexuality, muscularity is not merely a substitute for make-up but differs in the content of the excess. As the well-toned muscular body appeared to present a form of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1995), gay gym use increased to such an extent that muscular gay body became the new stereotyped gay body by the early 1990s (Harris 1997; Cole 2000, 2008).

Although body type is key on the international gay circuit party scene, operating as a form of bodily subcultural capital (Thornton 1995), clothing, of course, plays a role and items are selected to reveal the worked body beneath. Erich who is 27-year-old came out as gay at College in Columbus Ohio, has previously worked in retail and is now a nurse in New York, observed that ‘in Chelsea [New York] there are a lot of people, who dress athletic, they wear a lot of tank tops showing off their muscles’. London-based 25-year-old film-maker David M. who is originally from Ireland believes that the tank top is a quintessential gay item of clothing that ‘shows off the body’ and thus ‘many people consider to be the majority of gay style’. This garment that had traditionally been equated with certain white working-class masculinities has come to connote a certain hegemonic gay dress style an association with a global gay circuit club culture (Cole 2008; Wethaver 2005). The tank top clad muscular gay man, regardless of age and racial or ethnic background but predominantly Caucasian, operates a hegemonic gay style identity, against which many other gay men measure their appearance and engagement in gay communities.

**‘Regular guy’ bears**

One gay subcultural group that does not fit this stereotype of gay style in terms of body image and is in direct contrast to the gay muscle boys is the bears. As gay commentators Silverstein and Picano noted bears were initially just ‘regular guys – only they’re gay’ (1992: 128–30), something that sociologist Peter Hennen notes as the ‘*possibility* of subversion’ to divorce effeminacy from same-sex desire (2008: 130). The bear image has been used in a transgressional way to question the views of both gay and straight societies on ‘real’ masculinity, acting as a masking device or causing confusion because it appears so ‘un-gay’ to the untrained eye. Folk singer Andy McCarthy noted that straight people ‘do not like it when they can’t tell… They don’t know where they stand’ (cited in Flynn 2003: 70). In ‘passing’ as straight to outside observers (Levine 1998) but embracing their homosexuality, bears challenge the perception of what a gay man looks like.

**Figure 1:** Graham and David W. in Bears Den Bar, Paris, 2008 (photo by Shaun Cole).

Facial and body hair are important visual signifiers of the bear, operating in direct opposition to the seemingly feminine removal of body hair by the buffed muscle boys. A British Bear cub, 36-year-old Graham, who was born, brought up and still lives in the West Midlands in the United Kingdom, describes bear style as ‘relaxed’ with beards and ‘lots of lumberjack style shirts, T-shirts, jeans, trainers’. These are the same staples of working-class clothing, which had been appropriated by the hypermasculine Clones of the 1970s, continuing to reflect the desire to appear to be ‘real’ men (see Cole 2000). However, reflecting back on early twentieth-century German sociologist, philosopher and critic Georg Simmel’s (1955) argument that the modern individual is characterized by multiple group membership and a web of overlapping group affiliations reveals Graham’s negotiation of identity, and how there is an impact of the demands on the self arising from ‘competing’ identity affiliations. While Graham identifies with the gay bear scene, he is also a heavy rock music fan and as such spends time at ostensibly straight clubs and concerts that play this music. His own personal dress style does not differ between the straight and gay scenes, he does think about how his sexuality impacts upon who he appears and is perceived to be and how he acts at each location. Thus he negotiates his identity as a rock music fan and gay bear dependent on temporal and spatial conditions and the company he keeps.

Within the American bear community, issues of both class and authenticity have been raised, with accusations that the bear subculture simply fetishizes signs and symbols of lower-class white masculinities. However, as gay activist, educator and Bear, Eric Rofes has observed: ‘Bear culture is one of the few queer spaces … constituted in large part by working-class men’ (1997: 93–94). For 46-year-old Birmingham-based British bear David W. the scene is about acceptance regardless of social class identity and offers an identity to older, larger bodied men. However, London-based fashion studies Ph.D. candidate, originally from West Virginia who lived for some time in New York, Mario recalled how his bear friends refused to take him to New York bear bar as they didn’t want to be seen as ‘the guys who brought the fashion queen into the bar’. For Mario then this particular gay community or scene operated restrictions about who was acceptable to participate in social activities and attend bear-centred locations.

**Hip hop realism**

Similarly to bear’s initial rejection of mainstream gay club culture and style, Benoit Denizet-Lewis notes that many American black and Latino men have ‘settled on a new identity… Down Low’ that rejects ‘a gay culture they perceive as white and effeminate’ (2003: 30). Hypermasculinity was thus at the heart of being Down Low and stylistically, these ‘homothugs’, a term used by black and Latino Club DJ Alphonso King (cited in Philip 2005), drew their influence from hip hop culture, wearing low slung oversized jeans revealing branded underwear waistbands, hooded sweatshirts and baseball caps or bandanas. Thus hegemonic presentations of African American and Latino masculinities have exerted an influence upon how these men present their dressed bodies. Despite the macho anxiety that underpinned the culture, homothugs could be viewed as part of a new queer presence that employed the macho signifiers of both hip hop and the society around itself to find an identity and a way out of the closet, a sentiment summed up by American theorist José Esteban Muñoz: ‘We are so used to white masculinity setting the standard for the closet. Now when we talk about it in relation to communities of colour, it’s not so much about the single man on a subway; its about a network of men who recognize each other’ (1999: 105).

The global spread of hip hop music and its associated dress styles has seen specifically black-oriented gay clubs open in London over the past decade. As in America the gay version is virtually indistinguishable from straight styles but as black gay British film-maker and theatre director Rikki observed ‘the difference is in the details. It’s a knowingness of how to put together and those little camp touches that a straight boy wouldn’t think of’. Rikki’s noting that finer details are the difference between gay and straight looks is echoed by 19-year-old London-based trainee tailor Taylor – ‘it is the tiny little details… mannerisms or grooming’ – and New York-based Lee who believes it is down to ‘a sensitivity to the look, a thoughtfulness, a just too well put-togetherness’. Returning to the way in which black gay men negotiate their dressed appearance and presentations of their identities to observers in a variety of communities and situations 26-year-old retail assistant Alex has noted that in Philadelphia, where he was raised and now lives, he sees ‘gay black men who dress extremely flamboyantly, extremely tight jeans [and] women’s shoes’. He adds also that ‘gay black men still have to look like they are straight sometimes’, thus, as journalist Emil Wilbekin noted in *Out* magazine in 2004, ‘walking a fine line between masculine and feminine characteristics’(2004: 93).

**Figure 2:** Bashment Club, London, 2005 (photo by Chip Donohue).

**Straight acting and fitting in**

Taking this notion forward, Alex also pointed out that he believed that more effeminate men ‘are looked down upon’ and this attitude towards certain behaviours and appearances has had an impact upon how gay men regulate their dressed appearance. Judith Butler (1990) has proposed that gendered identities are performed in relation to external societal and internal personal pressures and considerations, as well as being regulated by cultural discourses. In discussing the binary frame in which sex and gender has operated within hegemonic constructions, Butler considers conformity to a ‘heterosexual matrix’ where actions and behaviours are learned, rather than natural and are imposed upon us by normative heterosexuality. This also links to the idea that gay men’s construction of, and approach to, their identities is impacted upon by the idea of the heterosexual assumption, as outlined by sociologists Jeffrey Weeks et al. (2001), and utilized by sociologist Andrew Cooper in his work *Changing Gay Male identities* (2013).

Hennen has recorded how ‘personal ads placed by American gay men now routinely include phrases such as “straight-acting and appearing” and “nofems”’ reflecting the ‘relentless repudiation of the feminine’ (2008: 10, 35). Cultural commentator Mark Simpson believes that straight acting gay men so desired acceptance in mainstream straight society that they copied behaviours and ‘exaggerat[ed their] masculinity’ (1992: 52) compensating for the fact that their homosexuality created a perceived or real distance from the real or perceived straight hegemonic masculinities they encounter in daily life (Connell 1992, 1995). Both sociologist Andrew Cooper (2012) and psychologist Perry Halkitis (2000) have built on sociologist Raewyn Connell’s groundbreaking and influential 1995 book *Masculinities* arguing that hegemonic masculinity is a major contextual factor in the negotiation of gay identity, and thus I would propose in dressed appearance. British journalist Stewart Who? saw straight acting ‘veneers of masculinity which are based purely on image’ as a form of ‘drag’ (2005: 40), the appropriating of a costume that creates a character, that of a ‘straight’ man. In this respect Who? is acknowledging the way in which hegemonic presentations of heterosexual masculinity impact upon gay men who, in some or all social circumstances ‘play’ the role of a straight man, distancing themselves, as acknowledged by Hennen and Simpson above from more traditional ideas of what gay men should be and appear. I would then propose that adoption of the self-description ‘straight acting’ or ‘straight appearing’, is what Frietas et al. (1997) identify as an ‘identity not’ principle; in this case an ‘I am *not* effeminate’ stance.

In relation to this idea of ‘straight-acting’. Nick noted many of the gay men he meets in New York say ‘I want a straight acting man’ and that they ‘think it’s just so hot that they are wearing a T-shirt and jeans and not effeminate’. In his work on *Changing Gay Male Identities* (2013) Cooper cites two of his informants who, like some of my respondents, note the wearing of jeans and T-shirts equates to a certain gay male style and can illicit comments from heterosexual male observers that the wearers were deemed to be ‘poofs’ because of this choice of clothing. Appearing ‘masculine’ and wearing a T-shirt and jeans does not necessarily mean that a gay man identifies as ‘straight acting’ – none of my interviewees use this self definition despite some of them choosing to wear jeans and T-shirts – but it does arguably point towards a certain conformity. Commenting specifically on New York, Mario observed that ‘you don’t have to be exactly cookie cutter but there is a lot of conformity’. Joe takes this a step further arguing that ‘the polo, the jeans, your really white tennis sneakers, nice cropped hair, perfectly trimmed facial hair, nice tan’ is a form of gay uniform, echoing comments from Cooper’s respondents and fitting with David M. Halperin’s (1995) proposition that gay life has generated its own disciplinary regimes, its own techniques of normalization in the form of obligatory haircuts, T-shirts, dietary practices, and physical exercise.

Joe continues with his train of thought on conformity noting that ‘by trying to fit in the most they stand out the most’. The items of clothing and adornment identified by Joe help to place men within a collective gay appearance and identity. While Joe who adopts a distinctly individual style and Mario is somewhat unsympathetic towards conformity of appearance on New York’s gay scene’s there is perhaps a sense of belonging that such looks can offer, feeding into ‘collective identities’ that anthropologist Kath Weston (1991) has argued are key to the definition of ‘gay community’. The idea that in a search to fit in with collective identities the men ‘stand out’ raises the potential conflicts that exit when individuals negotiate between a collective and individual identity that Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman names ‘the extremes of uncompromising individuality and total belonging’ (2005: 30). The ‘subcultural’ grouping of bears or homothugs identified above and straight-acting identification offer collective coherent identities for gay men, while for others a sense of individuality in their identity formation and dressed appearance is more important.

**Gendered play**

Operating at the opposite end of the spectrum to the masculine responses to commercial muscular gay scene, such as bears and homothugs, the London club scene at the beginning of the new millennium saw a revival in experimentation with appearance that fostered an exploration of the boundaries of gendered appearance and encouraged creativity in dressing. Thus clubland experimentation coincided with the rise in ‘flamboyance’ and what was perceived as somewhat ‘feminine’ styles in men’s fashion catwalk collections identified in articles by Weir (2002) and Williams (2002) cited above. Leading the London clubland charge of individual expression was Johnny Slut, a gay stalwart of the London music and club scene, who started his club night NagNagNag in 2003, ‘out of a sense of boredom’ (cited in Lutyens 2004 30). Like previous London club scenes it had a high proportion of gay attendees (see Cole 2000, 2013), and the styles of dress fused individual mixes of clothing and influences. Fashion designer Julian Smith described his own wardrobe as a ‘mix of formal men’s trousers, biker jackets, men’s T-shirts and women’s clothes – dresses by Zandra Rhodes and Jonathan Saunders’ (cited in Lutyens 2002: 32). Clubs such as NagNagNag, Kashpoint and Boombox (see Smith 2008) encouraged a full range of play with gender appropriate and inappropriate dress and appearance, from men with a hint of make up to full on drag. Cross-dressing, drag and gender play have used both the nightclub and the street as sites for expression and offered what Leila Rupp and Verta Taylor have termed ‘goals and strategies for challenging dominant constructions of masculinity [and] femininity’ (2003: 218).

Pushing the gendered boundaries of what is acceptable attire has not just been restricted neither to the nightclub nor to London. Nick described a man he saw in Brooklyn ‘wearing leggings and doc martens with socks with a tunic and then a blazer and some make up’. New York-based 27-year-old Fashion PR TJ similarly observed gay men who do not cross dress but ‘wear women’s clothing, not necessarily a skirt’ but ‘pieces that are very feminine’. In both these cases the combining of garments that have been usually linked to one gender or another have been combined to create a look that pushes at the norms and blurs the boundary lines of gender in dress, achieving what might be described as an androgynous look.

When describing a particular gay style that he observed in London where men were wearing full length skirts David M. noted how he believed that they were using their ‘position of being gay to experiment [and] subvert another norm in dressing in another way’. My respondents noted that there was a certain knowingness in these gender play dressing strategies and that this could be related to an element of camp, which gay media and cultural studies scholar, Andy Medhurst has described as ‘the way gay men have tried to rationalize, reconcile, ridicule and … wreck their own specific relationships with masculinity and femininity’ (1997: 29)

**How to look gay**

A number of my interviewees discussed ways in which they negotiated their gay identity and appearance in relation to the variety of ways of being and presenting as gay men. Joe, for example ‘intentionally dress[ed] different on different days, so tonight I am going to do an athletic look and tonight I am going to do a gothic look’. In this way Joe operates an element of agency over his identity, by reflexively using his clothing to make a statement about who wants to be perceived as in each of this situations. This negotiation relates closely to the idea proposed by Sender (2001) that there is no one gay habitus, in that it is not, of course, just habitus that impacts upon gay identity but also the multitude of subject positions that factor in the formation of any one individual. Subject positions are not as Professor of Women and Gender Studies Susan B. Kaiser has noted ‘isolated’ but rather ‘are multiple, and they intersect’ (2012: 35) and as such influence the choice of clothes dependent on time and location. For some gay men this means altering their dress style depending on which aspect of their identity they decide to forefront or on the location they find themselves in, as is the case for Mario who recalled changing his style between attending classes at Cornell University in upstate New York and going out to gay clubs:

it was more the baggy jeans and doc martens was what I went to class in… but going out… as fashion students we all wanted to look like Tom Ford. So we dressed all the time head to toe in black or white shirts opened and black pants.

TJ articulates this in relation, not to the gay bar and club scene but to his working environment: ‘for one [job] I wear slacks and button front shirt, cardigans and occasionally a blazer… for the firm that represents emerging fashion designers… I have more freedom … so I can wear skinny Jeans, skinny pants, tighter clothing’.

**Figure 3:** Alex, Philadelphia, 2013 (with permission from Alex Jeffcoat).

While gay men may affiliate themselves with specific groupings it is not only their sexual orientation but also their class, race, age and economic situation (Grossberg 1996, 2010)[[2]](#endnote-2) that impact upon their context-specific understandings of their identities. The coexistence and overlapping of and interlay between subject positions (Kaiser 2012) has been articulated as ‘intersectionality’. This concept can be applied in terms of considering how various social categories can be considered not just as a ‘hierarchical list of what counts’ but as a means of addressing ‘*both* sameness *and* difference’ (Cooper 2013: 36, original emphasis).

For Alex the negotiation of his black, racial, and gay, sexual, identity led to him observe that ‘I feel like there is not to say segregation, but groups and pockets of different kinds of gay men and gay black men and … you either decided to be black and gay and hang with this crowd or be gay and black and hang with *this* crowd’. Alex’s self reflection echoes Marcus Hunter’s discovery through interviews with 50 self-identified black gay men, that individuals downplay particular aspects of their identity over others, specifically ‘compartmentalising, de-emphasising, or de-prioritising a gay identity’ (Hunter 2010: 88). Attempts to assimilate, conform and fit into a particular gay scene or subculture, or one of the ‘types’ identified earlier by Lee, has a particular impact on how gay men dress when they begin to come to terms with their sexual orientation or first encounter the gay scene. Coming out as gay at college in Malaysia, led Wyatt’s straight female friends to push him ‘to dress more the part of a gay man… to wear things that you associated with how a masculine guy would wear… letter jackets and T-shirts that fits really well’. Moving to New York has led him to alter his look somewhat: on the one hand experimenting with leather and BDSM scene in the evenings and on the other enhancing his style in relation to the more fashion forward fellow gay students at Parsons New School with their ‘crazy colours, crazy hair…bright coloured stuff or skinny jeans’.

**Hipsters and metrosexuals**

In his critical assessment of Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity Demetrakis Z. Demetriou (2001) discusses the increasing cultural visibility of gay masculinity in western societies. This has, he argues, made it possible for certain heterosexual men to appropriate ‘bits and pieces’ of gay men’s styles and practices and construct a new hybrid configuration of gender practice, somewhat blurring gender. However, the appropriation is not as simple as straight appropriating gay or gay appropriating straight. London-based 19-year-old fashion history student Josh, who moved from the north-west of England to study, observed that the ‘skinny boy’ look, that had initially been seen in catwalk collections of Hedi Slimane around 2006 and that promoted a youthful boyish look for men in high fashion, is one that is present on the gay scene in East London and he himself wears ‘black skinny jeans... black or brown brogues and colorful socks’ with ‘a vest top and a hoody and then a sleeveless denim jacket over the top’. He notes how, despite that fact that this is popular for young gay men, there are also straight men in East London who similarly wear this close fitting style. The East End of London and particularly Shoreditch is associated with the ‘hipster’, a subcultural identity that has drawn much commentary both positive and negative as a styled identity or lifestyle. Describing an outfit he wore to go out in New York TJ echoes Josh’s style: ‘I wore these skinny black pants … with a black zip up sleeveless sweatshirt [and] a leather jacket’. This commonality in style evidences the way in which styled identities for gay men are not necessarily nationally located and that there is a more global aspect to collective styles worn by gay men. That this skinny look, sometimes associated with the hipster style, is prevalent amongst young gay men is reinforced by Alex who said he would have difficulty saying whether his choice of ‘skinny Jeans, regular T-shirt that had a cool print’ was influenced by gay style ‘or not because a lot of the crowd I hung around was hipster’. A number of my interviewees in both London and New York identified the hipster look as one that blurred boundaries of gay and straight style. Nick particularly noted how it is hard to ‘tell the difference between gay and straight [hipsters] unless the gay was more effeminate, or effeminate nature. Think the cut is a little different… but I think hipster culture has blurred the lines between gay and straight’.

On the subject of this blurring, Lee noted that

the metrosexual ideal… is certainly borrowing from gay men in that it allows straight men to be concerned about their appearance in a way that allows them to look flirtatious and glossy, while retaining their masculinity, which is something gay fashion has tried to do for ages.

Kaiser has noted how ‘the metrosexual label attempted to define a space in between gay and straight; hegemonic masculinity itself was in a state of flux’ (2012:163). I specifically asked my interviewees about their response to the idea of the metrosexual with answers ranging from ‘I don’t even know what that is’ to a discussion of how it has impacted upon straight men’s relationship to clothing and to how it has made gay men feel they are perceived. Sociologist Mark McCormack (2012) links the rise of the metrosexual and inclusive masculinities that are less discriminatory about homosexuality, to what he terms the declining significance of homohysteria; that is a decline in western cultural homophobia.

**Figure 4:** Lee, New York 2012 (photograph by Kip Rathke, with permission from Lee Houk).

**Gay/straight, straight/gay – whose style is it anyway**

While for some gay men style and fashion is about fitting in and blending, for others it is standing out and making a statement. Taylor believes that ‘a lot of people, who are my age and gay would dress a certain way in order to show it or to fit in with the culture, but I am not really concerned with that’. Taylor’s, seemingly conservative, choice of Churches brogues, corduroy trousers, buttoned collar Oxford shirt, cashmere cable knit sweater and Argyle socks, may not be one that is commonly perceived as a gay style and by his own admission fits a standard style of dress for young men from the same upper-middle-class British background as himself, the fact that he *is* gay and the way in which he knowingly adopts this style of dress means he feels it reflects his identity as a young gay man.In a similar veinLee particularly noted that even if gay and straight men wear the same items of clothing that he *is* gay *is* significant in his choice: ‘would a straight man wear a Marc Jacobs floral print shirt, white jeans and lime green SeaVees? Perhaps. But when I wear all that, it's definitely a gay look…’ So for both Lee and Taylor the sexual orientation aspect of their individual subject position is important and what makes what they chose to wear an individual gay style. However, for Joe ‘whether you are gay or straight, if you are just your own person and you dress the way you dress it doesn’t matter about your sexuality’ and 37-year-old artist Carl, brought up in a conservative American Christian family in Kansas but now living in New York feels ‘that once society becomes more comfortable with gender expressions that don’t match the norm, I believe there may be more of an impact on similarities of how gay men and straight men dress.  There may be less defining characteristics between the two in dress’. Each of these statements reiterates cultural commentator Michael Bracewell’s observation that ‘there is no longer any “us and them”, in fashion terms (1993: 41); what remains are more simple notions of style which adapt to the sexuality of the individual’.

Clothing and style can signify meanings about the multitude of aspects that make up an individual’s identity and as Kaiser notes ‘[t]he concept of habitus reminds us that it is not just what one wears that matters, but also *how* one styles, fashions, or dresses the body that tells us about everyday processes of subject formation as the interplay between subjectivity and the subject positions people inhabit’ (2012: 31). Gay men do not operate in a vacuum in terms of their dress and style; attitudes towards sex and gender and the constructions of the masculine and feminine have had an impact upon gay dress choice. Film scholar Richard Dyer has noted how the ‘quoting of mainstream masculinity’ has destabilized the supposed naturalness of masculinity (2002: 68) and so some gay men, as demonstrated here in the examples in this article, have articulated interpretations of ‘masculinity’ or what it means to be a man through their choice of clothing. For other men a conscious rejection of hegemonic masculine styles and an affinity with a more feminine or effeminate expression and style of dress has offered a means of expressing a gay, or perhaps ‘queer’, identity. While there are those who align themselves with one or other side of a traditional binary division of masculine/feminine, others have opted for a more fluid ‘both/and’ rather than ‘either/or’ (Kaiser 2012), blurring the lines between what has traditionally been seen as gender appropriate or inappropriate. Equally the dividing line that *may* have existed historically between the way gay and straight men dressed has been blurred, particularly amongst younger generations where sexual orientation is just one of many elements that make up an individual’s subject positioning. Whilst this article only allowed for a small number of examples of the multitude of styles and fashions that gay men use to express themselves through their dressed appearance, and could not attempt to cover the multitude of gay male styles and fashions over past fourteen years, this article has offered some thoughts about a selection of the ways American and British gay men have found to express their negotiation between conformity and non-conformity both to gay and straight regimens and between visual expressions of masculinity and femininity in the early twenty-first century.

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**Contributor details**

Shaun Cole is a writer, lecturer and curator, and currently Programme Director for Curation and Culture and Course Leader for MA History and Culture of Fashion at London College of Fashion. He was formerly Head of Contemporary Programmes at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where he curated several exhibitions, most notably Graphic Responses to AIDS (1996), Dressing the Male (1999) and Black British Style (2004). He is a trustee of the Costume Society UK and associate editor of the journal Fashion Style and Popular Culture. Shaun Cole has also written and lectured on the subject of menswear and gay fashion and his publications include *‘Don We Now Our Gay Apparel’: Gay Men’s Dress in the Twentieth Century* (2000), *Dialogue: Relationships in Graphic Design* (2005) and *The Story of Men’s Underwear* (2010).

Contact:

Graduate School, London College of Fashion, 20 John Princes Street, London W1G 0BJ

E-mail: s.r.cole@fashion.arts.ac.uk

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Notes

1. This quote was taken from an interview between Nick and the author on 13 October 2012. Other interviews cited in this article were with the following:

   Alex (2012), Brian (2012), Carl (2012), David (2012), David (2013), Erich (2012), Graham (2013), Joe (2012), Josh (2012), Lee (2012), Mario (2012), Nick (2012), Peter (1997), Rikki (2005), Taylor (2012), TJ (2012), Wyatt (2012). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Recent work has questioned the age specifics of subcultural affiliations examined and the increasing presence of ‘“post-youth” cultural territor[ies]’ (Hodkinson and Bennett 2012: 6). Jodie Taylor (2012) has specifically addressed the idea of queer post-youth participants, marking out the importance of ‘non-normative’ and non-heteronormative ageing and behaviour that she identifies in the Brisbane queer scene. Queer theorist Judith Halberstam raises the issue of age, specifically in relation to the ways in which youth cultures have been seen as ‘stages on the way to adulthood’ (2003: 328) and invokes a notion of ‘queer time’ to situate queer subcultural participants outside of normative heterosexual temporality structured by reproduction, making queer subcultural participation a life-long commitment rather than a life stage (Halberstam 2005: 152–87). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)