

Abstract:

McCauley Bowstead's contribution explores two divergent fashionable physiques – the so-called spornosexual and waif aesthetics – that have become prominent in contemporary fashion and lifestyle media. By investigating examples of these body styles in fashion imagery, McCauley Bowstead places shifting and contested ideals of masculinity in a broader social, cultural, economic, and class context. Though these differing corporeal ideals are associated with discrete markets, both point to the 'spectacularization' of the male physique in visual culture. In this way, the pressure to construct a desirable body is connected to notions of self-branding, self-fashioning, and the rhetoric of self-improvement common to contemporary (social) media. The article examines how dominant economic paradigms manifest themselves in image making and bodily practices, and how men navigate these forces by refashioning their physiques.

Keywords:

Spornosexual, waif, slender, muscular, self-branding, class

Biography:

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REFASHIONING THE MALE BODY: CONTEMPORARY MEDIA REPRESENTATIONS OF THE SPORNOSEXUAL AND THE WAIF

Jay McCauley Bowstead

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary Western media discourse, men – whether models, celebrities, sportsmen, actors, or influencers – are subject to the desiring and emulating gaze of their audience both on- and offline. This article investigates the pleasures and possibilities that this corporeal turn has permitted men and the extent to which it has subjected the male body to an objectifying economy of looking. The following is an attempt to make sense of the increasing centrality of men’s bodies to contemporary fashion, style, and (social) media. I shall argue that two sharply contrasting modes of fashionable physicality, namely the ‘spornosexual’ physique and the slenderness of the high-fashion model, have predominated in recent years. By investigating the links between these two aesthetically divergent body styles I shall connect them to shifting practices of masculinity, changing patterns of work, and the impact of digital media.

From the idealized proportions of classical statuary to the verisimilitude of the renaissance crucifixion, and from the sinewy musculature of fascist propaganda to the 1980s underwear advert – throughout history, shifting notions of gender, class, race, and sexuality have inscribed themselves onto the male form. In tracing the cultural and ideological shifts that are shaping contemporary masculinities, it is essential to consider how male bodies are fashioned in dialogue with dominant sociocultural, economic, and technological discourses. Today, men’s style, fitness, fashion and grooming, and the advertising and imagery surrounding them, represent particularly important sites for the dissemination of new corporeal ideals. Over the past two decades, those image industries clustered around fashion have increasingly drawn attention to the male form. And as representations of men’s bodies have proliferated, issues of identity, aesthetic labor (Warhurst & Nickson 2001), sexuality, and competing ideologies of gender have come to the fore).

For Spring/Summer 2020, the designer menswear catwalks at Loewe, Dior, Prada, and Wooyoungmi presented diverse collections encompassing disparate aesthetic cues but, the

male models were remarkably homogenous. With few exceptions they were tall, very slender – often with pronounced cheekbones and clavicles, and narrow thighs – a corporeal aesthetic that is sometimes referred to as waifish or waif-like.¹

At the same time that these adolescent waifs have come to dominate the menswear runway, a strikingly divergent form of fashionable masculine presentation has emerged in the context of social media, reality television, and in an expanding fitness culture. Characterized by a muscular, gym-honed, smooth, tanned, and often tattooed body the spornosexual look is disseminated by vloggers, Instagram-users, celebrity sportsmen and reality TV contestants. Its popularity points to the body as an increasingly crucial site for identity formation amongst aspirational young men while demonstrating the growing role of aesthetic labor in an economy of eroticized masculinities.

In this contribution I argue that these two approaches to styling the body act as sites of identity construction, agency, and pride, and, furthermore, that waif and spornosexual aesthetics enable some men to resist the values of orthodox masculinity while carving a space for themselves in the contemporary economy. At the same time, however, the pressure to commodify, brand, and aggressively reshape the self which is implicit in both body styles has the potential to profoundly alienate men from their bodies with psychologically and physically damaging consequences.

SPORNOSEXUAL MASCULINITIES

Away from the catwalk and high-end magazines, the fashions transmitted via celebrity culture, reality television, sport, and social media have played a significant role in popularizing a new body aesthetic. In a *Telegraph* article from 2014, the journalist Mark Simpson coined the portmanteau term ‘spornosexual’ to allude to the aspirational, artfully honed male bodies popular in sport and pornography and widely emulated by aspirational working-class young men in particular (though, of course, members of other socioeconomic groups also participate in spornosexual style while the designation ‘working-class’ is also not as straightforward as it might at first seem).

Drawing upon images of sportsmen, pornographic actors, and reality television

¹ In this way, the slender body is connected to (romanticised) notions of dispossession, displacement, and poverty, as in the phrase ‘waif and stray’.

contestants, spornosexual self-presentation coheres around a muscular gym honed body, bleached teeth, a tanned, waxed torso, and, frequently, an abundance of tattoos (fig. 1). Sports media has been particularly significant in disseminating shifting notions of the ideal male form since sports have long represented a privileged space of homosocial bonding, a space in which men are invited to gaze upon one another's bodies, in short a site of idealized masculinities.² For these reasons, the very noticeable changes to the ways in which the sportsman's body is trained, nourished, and styled – particularly in football – has exerted a particular cultural impact. Figures such as Cristiano Ronaldo, Neymar da Silva Santos Júnior, and Toni Kroos with their rippling musculatures, tanned, waxed, and tattooed bodies, and artfully styled hair, demonstrate how new 'technologies of the self' that were once peripheral or taboo have gained a mass audience.

Fig. 1. A muscular gymgoer sports a dragon tattoo (Alamy Stock Photo n.d.).

Philosopher Michel Foucault describes how the body is formed by social and cultural processes that are simultaneously an expression of external influences and a mechanism through which subjectivities are created (1995; Foucault et al. 1988). In this way, the body is understood as deeply cultural not only at the level of representation, but also in its gestures, styling, and formation through various disciplinary regimes including exercise, dieting, and grooming. In his later work, however, Foucault becomes increasingly interested in how individuals care for, create, and 'improve' themselves through what he terms 'technologies of the self' (Foucault et al. 1988). By creatively and self-reflexively shaping their identities, individuals are able to assert some measure of control over their lives (not to escape existing power relations but to intervene in them) (Mitcheson 2012, 59–75). Using Foucault's terms of reference, one can consider the artfully honed spornosexual body as means through which a, perhaps resistant, identity is articulated.

Contemporary fashion has also been significant in the development of a spornosexual aesthetic. The popular UK based online fashion business Boohoo has, for instance, championed the spornosexual male body in much of its advertising and social media content. Targeting a youthful demographic, Boohoo Man offers inexpensive own-brand garments marketed using glossy imagery. The Boohoo Man look comprises a mixture of

² In this regard, see also the article on idealized male bodies in boxing and wrestling magazines by David Patrick and Ana Stevenson in this volume.

sporty references, unusual fabrications, including metallic and iridescent cloth, foil-blocking, tight muscle-fit t-shirts, fitted tracksuits, and tailored separates, often in a bold plaid. The label's aesthetic references contemporary streetwear, the recent 1990s revival, some of the more exuberant designer menswear labels such as Versace, Balmain, and Riccardo Tisci era Givenchy, as well as cult sportswear brands like Stone Island, Off-White, BAPE, and Palace.

As well as the items of apparel, the models who sport them are also noteworthy. On the Boohoo Man website and Instagram feed an ethnically diverse cast of muscular, tattooed, and carefully coiffed young men pose against the background of glacial landscapes, on the bonnet of sports cars, in various gritty cityscapes, or by miscellaneous azure coastlines. In a promotional photograph from September 2019 a tanned, peroxide blond, white model with mirrored sunglasses stands in a multi-story car park: he wears a utilitarian style waistcoat in an iridescent, shot fabric of petrol green and violet teamed with matching drawstring trousers. The model's shirtlessness, along with the low camera angle, draws the eye to his naked torso, inscribed from the neck down with complex interweaving tattoos, winged skulls, and tessellating geometries outlining his washboard stomach and defined pectorals. In a post from a month earlier, a very muscular black model wearing a durag is pictured against the backdrop of an American style garage – the windows of a convertible sports car are just visible within the tightly cropped composition. The model wears a pair of jogging bottoms with a repeat print featuring a gothic M. But at the center of the image, both literally and figuratively, is his smooth torso, highly developed trapezius, and deltoid muscles; the contours of his ample chest and flexing biceps, festooned in a tattooed fantasia – eagles' eyes and feathers peeping out amongst radiating patterns, curlicued lettering, foliage, and various abstract motifs.

The physical ideal celebrated in the marketing imagery of Boohoo man and other online brands such as ASOS has emerged both in dialogue with contemporary social practice (including the mainstreaming of gym culture and increasing popularity of various forms of grooming) and in relation to mass-media representation. Indeed, the centrality of user-generated content to apps like Tumblr, YouTube, and Instagram has collapsed this distinction between representation and cultural practice, because generating images of the male body, for example gym selfies, has become an integral part of the contemporary social

world. The fashion theorist Rosie Findlay has drawn attention to the ways in which a performance of intimacy has become a hallmark of social media and branded content online, as audiences and consumers are invited to form relationships of trust with labels and tastemakers. This dialectical relationship between proximity and aspiration, between the attainable and the out-of-reach is also part of the dynamic of self-branding that underpins the influencer economy, in which the body and the self are seen as infinitely perfectible and marketable commodities (Findlay 2019, 1–17).

Another key site of spornosexual imagery, as I have suggested, is the ‘structured reality’ television genre. Amongst these programs, ITV’s *Love Island* – with its sunny location and scantily clad contestants – is particularly notable in the way that it foregrounds the muscular male body. The program invites male and female contestants to form couples while subjecting them to a series of tests and tasks while the audience votes for its favorite pair. In this way, the show exposes its participants to an extraordinary level of scrutiny: not only are their artfully honed bodies almost permanently on display, but their ability to perform intimacy and emotion are also key elements of success or failure. In the first episode of the 2018 series, the female contestants were asked to select from a number of potential male matches based on their appearances – the men appearing dressed only in their swimming trunks. In this episode, many of the issues of spectatorship, sexuality, corporeality, and aesthetic labor, which seem to me to be central to understanding the spornosexual phenomenon, came to the fore as young people, who have worked hard to achieve a particular corporeal aesthetic, engage in a titillating performance as a form of self-branding.

In this sense, perhaps part of the fascination commanded by *Love Island* lies in the way that it schematizes a set of broader cultural and economic shifts. In the contemporary world of work, in intimate relationships, and in media representation, the male body is commodified as never before – through visually oriented, smart-phone enabled dating applications like Tinder and Grinder; in the influencer economy of Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok; and in sport, music, and fashion media. At the same time, the rise of the service and knowledge sectors, of freelance, portfolio careers, and the digital economy has further increased the premium on beauty for both men and women: indeed, the fast-growing fitness sector is entirely predicated on aesthetic and corporeal labor. Whether in retail, gym, or

hospitality work or in the more prestigious fields of consultancy, PR, and marketing the management of appearance has become increasingly crucial. Not only are bodies publicly exhibited, surveyed, and judged in the context of *Love Island*, but the ability to be likable, relatable, and emotionally accessible is also highly prized. Perhaps then, the collective fascination that *Love Island* so palpably commands is due to the heightened but nevertheless familiar affective landscape it evokes. The need to be desired and liked and the necessity of performing one's identity in a way that seems both emotionally plausible and aspirational is an integral aspect of contemporary social media and the world of work. The aesthetic labor underpinning the participants' spectacular bodies – though not actually pictured – is all too obvious in their carefully crafted appearances, while the contestants' affective labor is the principal content of the show. Raymond Williams describes as 'structures of feeling' the ways in which inchoate social processes express themselves in lived experience, in the texture of everyday language, and crucially in art and culture (2015, 20–28): *Love Island* in its expression of these 'structures of feeling' captures and reflects back to us a set of tensions, social and economic shifts, and cultural preoccupations.

The spornosexual physique, I argue, arises out of a particular set of processes – the rise of 'flexible' precarious work; the integration of digital media and mobile technology into both labor and leisure, as well as the use of self-branding, the body, and the performance of sexuality to manage these impersonal forces. As labor in late capitalism has become less secure for many, freelancers and workers in the gig economy are required to constantly 'hustle' for work. Creating a 'brand' for oneself – a strong, recognizable, and aspirational image – is therefore crucial. Social media feed into this phenomenon because they are engines for generating informal networks of influence and patronage – what Pierre Bourdieu (1986) calls 'social capital' – that rely to an increasing extent on projecting an image of success. Indeed, Bourdieu's theories posit that 'capital' is simultaneously a cultural, economic, and *social* phenomenon in which cultural competencies (cultural capital) as well as social networks operate as mechanisms through which economic hierarchies are both maintained and potentially challenged. Those who adopt elements of the spornosexual look may not be doing so directly or consciously for reasons of economic self-interest (and in some traditionally bourgeois and petit-bourgeois fields of work such as aesthetics would place individuals at a distinct disadvantage). But these looks and the

techniques underpinning them with their focus on a certain kind of mastery of the body relate to a rhetoric of self-improvement, success, and control of one's destiny that are a direct response to the insecure conditions of our current economic system.

To this extent, the fitness coach, influencer, and author of best-selling diet books Joe Wicks represents an instructive example of the ways in which the 'aesthetic capital' of a handsome face and muscular body, combined with the 'emotional labor' involved in motivational social media posts, can facilitate the promise of social mobility. As he described in a BBC interview (Dillon 2019), despite his economically deprived background, his love of exercise led Wicks to study Sports Science at university – part of the expansion of higher education and vocational subjects instituted during the Blair years – and to join Instagram in 2014 where his distinctive mixture of recipes, selfies, motivational patter, and work-out videos garner him a large following.

With his lean, muscular physique, chestnut curls, high-energy estuary-accented delivery, and supportive advice Wicks makes for a compelling rags-to-riches story. And while not everyone can replicate his immense success, for many men, a carefully honed body can act not only as a symbolic site of agency and control, but also as a marketable commodity. Traditionally bourgeois professions employ a variety of formal and informal mechanisms of exclusion, such as attending the 'right' kind of university, possessing the 'correct' vocabulary, and accent – in other words – the assimilation of an upper-middle class habitus. Despite their precarity, the porous nature of social media and the service economy represent spaces of opportunity not yet colonized by the well-heeled: these emerging sectors are precisely those fields in which corporeal and aesthetic capital are most prized.

The dynamic and shifting nature of working-class masculinities in recent years has been addressed by a number of scholars who have argued that more inclusive and hybrid forms of gender expression are emerging.³ Steven Roberts in his ethnographic study of working-class men in retail found that the experiences and attitudes of the participants he observed diverged starkly from a set of (often stereotypical) assumptions about proletarian masculinity (2012, 671–686). Not only was retail work a source of identity and meaning in the lives of the men he interviewed, but the emotional labor of customer service, and for

³ See, for instance, Roberts (2012), Ward (2017), or Stahl (2020).

some aesthetic expertise, were key to respondents' job satisfaction. It is perhaps unsurprising that these shifts in attitudes and in the structure of the economy should manifest themselves at the level of the body.

As I have argued, spornosexual modes of embodiment are particularly, though not exclusively, associated with aspirational working-class young men: a manifestation of an increasingly aesthetically oriented service economy. In light of these contemporary shifts, however, the designation 'working class' needs to be further interrogated. Social class is a complex and fluid phenomenon and, as a result, deductive schemata for making sense of class are always methodologically fraught affairs. Nevertheless, work by Mike Savage et al. (2013) has emphasized how economic, job market, and cultural developments in recent decades have affected the class structures of the UK in particular. The second decade of the twenty-first century has seen the continued contraction of manufacturing, the further shrinking of the welfare state, and the rise of entrepreneurial, service oriented, and precarious employment in many Western economies. These developments have resulted both in the shrinking of the traditional working class as a segment of the population and in the emergence of new class groupings. Of course, these changes to the structures of social class have a much longer history. Nevertheless, the acceleration of recent shifts in class identity and the specific ways in which they manifest themselves socially and culturally bear further scrutiny. In their 2013 article "A New Model of Social Class?" Savage et al. identify three new demographics sitting outside conventional classificatory schemata:

a) The group of new affluent workers – "whose members have not benefitted from conventional routes through education to middle-class positions, but have nonetheless achieved relatively secure economic positions and are also relatively socially and culturally engaged" (237–239);

b) The emergent service workers – who possess "a modest household income of £21k [but have] a high degree of cultural engagement in youthful musical, sporting and internet activities". This is a youthful class segment comprising a high proportion of ethnic minorities, they are marginal in terms of economic capital, but with high levels of cultural capital. (240);

c) The precariat – who are "economically the poorest class, with a household income of only £8k [...]. The scores for both high-brow and emerging cultural capital are the lowest and second lowest, respectively [...]. This is clearly the most deprived of the classes that we have identified, on all measures" (243).

Spornosexuality, in this way, can be understood as an expression of corporeal and aesthetic

capital – a strategy for securing a position within the ranks of the ‘emergent service workers’ or ‘new affluent workers’ and avoiding the precariat.⁴

Despite these shifts, the classed nature of spornosexuality has not until recently received significant academic attention (Hakim 2021, 57-79). In 2014 the British journalist Clive Martin wrote a piece for the online magazine *Vice* – a sort of irreverent ethnography resulting out of his visits to nightclubs up and down the UK – explaining, in his words “How Sad Young Douchebags Took Over Modern Britain”. The article focuses, in particular, on the bodies and appearances of the ‘emergent service worker’ young men Martin encountered. And while his tone was intended to be humorous, the ‘inauthenticity’ of spornosexual modes of self-presentation (waxed chests, Maori tattoos, and inflated biceps) were clearly a source of anxiety for the journalist. Although Martin attempts to address issues of class, he does so in a manner that reproduces a set of problematic stereotypes: accusations of ‘excess’ and ‘tastelessness’ represent familiar critiques of demotic cultural expression:

You can’t help but get the impression that there’s very little weight, bravery or even violence lying below those nutritionally enlarged ‘ceps. Really tough guys have sinew on their bodies, scabs on their face and hate in their hearts; the modern British douchebag just has balloon animal muscles and a waxed chest. They’re pampered, meek behemoths who look good on the beach but can’t fight for shit. (2014, n. pag.)

At the same time, Martin reifies an imagined ‘authentic’ working-class masculinity of yore – a yore located in the industrial communities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and in the military. This fetishization of a misremembered past is one that celebrates the instrumentalization and brutalization of the soldier body, and thankless, repetitive, backbreaking labor – it is one that sees violence perpetrated by and against men as the ultimate metric of masculinity.

In some senses, the spornosexual male body relates to the semantics of strength and dominance that were described by Raewyn Connell and others during the 1980s as key components of the idealized and culturally sanctioned ‘hegemonic’ form of masculinity (1987). But in other ways, as Clive Martin’s trenchant critique suggests, spornosexuals

⁴ In this sense the terms ‘working class’ and ‘middle class’ are increasingly problematic simplifications: the élite and super-élite have pulled away from other segments of the population becoming ever more wealthy, while, on the other hand, younger members of the professional classes are increasingly insecure (unable to benefit from the expansion of professional jobs enjoyed by the baby-boomer generation).

diverge from the dominant norms of twentieth century Western masculinity. The male bodies disseminated via Boohoo's marketing machine, reality television, and the gym selfies of Instagram are notable for their muscularity, but rather than seeking to 'naturalize' this muscularity, to wrap it in a sporting or laboring alibi, representations of the male body today prioritize the aesthetics of muscularity while detaching them (almost totally) from their prior semiotic connection to manual work⁵.

Rather than aiming for a look that is 'natural', artless, or unassuming, spornosexual style revels in its explicit constructedness: critiques of this corporeal aesthetic in journalism and popular discourse often center upon its lack of 'authenticity'. There is a sense that by drawing attention to the constructed nature of orthodox⁶ masculinity, spornosexuals threaten its apparent naturalness and disrupt the economy of gendered looking (in which the male body is the unmarked category rather than the object of the desiring gaze).⁷ While the body remains a site of labor, for the spornosexual this is primarily aesthetic labor. Not only is the physique re-formed through the lifting of weights and the repetition of strenuous exercises, but also through teeth whitening, veneers, spray tans, tattooing, and waxing (fig. 1). This dismissal of a sporting or proletarian alibi for muscularity represents a significant shift away from the symbols of twentieth century orthodox masculinity – and an embrace of a more explicitly 'performative' model of gender (Butler 1990).⁸ And while these forms of self-fashioning point to economic and social shifts, they also enable a reading of the spornosexual body, via Eve Sedgwick, as a potential intervention into social norms, a

⁵ This process of delinking may have begun in the 1980s with the increasing eroticisation of the athletic male physique in popular culture (Triggs 1992), nevertheless, the representations produced by the likes of Herb Ritts and Bruce Webber drew upon the iconography of sportsmen, laborers, and (neo-)classical statuary. This use of an established canon of masculine iconography perhaps neutralized some of the subversiveness implicit to the commodification of the male form.

⁶ Eric Anderson uses the term “orthodox” rather than hegemonic masculinity: in doing so, he suggests that formerly dominant expressions of masculinity are no longer unambiguously hegemonic and that, amongst certain demographics, other more inclusive and diverse forms of gender expression have become acceptable for men (2009: 30–31).

⁷ Of course, there is a long history of eroticized representations of masculinity from antiquity to the present day, and images of the male body have been much discussed in relation to 1980s advertising (Triggs 1992; Mort 1996, 109–111; Nixon 1996, 117–120). However, there is something qualitatively different from these 1980s representations of the male body in the mass nature of contemporary spornosexual style. Here, I would argue, the gaze has been internalized on a much grander scale.

⁸ For the seminal queer theorist Judith Butler categories of sex and gender – male and female, men and women – are created through discourses, representations, and behavior. In this way, gender is something that you *do* rather than something you *are* intrinsically: Butler describes gender as 'performative' to allude to the ways in which it is produced through habitual, naturalized actions, modes of dress, ways of moving the body, speaking, and so on (1990).

promotion of semantic innovation, and a step, in Sedgwick's understanding, towards an ameliorative perspective (147). In this sense, these mediatized, perfected male bodies point to significant changes in gender practice in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

THE HIGH-FASHION WAIF

As I have suggested, high fashion media representations of the male body have popularized a corporeal ideal very different from the spornosexual physique. But in this context too, shifting discourses around masculinity as well as aesthetic and embodied labor come to the fore. For example, for the Spring/Summer 2020 Céline menswear collection, designer Hedi Slimane sent extremely thin models down the runway. With their pale white skin and protruding Adam's apples the boys on the Céline catwalk represented the antithesis of the gym-honed pneumatic look favored by Boohoo Men.

While Slimane is noteworthy for the extreme (and sometimes problematic) thinness of the young men who walk for him, designer Ludovic de Saint Sernin has instead garnered attention because of the way that his designs expose the slim physique of his models (fig. 2a and 2b). The casting for the designer's Spring/Summer 2020 catwalk favored youths with slim waists, attenuated limbs, slightly hollow thighs, and smooth, hairless, pale or dark brown skin. In an opening look, a model progressed down the runway clad in a coat and trousers of sheer white voile – his transparent garments barely veiling his slender body. Subsequent outfits featured see-through panels and cut-outs; and then a skin-tight off-the-shoulder top appeared drawing attention to the pronounced collar-bones, shoulder blades, and slender arms of the young man who wore it. As the collection progressed, abbreviated satin shorts were paired with open shirts, and leather coats worn over underpants (Prigent 2019). Saint Sernin's queered, eroticized, and fetishistic vision for contemporary menswear certainly possessed an audacious elegance, but the runway presentation might have been more successful if his models had been more comfortable and confident in their skimpy garments (some were visibly attempting to cover their slim bodies).

Fig. 2.1 A model walks for Ludovic de Saint Sernin Fall 2020 Runway (Alamy Stock Photo 2020).

Fig. 2.2 A model walks for Ludovic de Saint Sernin Fall 2020 Runway (Alamy Stock Photo 2020).

Saint Sernin's models, despite looking very different to the participants in *Love Island*, nevertheless perform a similarly sexualized form of corporeal labor – one that caters to the spectacular nature of the contemporary digital context. The media practices which have developed over the past two decades – online video content, image-based search functions, as well as image sharing applications like Instagram, Pinterest, and Tumblr – have created the conditions for a proliferation of representations of the male body. As I have suggested, the spornosexual ideal is disseminated both through 'traditional' mass-media channels like television and men's magazines and through content sharing applications. Despite catering to a very different demographic, the high-fashion waif aesthetic has similarly reproduced itself through a mixture of digital and analogue channels. Indeed, the contemporary runway show exists much more as a mediatized digital artefact than as a unique temporally bound event. Catwalk images and 'behind the scenes' photographs are disseminated via Instagram, full shows are uploaded as videos onto YouTube and are poured over by commentators in video reviews. In this way, today's catwalk shows are conceived of first and foremost as media spectacles – as demonstrated by the increasing attention paid to *mise-en-scène*, lighting, and stage dressing. As sociologist and fashion theorist Agnès Rocamora has claimed, the digital context has contributed to the hybridization and 'remediation' of media and commercial forms with websites borrowing the visual language of magazines, while catwalk shows use filmic and theatrical conventions (2019, 99–122). In terms of shifting attitudes to the fashionable male body, the significance of these new forms of digital media lies in the wide dissemination of a corporeal ideal that might otherwise have been confined to consumers of and specialists in men's designer *prêt-à-porter*.⁹

The centrality of a slim body to contemporary high fashion is reflected not only on the runway and music video, but also, of course, in fashion photography.¹⁰ For example, in a

⁹ Another significant vehicle for the dissemination of both the svelte male ideal and designer fashions are Korean K-Pop bands such as EXO and BTS as well as Korean solo-artists like G-Dragon. These musicians are notable not only for the music they produce, but also for their distinctive, fashionable appearances characterized by sumptuous garments, slender frames, clear 'glass skin' complexions, and bleached or brightly colored hairdos.

¹⁰ For example in such magazines as *Hero*, *Vogues Hommes*, *Arena Homme+*, *Varón*, and *Another Man*.

spring 2020 special issue of *Hero* magazine, a curiously collaged photo-shoot entitled “Lost Romance” by Toyin Ibidapo and Davey Sutton appears. The cool-toned, smoky, faded photographs feature two young models, Peter Dupont and Lukas Gomann, often in states of undress. These montaged images – taped down, splattered with paint, and layered one atop the other – form a kind of wistful palimpsest. In one set of photographs Dupont is pictured seated on a bed of crumpled foliage in the hall of an institutional building. Dressed only in his underpants and socks he tucks his knees to his chest, gazing pensively at the viewer, or smiling while holding a camera – his slender, lightly-muscled body, tousled hair, and impish features are captured over a series of images. In another sequence of photographs Lukas Gomann’s slender torso, slim waist, faintly outlined abdominal muscles, and long limbs are pictured as he wears a Dior messenger bag strapped diagonally across his bare chest. Today, fashion photographs like these not only exist between the glossy pages of the magazine but are also circulated online, especially via the models’ own Instagram accounts.

I have argued that the somewhat forlorn, skinny male models of contemporary fashion photography (often placed in scenarios suggesting desolation, such as abandoned buildings, deserted backwoods, and grimy bedsits, and photographed in prone or unguarded poses) symbolize precisely those aspects of human experience, particularly vulnerability and passivity, that are most taboo within orthodox masculinity (McCauley Bowstead 2018, 102). In this way, these melancholic, slender figures reflect Julia Kristeva’s notion of abjection (1982, 61), where that which is abased, cast off, or rejected – particularly qualities coded feminine or maternal – also hold the greatest transgressive potential. While a lithe physique is clearly an important aspect of the representations I have analyzed, the emotional content of the scenarios discussed is also intriguing: a sense of inchoate yearning and melancholia common to the genre. By emphasizing the emotional and physical vulnerability of their male subjects these representations contest the dominant symbolic order by creating liminal spaces in which the normative codes of masculinity and femininity are blurred; beneath their taut, artfully composed surfaces the power of these images lies in the threat of chaos and abjection that they conjure up. In this sense both the physical fragility evoked within this new fashionable ideal and its ambiguous affective

register relate to the contestation of the stoicism, the emotional and physical invulnerability that characterized the ideal of hegemonic masculinity.

The prominence of these waifish male bodies in contemporary visual culture and fashion seems to point to an appetite for a greater plurality of masculine archetypes, and, in particular, for male vulnerability to be acknowledged. In this way, from a reparative perspective, such representations can be understood to make space for a greater variety of masculine subjectivities. At the same time, however, the objectifying and fetishistic gaze that these representations potentially invite must also be acknowledged. One has to ask how ethical it is to present adolescent-looking models in suggestive garments and poses; while some models – for example those walking Slimane’s catwalks in recent years – appear thin in a manner very few of us are able to sustain healthily.¹¹

The popularity of the slender male model emerges out of a longer history and set of discourses. In the late 1990s and early 2000s designers such as Raf Simons and Hedi Slimane employed svelte and youthful models to conjure up an ambiguous, liminal aesthetic that seemed to speak of a renegotiation of gender identities in the twenty-first century. As I have argued elsewhere (McCauley Bowstead 2012, 2015, 2018), by rejecting the built, muscular physique that had dominated the 1980s and 1990s, designers like Simons and Slimane (and photographers such as David Simms, Collier Shore, and Willy Vanderperre) were attempting to advance a vision of masculinity outside of hegemonic norms – one that made space for vulnerability and that appeared less ‘artificial’ and constructed. The unusual casting of Slimane’s and Simons’s shows was understood both by commentators and by the designers themselves as an intervention in the language of masculinity (Spindler 1997, 14; Porter 2001, 62). As Slimane himself stated “[t]here is a psychology to the masculine: we’re told don’t touch it; it’s ritual, sacred, taboo. It’s difficult but I’m making headway, I’m trying to find a new approach” (qtd. in Cabasset 2001, 70).

At the moment in which this intervention was first made, in the late 1990s and early

¹¹ Moreover, research into the working conditions of male models (Fowler et al. 2016) has underlined the real as well as the symbolic vulnerability of models who are subject to arbitrary demands to remold their bodies, lose weight, or gain muscle, who lack agency within the creative process, and whose employment is extremely insecure.

2000s, it did indeed herald a pluralization of masculine archetypes that spoke to broader attitudinal shifts surrounding gender and sexuality. The body conscious, close fitting, and gently draping garments proposed by designers like Slimane at the turn of the millennium alluded to an alternative conception of gender: supple soft leathers, jerseys, satins, and the lithe physiques of the models signified an expanded notion of masculinity sitting outside of hegemonic norms characterized by strength, invulnerability, and muscularity. This renunciation of hegemonic masculinity in the world of men's fashion connected to a broader cultural shift in the early years of the new millennium. Sociologist Eric Anderson (2009) – conducting ethnographic fieldwork amongst British and American men between 1999 and 2004 – found striking, unexpected changes taking place, as young men increasingly embraced identities that were more affectionate, more diverse, less delimited by sexism and homophobia, and in which behaviors historically categorized as feminine were given license.

Over the past two decades this slender, boyish physique has become dominant on the men's designer ready-to-wear catwalk and in much fashion photography, and I have been critical of the sometimes objectifying gaze that men's fashion media trains upon its young models (McCauley Bowstead 2018, 107–110). In some of the representations I have reviewed, the active/passive binary described by Laura Mulvey in her famous essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) is reproduced, but with a male (rather than female) figure as the object of the voyeuristic, scopophilic gaze. In this way the unequal distribution of power between the bearer and recipient of the gaze remains – as does the fungibility, inertness, and denial of subjectivity implicit in these depictions (Nussbaum 1995, 257) – though the precise nature of the gender dynamics has shifted. Of course, men's fashion has as much right to explore notions of sexuality and the body as any other creative form (indeed, corporeal and sensual concerns are central to fashion practice) but it is incumbent upon designers, casting agents, stylists, and photographers to think more critically about the implications of the representations they produce.

In their explorations of fabrication, cut, silhouette, and gesture menswear practitioners propose new ways of inhabiting a male body and alternative notions of masculinity, sexuality, and desirability less reliant on dominance, strength, and invulnerability. And while, for much of the past decade, designer men's fashion has tended to celebrate one

fairly tightly defined body type, new developments in fashion media are beginning to challenge this single prevailing corporeal ideal.

As I have shown, the popularity of the slender male model in high fashion relates to an existing set of symbols associated with edgy youth culture and an unorthodox model of masculinity: over the past two decades this physique has become central to the aesthetics of luxury men's fashion. In this way, the svelte ideal not only connects to shifting and contested attitudes to gender, but also to cultural and socioeconomic status. Contemporary malnutrition and poverty, especially in industrialized economies, often manifests itself in both a deficit of nutrients and in a surfeit of calories – calorie dense, industrially produced foodstuffs being the cheapest, most heavily marketed, and most immediately available to those who are poor in time and money. These tendencies have coincided with increasing levels of income inequality (as well as spatial and transport inequalities), all of which have contributed to escalating rates of 'obesity'¹². In contrast, the slender figure has become aspirational as slimness, vegetable-based diets, and an engagement in – often expensive – 'wellness' practices have become associated with high socioeconomic status. In this way, the thin body has become part of a nexus of conspicuous consumption, 'leisure class'¹³ signifiers, and a site of middle-class aspiration (Veblen 1994, 108–111). Like the spornosexual physique, proliferating representations of the waif body in fashion and popular culture relate to the increasing significance of aesthetic labor to men's lives, as menswear and grooming markets have grown rapidly over the course of the last two decades.¹⁴ This expansion in images of the male form in popular culture has provided spaces in which competing notions of masculinity could be played out: sites of meaning and aspiration that have enabled young men in particular to construct forms of identity at odds with orthodox systems of gender. While this expansion in men's fashion imagery has opened up discourses of masculinity, its imbrication in the logic of late capitalism (with its rhetoric of self-branding, self-improvement, flexibility, and agility) has simultaneously

¹² Campaigners for 'fat equality' might question the use of the word 'obesity' with its tendency to pathologize fat bodies and shame 'fat' people (though the term remains widespread in medical and popular discourse).

¹³ In the *Theory of the Leisure Class*, Thorstein Veblen describes how wealth is expressed through engagement in conspicuously non-productive 'leisure activities. Rituals of sport and leisure are important to the moneyed classes, argues Veblen, because they act to exclude those without the time and capital to participate, and those who are ignorant of the 'correct' forms of dress and etiquette (knowledge which again takes time to accrue).

¹⁴ See for instance Russell (2017), Apparel Online (2017), and Technavio (2020).

reinforced the conditions of exploitation and precarity.

NEW TENDENCIES IN FASHIONING THE MALE BODY

This article has focused on the way that two aesthetically differentiated body styles have become fashionable in recent decades. As I have suggested, the proliferation of images of the male body in popular culture, and (social) media forms part of a broader set of processes: changes to the economy and work, along with new media technologies and shifting attitudes to gender, have contributed to the popularity of both spornosexual and high-fashion waif representations. Angela McRobbie has argued that in the arts sector notions of creativity, identity, and agency have tended to erode the boundaries between work and leisure: creative industries, she suggests, have anticipated many of the broader changes which we now see in the economy as a whole (2014, 19). In this way, fashion and social media exemplify a set of socioeconomic processes characteristic of twenty-first century capitalism in which ideas of self-branding and self-fulfillment are frequently allied to precarious working conditions, low pay, and informal networks of influence (McRobbie 2014, Mensitieri 2018). The necessity of communicating a strong visual brand and of demonstrating cultural capital – which have long been central to creative and artistic *milieux* – are now seen much more broadly across a variety of sectors. These wider economic tendencies have brought about an increasing emphasis on the visual. And, as I have argued, both the svelte silhouette of the high fashion model and the belabored appearance of the spornosexual represent crucial sites of corporeal capital. The work involved in maintaining these physiques – dieting, exercise, skin regimes, hair-removal, and other techniques of the body – produces symbolic value. But more than this, for models, fitness coaches, beauty and lifestyle vloggers, celebrities, and influencers the body is a major site of economic capital – it is their livelihood. This ‘body work’ can be conceptualized as manual labor for the post-industrial age: labor that, despite its drawbacks, is sometimes more attractive than its alternatives (like the unglamorous exploitation of the Amazon warehouse). At the same time, changing attitudes to gender – and the tolerance of a greater plurality of masculinities – have rendered corporeal practices that would once have been taboo, peripheral, or subcultural much more mainstream, while

new ideas about the ideal male body have proliferated in the highly visual, hyper-networked new media context.

The fashionable body styles discussed in this chapter are by no means entirely unproblematic: they encourage some adherents to adopt unhealthy and psychologically damaging regimens (including stimulant use, obsessive exercise, restrictive or unbalanced diets, and the abuse of anabolic steroids). More generally, seeing oneself as a 'brand' or a 'product' to be sold represents an instrumentalized form of self-esteem in which one's value as a person is at the mercy of the market. It would be too simple, however, to perceive participation in mediatized body styles either as a form of false consciousness or as an uncritical internalization of 'neoliberal' values. The cultural discourses producing both spornosexual and waif-like representations are much more diverse, complex, and polysemic than this reading would allow. As Judith Butler has claimed, "to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination" (1990, 40). This is to say that, while contemporary regimes of representation, attention, and symbolic capital may reproduce unrealistic self-commodifying ideals, individuals and groups are nevertheless able to use the tools and vocabularies of fashion and the media to find spaces of agency and even resistance to orthodox systems of gender. Pointing out the pleasures and strategies of resistance that individuals and groups find in culture implies subscribing to what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has termed a 'reparative reading' of the world. And while looking at the fashionable male body through a reparative lens in these terms runs the risk of seeming naïve, it also makes space for hope. Moreover, the permission to attend to, to care for, and to value one's own body which can be found within these male corporeal styles (albeit in rather circumscribed ways) should not be underestimated.

Beyond that, the spornosexual look discussed in the earlier part of this article not only contests aspects of normative masculinity but also acts to resist negative stereotypes projected onto the bodies of working-class young men in a defiantly showy display of corporeal pride and self-confidence. Spornosexual and waif-like body styles have emerged out of the processes of late capitalism and contemporary discourses of masculinity, but they also contain within them the potential for symbolic resistance to dominant norms and ideologies.

In recent years, there have been signs that the two stylistically bifurcated corporeal fashions I have explored may be beginning to lose their dominance as a greater diversity of male bodies appear in social media and in the fashion and lifestyle press. Consumers, designers, stylists, photographers, and especially influencers have increasingly questioned the exclusion of older people, fat people, disabled people, trans people, and those identifying outside of the gender binary from fashionable representation: in this way discourses surrounding inclusivity have come to the fore (Ripley 2019; Sadkowska 2020, 67–88).

The space in which alternative representations of the male body have exerted the greatest impact recently has undoubtedly been in the digital context in which self-authored user-generated content can reach the widest audience. Through the figure of the influencer – the cultural intermediary par excellence of this present historical moment – issues of authenticity and thus of relatability have become increasingly crucial. The bearded ‘plus-size’ influencer Marcus Neil aka #Marquimode – whose colorful, body-conscious, exuberant outfits have garnered attention on Instagram – is indicative of the contemporary shift towards body diversity in fashion and social media. His jaunty, smiling self-portraits show a variety of fashionable looks (sheer fabrics, dungarees, and pastel-hues) while also celebrating a chubby, ample physique hitherto excluded from fashionable representation. Similarly, the one-armed actor, dancer, and model Luc Bruyère with his edgy, erotic Instagram selfies demonstrates a hunger for more diverse and relatable images of male fashionability (McCauley Bowstead & Barry 2019). The fact that both of these influencers have been featured in magazine editorials and catwalk shows underlines the ways in which the fashion industry and fashion media proper are beginning to change. Ostensibly, these new, more inclusive fashionable representations may appear the antithesis of the spornosexual and waif-like body styles I have so far reviewed, but, on the contrary, I would argue that they have emerged out of a similar set of sociocultural, economic, and technological processes. While the slender figure of the high-fashion model may resist some of the norms of normative, orthodox masculinity, and while the spornosexual body may challenge bourgeois taste, achieving a more inclusive model of masculinity (Anderson 2009) requires rethinking and rejecting narrow and prescriptive corporeal ideals by embracing variety and diversity.

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