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Interview

Jay McCauley Bowstead | Charlie Athill

Vivek Vadoliya interviewed by Jay McCauley Bowstead and Charlie Athill

Jay McCauley Bowstead

Jay McCauley Bowstead is a lecturer in cultural and historical studies at London College of Fashion. He is co-convenor of LCF Masculinities Research Hub where he and Charlie Athill organised the conference 'Globalising Men's Style' in 2020. Jay's scholarly work focuses on gender, design, and materiality, with recent publications including the monograph *Menswear Revolution* in 2018, a co-authored article on designer Charles Jeffrey with Fenella Hitchcock in 2020, and a chapter on cultural hybridity in the anthology *Dandy Style* edited by Shaun Cole and Giles Lambert in 2021. Other research interests include the relationship between ethics, fashion production and public policy discourses.

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Charlie Athill

Vivek Vadoliya is a British Indian photographer and director. His 2019 film *Kasaragod Boys* investigates an online subculture of boys based in Kasaragod in Kerala (South India) who call themselves 'Freakers'. The film seeks to break through the online personae of the Freakers to examine who they are offline. In this way, Vadoliya explores the 'hyper digital' nature of contemporary India and the ways in which identity and masculinity is expressed online.

Figure 1: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

JMB/CA: Your film Kasaragod Boys documents the fascinating so-called 'Freaker' subculture of young men and teenage boys based in Kasaragod in Kerala (South India) which

is characterized by distinctive fashions, hairstyles and ways of engaging with social media. In the film you explore how the Freakers mix global influences (from K-pop, Iranian culture, South African models, western emo subcultures and Dubai style) along with local Indian garments and aesthetics. What does this hybrid style tell us about Indian culture today?

VV: For me, having visited India over the last ten years, it tells us that it has become a hyper-digital culture, where WhatsApp and other apps have taken over in a massive way as a means to share memes and ideas. Instagram is huge, it's completely skyrocketed: a generation of kids have skipped having broadband at home, those interactions with computers and the internet at home which were common in the west, so their first experience of digital worlds are through smartphones. There's so much of the world you can explore through social media on your phone, which is incredibly scary but incredibly powerful as well.

With the Freakers specifically, they were able to see cultures originating from all around the world: by exploring, for instance, the K-pop style, which is reflected in their haircuts; the Dubai aesthetic of being built and muscly, wearing certain shirts and posing next to cars; South African models; Iranian models as well, each of which have a certain look. The Freakers have taken these styles and made them their own.

And, in terms of social media, it's not just the Freakers who are doing this – it's all over the world. You have access to cultures from all over the world, styles from around the world. So, I think the Freaker phenomenon captures a specific time in India and is indicative of this current generation of young people who got their first smartphones when they were teenagers, so they were really able to consume these ideas from around the world. I think, that's what it says to me about Indian culture, just how hyper digital it has become.

Figure 2: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

JMB/CA: *Kasaragod is – as far as we understand – a medium-sized town, not a large metropolis: is it significant that this cosmopolitan subculture has emerged there rather than*

in one of India's major urban centres? One of the things that struck us about your video, was that, perhaps very naïvely, we had associated that kind of intensely cosmopolitan bricolage of style with the big city: so, if it were somewhere like Kolkata, I would have thought 'oh yeah, of course' – but it's a really quite small place, isn't it, Kasaragod?

VV: Exactly, it's a medium-sized town, not even a city. I think that's one of the beautiful things about the Freakers – they're able to play, they're able to connect to these cultures that are considered to be from major metropolises around the world, or from around India, and they're able to make their own version of the cultures they encounter. It feels very grassroots, in a sense, that people can make things happen for themselves in a medium-size town in Kerala. I think that's maybe also to do with Indian culture, where you just make things happen yourself. I think that's what these kids do, they help each other out – and they really encourage each other to carry out their ideas, and to experiment with their dress sense, which I think is really beautiful.

But these kids, the Freakers, aspire to go to other places. So, they aspire to go to Dubai, they aspire to go to Delhi, they see what kids and other people – Bollywood heroes and heroines – are wearing in those places, and they aspire to visit these glamorous places and perhaps even to live there. I think this is also what the Freakers are doing – it's about trying to have a piece of that, but to have it in their own local space as well.

JMB/CA: *Is it to do with economic development as well? Is there a sense that it's connected to people having more money in their pockets?*

VV: I wouldn't say the Freakers are very affluent people. They're sort of newly middle class, I'd say, working/middle class. Specifically in Kasaragod there is a bit of illicit money. An undercurrent where kids smuggle gold, and there's a gold industry that happens around Kerala.

So, I wouldn't call the Freakers affluent, but if they do have any money, they want to show off about it. You see that a lot in hip hop culture as well, as soon as someone gets paid, a record deal, or whatever, they want to show off: that's about having street cred. Which is what happens in Kasaragod as well, as soon as someone earns money that's separate to their family money, they want to show off about it. And to show people 'look at all these new clothes I've got, look at this bike I've got', they want to peacock around their area with what they've got.

Figure 3: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

JMB/CA: The other thing that strikes us about the apps you're referring to is that they're not language based, they're not written language based so you don't have to have a language in common to engage with images from around the world.

VV: Exactly, I think there is a social currency which, is measured specifically in likes and numbers of followers. A lot of these kids buy followers, so they look as if they have 30, 40 thousand followers – which are actually mostly fake bots. Which I think is hilarious. But they want to be the next Zayn Malik, or one of these celebrities from around the world that they're so inspired by: they see how successful he is, and what he posts, and all the likes and followers he has accrued, and they want a piece of that, they want to show off in the same way.

So, it's not necessarily a written language of words, but I think in terms of pictures and numbers of followers, that is definitely a mutually understood language, and one that that they want to successfully ... well, get a piece of.

JMB/CA: As you show in the film, Kasaragod is a predominantly Muslim town, and the individuals you interview discuss how they balance their faith and culture with their engagement with Freaker style: what tensions, if any, are there between these subcultural aesthetics and practices, and the tenets of Islam?

VV: I think the Imams in the mosques don't really like the kids doing this. They think that it's, I wouldn't quite say haram, I think they just don't agree with the style and the way the Freakers look, because Islam is focused on modesty, and you know, the way these kids dress isn't necessarily modest. There are different kinds of Freakers, in a sense, you know, the young man from my film who wanted the really big hair – he was wearing clothes that had sparkly diamantes, and Paris and stuff written on them? He represents one way of being a Freaker. And then you get Freakers who want to dress and celebrate their identity with their friends and wear matching outfits. They're the ones who would dress up in that specific way to celebrate Eid or use Freaker style as an extension of their culture, as a way to celebrate their culture and identity.

So, there is a bit of a balance. I think the Freakers that have a very extrovert style and have crazy hairstyles, they're the ones that do get told off by their elders.

But when you speak to people outside of the mosque about it, specifically women and mums. Some people think it's hilarious and some people think 'oh, these kids are just playing, and as soon as they get married, they'll just be modest again'. It's a way of exploring their youth in a sense. So, there is definitely tension with the male elders, but I think from mothers and cousins and brothers and sisters, I think, it's a way of being playful with their style and identity.

Figure 4: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

***JMB/CA:** It's difficult to unpack what is disapproval on religious grounds and what is just disapproval because they're young people who look different 'when I was your age, I wasn't wearing any of this stuff': which is an attitude to young people one finds across the world.*

VV: Yes absolutely, as long as people are walking in the mosque and looking respectful and modest then they're accepted in. I think they only get told off when they have crazy colours in their hair, or they're wearing extremely bright colours. I think that's where it becomes a bit

of a problem for some of the elders there. I don't know the exact theological conflicts between Islam and that style of dress, but I know that you are expected to wear a modest outfit, like a *kurta* into the mosque: and that's what people wear, unless you're coming directly from work in your work outfit. So, I think that's where the tension comes, when some of these kids are not wearing the expected garments.

JMB/CA: *For instance, they're wearing a diamante T-shirt instead?*

VV: Yes, that says Paris, Milan or London on it.

JMB/CA: *It's interesting that you're talking about male elders being more disapproving. I wonder if that's something to do with masculinity, and of conflicted or contested notions of masculinity in that space. Is it?*

VV: I think so – it's maybe to do with the patriarch and having that sense of always respecting your elders. But I also think that masculinity in India is understood and practiced very differently from here in the west: the way that men touch and interact with each other is very different. With someone much older it's a different story, but with people your own age, there is a specific social language of talking and being around men, which I think is really sweet. You know, the fact that male friends hold each other's hands, is really beautiful: and you think, of course, why would I not celebrate my friendship or my love for my friend by holding his hand? But of course, that behaviour isn't usual or acceptable within the dominant heteronormative culture of the western world. What's really beautiful about India is that you can hug your friend and that's completely fine.

Figure 5: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

JMB/CA: *There's a really interesting book by John Ibson called 'Picturing Men: A Century of Male Relationships in Everyday American Photography'. He analyses photographs that he collected in America from the early days of photography up until the mid-twentieth century, and lots of those show men holding hands, sitting in each other's laps, which was very*

common. He argues that it's not until the early twentieth century that that stopped being acceptable, and he connects it to an awareness of 'scientific' discourses of homosexuality, and military forms of discipline, that changed the way that men in America and elsewhere interacted with each other.

VV: I'm going to buy that, that's something I'm trying to explore a little bit more in my work so I think it would be a great read for me.

JMB/CA: *It's really intriguing the way a western, Northern European, Anglo notion of masculinity becomes universalized as the norm, the neutral, the unmarked category and other things are seen as weird or other or different when in fact you could flip that assessment on its head.*

VV: I also have a sort of personal theory, and it's a question as well, I haven't come to any conclusion about it. But I wondered, definitely in traditional Indian society: it's not like growing up in Britain, where you would be expected to date girls at school and to snog (kiss) girls at the back of the bike shed. You don't really have that in India. So, when you remove those elements: where does that energy go? You are coming of age, and you are feeling romantic feelings, but you maybe express that love with your friends in another way.

Expectations are changing as contemporary India is developing. There's a new middle class and there's more opportunity and more of a pivot towards careers for women. But traditionally, you would probably get married in your early 20s, you don't have a chance to date, and you marry whoever your mum and dad tell you to marry. So, friendship is a way to explore that side of your identity. And I wonder whether, in a culture and society like the UK where you're encouraged to date and to have multiple partners, if you maybe don't necessarily show that tactile side of you with your friends. You share that side of your affection with your partner instead of with your friends. But it's something I've always noticed and never come to any firm conclusions about. Just a bit of an observation.

JMB/CA: That sounds very plausible doesn't it, that need for tactility and intimacy expresses itself in 'homosocial', same sex contexts, because that's where it's acceptable to be tactile, because to be tactile with a girl or a woman would be very problematic.

VV: Yes exactly, and it would be much more problematic for the woman than it would be for the guy.

JMB/CA: Subcultural theory as developed at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s, characterized subcultures as a form of working-class resistance. They understood subculture as a way for marginalized groups of young people to deal symbolically with their material conditions, and to reject negative narratives projected onto them. How relevant is this reading to the Freakers? Should the freaker subculture be understood in the context of an increasing anti-Muslim politics in India, and/or in relation to the caste system (which we understand operates in a somewhat different way amongst Muslims in India than amongst Hindus)?

VV: That's a big question, and I don't know how explicitly political it is for the boys, I feel they live in their bubble in a sense. They do know about the religious tensions that are happening in India – of course. And Kasaragod is a very political place, there are a number of significant political parties – there's a Communist party that does really well there, and then there is the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) who are the ruling party in India right now.

And also in terms of other religious communities, there is a big Christian demographic in Kerala. Predominantly Kasaragod is Muslim, but the rest of Kerala is more Christian, and Hindu. I wouldn't go so far as to say the Freakers are trying to make an explicitly political statement with what they're trying to do, in the way that some punks in the late 1970s perhaps were. It's more about exploring youth and play in my view.

But I also think that, for a certain type of Freaker, they are expressing the sentiment ‘I am proud of being Muslim’. And you see that with the kids wearing the same outfits for Eid and at specific points in the religious calendar: because they’re celebrating brotherhood and they’re celebrating their faith, and it’s like ‘we can do this with this unity, when we dress in this specific way’. So, in that sense, there is a connection to faith.

When they post pictures online, whether consciously or not, they are showing their religious identity. People can look at their profiles and the way that they’re celebrating, and irrespective of whether the viewer is Hindu or from a different religion – it’s there for people to see. And I think that expression of faith is a beautiful statement in its own right. So, for that certain type of Freaker, a big motivation is the sense of community and the spirit between the boys where they can connect with other sorts of people.

There isn’t any tension between the different types of Freakers, apart from maybe being jealous that someone’s got more followers than someone else. But it’s more about – they walk on the streets, they all congregate on the streets, and they all help each other out and they all chat to each other and there’s a sort of friendliness about it which I think is really beautiful to see.

JMB/CA: That’s really helpful. And in terms of social class – as you said, it’s not a super wealthy place – so how does that feed into this desire for a kind of aspirational lifestyle. Because, as you’ve brought to our attention, what’s really interesting about this subculture is that it seems somehow to be very rooted in a specific place, but at the same time its aspirations are towards a kind of international, omnivorous cosmopolitanism, and that’s not necessarily contradictory, but it’s kind of fascinating and paradoxical.

VV: Yes, definitely ... there’s a sense of localization or local specificity that happens as well. Because some of the kids use hashtags like #KL14, which is almost like a postcode for a

particular block. And I think that's really beautiful as well, because there are certain styles that come out of certain blocks.

I think there's a similar sentiment to hip hop culture, as it emerged in the Bronx, and elsewhere in New York – like Biggie and Tupac. They didn't come from very affluent places at all, but they wanted to show off, or to live this sort of aspirational life through the items of clothing that they owned, and I think that's very expressive as well. It says, 'of course I am from this background where I don't have much money, but this is what I aspire to be and I can show an element of that through my clothes, and this is where I want to be at some point'. The clothes say so much about where they would like to go. I think that's how they're making a statement. There's a paradox between a public-facing image and a private way of being at home where they are quite modest.

So class and aspiration is definitely very significant, many of the Freakers are looking for ... some of the kids who have messaged me over the last year, year and a half, have said 'oh, can you help me come to London?' and 'I'd love to study there' and they don't necessarily have the money to do that, but they aspire to move around and see lots of different places. And some of the kids have moved to Dubai, which is great because they've had opportunities to go over there.

JMB/CA: As you suggest, there's a history, in lots of different contexts, of a kind of working-class dandyism, in which, though you can't afford a luxurious home or other attributes of a wealthy lifestyle you can dress in a distinctive way. ... Clothing is quite easy to manipulate because you can make clothes, or you can have them made locally, or you can acquire things in different ways. If you can't afford a gold necklace you can get something that's gold-plated. You can create this image or fantasy of a luxurious lifestyle through dress, so it is kind of powerful in that way.

VV: Yes, exactly. It's incredible. You can just make it happen yourself. If you want to go do something, you just go to see the tailor, or you go to the hairdresser, and show him a picture of a certain style that you want, and he'll just make it happen. You can get your mum to style lots of clothes, and the kids often will just make their own clothes. It's incredible they've got access to this archive online where they can copy the latest styles that are happening and make them their own.

There is a big textile industry in Kerala so there is a lot of fabric making, and there are a lot of factories there as well. That connection to cloth is deep-rooted in the veins of India. So, you may not have access to some of the finer fabrics, or some of the bigger factories or brands, but everyone's mum has made a blouse for her sari, or their auntie has – and it's so accessible – it's a family thing – you would often just make clothes for yourself rather than buying clothes, it's not always the norm to go and buy something ready-made.

***JMB/CA:** Circling back to our first question, you show groups of youngsters all dressed in matching kurta pyjamas in the film – in one shot, they wear maroon-coloured kurtas with an asymmetric opening, in another white kurtas with vivid pocket squares emerging from a breast pocket. What was the significance of these matching outfits? And by whom were they made?*

VV: It depends, the outfits could be off the peg, ready-made garments, or they could be made by a tailor. There are a couple of stores which I went to there, where they know that for Eid the boys will all want to dress alike, so they'll make sure they get loads of matching stock in different sizes. They will stock ten shirts of the same style, or the boys will come in and say, 'this is what I'm after', and they'll get it in for them. But then sometimes they will just go to the fabric shop, for the kurtas and stuff like that, and they'll just be able to get those made.

They all spend time crafting the look, as well – they spend weeks planning and knowing that everybody's going to dress like this too. I think it's really sweet.

JMB/CA: And you've talked about people going to Dubai, as well, a couple of times. So, what is the significance of Dubai?

VV: I think Dubai is not only aspirational, in terms of success and power and money, but it's also ... Kerala produces a lot of doctors and nurses, and a lot of them will go over to Dubai, but also a lot of construction workers, a lot of manual workers, and labourers, and they find themselves working in Dubai too. It's a place that is geographically close and easy to access to get jobs and money. They'll often pop over and go and work in those industries.

Specifically in Kasaragod, because it is a Muslim place, there are a lot of links to Dubai, and a lot of the Freakers, and people living in Kasaragod more generally, have family there. Flights are really frequent between the two places.

Dubai is a very big provider of income for Kasaragod. Kids will bring money back in their pockets or hands, bring undeclared money back into the country, because there is so much wealth that comes from Dubai, they don't necessarily want to declare it at customs.

JMB/CA: We were going to ask another question about masculinity and tactility – but you've covered that really well I think: is there anything you'd like to add?

VV: Yeah, I think we've already covered that question pretty well. It is something that doesn't go away with age. I see older men who are still holding hands in India, which can be quite beautiful. So, it is ingrained from a young age that this is how people should express friendship to each other, which I think is really great. Or, for instance, Vivek who I feature in the film, is a sort of macho strong man on one level, but he still has that element of touching his friends' hands, and hugging, and that is really sweet. Inside he's very tender, a very sweet soul, and he has a lot of fragility within him as well. I think touching, grabbing each other's hands and stuff within Indian society ... I think that there's a sort of strength that comes from that which is really incredible, a sort of solidarity that comes with that, and it's such an extension of showing love. Often men don't necessarily have the words to be able to talk

about their fragility with each other, but that simple hug or handholding can be like ‘it’s OK, I’m there for you and we are friends, and we just sort of show love that way’. That one action can speak a thousand words.

Figure 6: Photograph by Vivek Vadoliya (2018).

JMB/CA: Maybe just as important as the outfits worn by the Freakers are their specific ways of styling the body – such as dyed and straightened hair, geometrically shaped and close-shorn beards, lightened skin, use of cosmetics, bodybuilding and body hair removal. Clearly, these practices have lots of equivalents in contemporary visual culture more globally (from K-pop aesthetics to gym-bro and spornosexual style). What do they tell us about consumer culture and masculinities in contemporary India (and specifically in certain parts of the country or amongst particular demographics)?

VV: I think a lot of these men are trying to achieve some sort of perfection of their bodies, and I think this sharpness, this cleanness, is used to express that they are somebody – that they matter.

Sadly, we’ve spoken about this a lot in different contexts, the whole idea of having pale skin is quite a significant comment on your social status in contemporary India: lighter skin is seen as a symbol of higher status. And this is reinforced through the apps on Instagram, face-tuning apps and stuff like that, which are used to make skin look lighter. These boys use them online, as much as women. So, there’s a sense of always trying to achieve a notion of ‘perfection’ that you see online, which is not always easy to achieve, and not achievable at all in certain circumstances.

But there’s also this deeper idea of the hero, in Bollywood culture. You want to always be seen as this sort of macho character, who walks down the street and gets noticed. Also, as India has westernized, people see Hollywood, they see the west, they see all these

brands, and they see all these stars coming from Paris and Milan and other places and they want to have a piece of that as well.

In a sense, these ways of styling the hair and the body are about being the most individual person you can, but ironically, what actually happens a lot in subcultures is that eventually you end up being quite similar to other people.

I've spoken to people in India since we made this film, and they say, although the Kasaragod boys are from a specific part of India, and the subculture is probably the most prevalent there, there are boys like this in other parts of India. You know, there are similar ways of dressing and styling the hair in Bombay and in Delhi. And young men parade around the streets there too, but on more of a much smaller scale than in Kasaragod, it's maybe not so much of a movement or a subculture elsewhere.

Outside Kerala they might call themselves something different, or they might not call themselves anything at all, they might just express themselves in a similar way. They might have seen a cool photo or walked into a store to buy something that looks similar to a Freaker outfit, and then they might just stand next to their motorbike and pose. You notice these kids elsewhere in India, but they don't necessarily congregate in the same way as Kasaragod boys do.

***JMB/CA:** Can we connect this parading that you mentioned to the notion of the flâneur (the figure of the city-dwelling leisurely walker who is associated with modernity and the urbanity of nineteenth-century Paris). Dressing up is one thing, but maybe dressing up doesn't really matter unless you then present yourself to the world, because that's when it becomes activated – that's when it starts to mean something? Is that right?*

VV: Yes, and there are small rivalries between the Freakers as well, which I guess are mostly all in jest and in fun, but there are a couple of small rivalries. They're always trying to outdo each other. If someone gets a really extreme haircut, what can I do to one-up that person and

show that I can be more stylish than that person? Which I think is fascinating to see as a spectator.

JMB/CA: You have already mentioned the significance of the gym-honed body: how do you see this way of shaping the male body in a more global context?

VV: I haven't been to the gym since the pandemic, but you do notice the different types of gyms you go to have different cultures and demographics. There's one in Dalston (in East London) called Golders Gym, and that is where all of the beefcakes come, and all of the big Turkish guys, and they wear a certain type of clothing, for example vests (tanks) with skinny straps.

JMB/CA: Stringers', they call them.

VV: Exactly. I lived in Berlin as well, and Turkish and Lebanese men there have a specific form of gym culture. Typically, they're super built, their bodies are incredible, and so crafted, but they're also wearing their best clothes to the gym. They wear the fanciest track suits they can find, and wear what I would consider not performance shoes, but 'nice' expensive sneakers, to the gym. Because I think with these men, drinking is not a massive part of their culture, or they don't drink at all. So, the gym becomes like the pub – it becomes an equivalent space to the pub for British. It's a social space as much as a place to work out. Jay McCauley Bowstead and Charlie Athill have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.