

The affordances of masculinities: An investigation of the construction and
communication of digital masculinities through UK-based life(style)
Influencers

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Abstract

Drawing on qualitative research, I explore the digital self-representations of UK-based personal life(style) bloggers to investigate the construction and communication of masculinities and their interplay with imagined affordances. My study aims to address the gaps existing within scholarly research in digital networked masculinities. My study is situated within the framework of Inclusive Masculinity Theory, proposing a 'softening of masculinity', which I explore by looking at the personal narratives the bloggers weave through their blogging practices. Those narratives are spun through the bloggers' self-representations and are highly enmeshed with the brands and products the bloggers feature. Moreover, the bloggers' narratives also hold the potential to rework ideals around masculinities. Within the current neoliberal framework within which the bloggers operate, they are encouraged to construct and manage themselves as brands. Within this highly branded framework the bloggers' narratives reconfigure ideals pertaining to masculinities through instances such as the figure of the 'modern gentleman'; the visual aesthetic communication of skincare and makeup; and discussions around mental health. Ultimately, the narratives of the bloggers are governed by the imagined affordances and algorithms of the social media platforms and websites they use, thus the construction and communication of digital masculinities, often becomes regulated by and imagined affordances and algorithms.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Acknowledgments	iii
Chapter One. Introduction	1
A brief history of blogging.....	2
The rise of the social media influencer	5
Chapter organisation	6
Chapter Two. Contextualisation of the digital	11
Platformization	11
Social media as sociotechnical platforms	13
Affordances.....	16
Imagined affordances	17
Personal life(style) blogging as a communicative genre.....	20
Digital self-representations	25
Summary.....	29
Chapter Three. Methodology	30
Digital content creator, #lifestyleblogger, influencer	30
Digital narratives.....	35
Gathering the data.....	38
Images and text	39
Coding	44
Interviews	41
Ethics and copyright	47
Summary.....	48
Chapter Four. Masculinities: a review of the literature	50
Masculinity.....	52
Hegemonic Masculinity Theory	53
HMT: critique and response	57
Inclusive Masculinity Theory.....	60
Beyond hegemony: IMT, critique and response	62
Masculinities in the digital context.....	64
Masculinities within the context of fashion.....	68

Summary.....	72
Chapter Five. My life, styled: digital masculinities and the neoliberal digital context	73
Locating digital creatives in the neoliberal context.....	74
Imagined affordances and algorithmic visibility	76
An ideal world: metrics and quantified digital masculinities.....	78
I am a limited company: managing the self as brand	82
Switched-on: an algorithmic infiltration	86
The only platform I own and control: multiplatform imagined affordances.....	89
Concluding thoughts.....	96
Chapter Six. The figure of the modern gentleman: a reconfiguration through digital masculinities	98
Self-branding and the narratives of consumption	99
Tracing the modern gentleman	101
The art of the modern gentleman: digital narratives and brand-consumer storytelling.....	107
Live the life: a modern gentlemen’s journey.....	111
#gentleman, #dapperman, #dandy.....	118
How to dress like a gentleman: the suit	123
Concluding thoughts.....	134
Chapter Seven. My life, styled: visual aesthetic communication	137
We are part of an industry which trades in aesthetics	138
The algorithmic strategic imaginary	143
The algorithmic replicability of masculinities	150
Getting it done: work-life as a visually curated lifestyle	159
Skincare essentials: the beauty shelf.....	163
Something more masculine would help: the ambivalence of the beauty shelf.....	172
Curating the mundane and Insta-worthy masculinities.....	176
Concluding thoughts.....	193
Chapter Eight. The ups and downs: digital masculinities and narratives of mental health	195
Blogging to tell my story: mental health and the imagined affordances of blogging.....	197
Boys get sad too: algorithmic narratives of depression.....	206
Dressing up and down: style narratives of mental health	212
Comfort blanket(s): foregrounding CPM and IMT through style and mental health narratives	218

Concluding thoughts.....	224
Chapter Nine. Conclusion.....	226
Overview and key findings.....	226
Future considerations.....	230
References.....	231
List of Images.....	278
Appendices.....	287
Appendix A.....	287
Appendix B.....	295
Appendix C.....	298

Chapter One. Introduction

This chapter will outline the main premises that underpin my study. I will locate personal life(style) blogging, offer a brief historical context and state the gaps that my study addresses. My study explores masculinities as they were created and communicated through personal life(style) bloggers and influencers: two terms that as I explain below, I use interchangeably throughout my thesis. Overall, my study aims to address a broad gap that exists as men's experiences with technology and social media are underexplored (Light, 2013). It posits that men's engagement with digital media and the implications this might have for masculinities need further research (Light, 2013). This is a key aspect that my study addresses by exploring the self-representations of UK-based male life(style) bloggers that ultimately form and communicate highly personal but commoditised narratives.

Scheibling (2018) argues that blogs are influential media 'through which to create meaningful social discourse about masculinities' (p.10). Blogging more generally, involves digital spaces that contain 'personal commentary' (Sundar et al., 2007, p.85) often 'providing glimpses of the authors' lives' (Chenail, 2011, p.249). This happens as bloggers create and share texts, images and videos containing sponsored and unsponsored content. Generally, blogs can be categorised according to their content (Bruns and Jacobs, 2007; Rettberg, 2008). Historically, personal style blogs have been about 'fashion and style as it pertains to and is practised in the life of the bloggers' (Findlay 2017, p.27) while lifestyle blogs are broader in the scope of content but generally include 'individual ideas, thoughts and even the most mundane incidents of everyday life' (Hänninen, 2015, p.55). The initial scope of my research was to study personal style blogs. However, it quickly became evident that most of the blogs I encountered that had a focus on menswear and personal style also included, at varying degrees, content from other market sectors such as skincare and makeup, design and technology, and experiences such as sponsored and unsponsored visits to restaurants, bars, cafes, spas and hotels. Even though the content the bloggers share is broadly similar, albeit with variations, some bloggers self-identified as style bloggers (or influencers or content creators), others as fashion bloggers, others as lifestyle bloggers, yet others as menswear bloggers or various combinations of those terms. Thus, I coined the term life(style) blogging to better capture this multiplicity of content that sums up lifestyle but still showcases the importance of personal style which as discussed throughout my study, plays an essential part in the construction of digital masculinities.

In my study I conceptualise life(style) blogging as a distinct communicative genre that is not bound to a specific website or social media platform, but is a networked multiplatform practice, existing within an interconnected ecology of various social media platforms and personal websites. Within that

genre I locate and explore the creation and communication of networked digital masculinities. My study is situated under the Andersonian (2009) framework of Inclusive Masculinity Theory (IMT). As I explain in the methodology and literature review chapters, I found that IMT offers a more adequate tool to address and analyse the digital masculinities that arose through my study, than other theories pertaining to masculinities such as Connell's (1995) Hegemonic Masculinity Theory (HMT) or Bridges and Pascoe's (2014) Hybrid Masculinity Theory (HyMT). Concomitantly, I address gaps that exist within the chosen theoretical context of IMT, by linking the personal, found within the micro-social such as the personal narratives the bloggers weave, to the structural- something missing in studies under IMT, which I address by locating the affordances and algorithms that often act as regulatory points in the creation and communication of digital masculinities. Overall, my study aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do male life(style) bloggers create, communicate and negotiate their digital masculinities?
2. How is a dialogical relationship formed between the digital masculinities constructed by the bloggers and the affordances that pertain to life(style) blogging as located in the websites and social media platforms, and how does this shape the practices of the genre?

A brief history of blogging

Weblogs, or blogs emerged in the late 1990s in the US (Schradie, 2012). Siles (2011) traces early blogging to a group of US-based users who employed the term weblog to define their online activities happening through personal websites. Those websites had a high degree of similarity and shared various characteristics, such as short comments written by the authors about news or politics and the use of hyperlinks to other websites and posts in reverse chronological order. Simultaneously, Siles (2011) observes that another form of personal website was rising - that of the online diary. Another group of early web users in the US, as Siles notes, began sharing narrations of events from their personal lives that were considered as online diaries. The main differences between weblogs and online diaries were found in the content, as weblogs focused on news and politics and online diaries on the personal lives of the authors (Siles, 2011, p.787). However, with the progression of time and with the advent of standardised websites that users could use as templates for their personal websites and as user communities started to form, Siles (2011) notes that by the early 2000s, weblogs and online diaries started merging and became commonly referred to as blogs.

Blogging has been one of the earliest forms of online content production by users (Schradie, 2012). A key significance of blogging is that its early development showcases how technology and user

practices are interrelated (Siles, 2017, p.14-15). Early adopters both of weblogs and of online diaries, were usually using HTML coding to create their own websites, adding texts and hyperlinks. This was picked up by software companies and led to the development of standardised websites whose main plugins included text, hyperlinks and a reverse chronology and of course, as technology evolved, images, videos, sounds and other elements that became incorporated. Concomitantly, Siles (2017) argues that blogs were constructed as commodities as early as the 2000s as advertising started infiltrating blogging. This meant that bloggers started holding sponsored content and created collaborations and affiliations. The notion of the blogger as an entrepreneur emerged and became linked to the generation of revenue through blogging activities (Siles, 2017, p.100-101). Overall, Siles (2011; 2012; 2017) offers a meticulous tracing of the creation and wide spreading of blogging in the US, and makes important links between technology, user practices and the incorporation of advertising, in relation to blogs of varied content from news and politics to lifestyle. One of Siles' most important observations that is pertinent to my study is what he calls the neoliberalisation of blogging (p.191). Siles argues that as soon as blogs merged with advertising, bloggers became tied with a neoliberal mode of being online, meaning that self-promotion and self-performance became important elements of the bloggers' practices; something that, I would argue, illustrates how the foundations of influencer culture - a culture heavily intertwined with social media platforms, based on broad and wide visibility and self-branding - were set.

As my study is situated mainly within personal style blogs - which, nevertheless, have expanded to include varied content that in some cases has overtaken discussions on menswear and fashion bringing a fusion of what I call personal (life)style blogs - it is important to trace the history of personal style blogging too. Findlay (2017) has tracked the development of personal style blogs or fashion blogs from the mid-2000s onward and has identified two distinct periods of personal style blogging, which she calls the first wave and the second wave. The first wave can be located in the period of about 2004 to 2006. This wave of blogging mainly consisted of teenage and young female bloggers¹. During that time, the bloggers did not usually have affiliations with the fashion industry, nor did they hold sponsored collaborations with brands and designers and their interest in sartorial matters was theoretical. By the term theoretical Findlay means that blogging was not interlinked with commerce; rather, the bloggers engaged in lengthy written discussions on their views on fashion, seasonal styles and trends and created and shared outfits with clothing they usually already owned, displaying a DIY

¹ Bryan Grey Yambao, author of the blog BraynBoy, is the only known exception to the best of my knowledge. Bryan created his blog in The Philippines in 2004 and is now considered one of the most renowned male fashion bloggers and fashion experts within the industry of fashion.

(do-it-yourself) approach to fashion. Moreover, when the bloggers shared images, these had an amateur quality as the bloggers usually snapped images of themselves in their houses or bedrooms. As such, early style blogging was not as dependent on the affordances of visual communication as it nowadays is. Of course, communication technology has been rapidly evolving; something that affects blogging - a practice that, as Siles (2011) observed, is situated between technology and user practices.

The second wave of style blogging started emerging during 2008 to mid-2010; however, as Findlay (2017) stresses, the difference between the first and second waves is not necessarily the date of the operation of the blog, but rather the underpinning ethos. During the second wave, bloggers began forming lucrative collaborations with brands and designers, started being invited to attend fashion shows, created more professional photos, and started to be seen as authoritative style figures due to the significant numbers of followers on their various social media accounts (Findlay 2017). Thus, second-wave blogging is in line with Siles' (2017) observations about the propagation of advertising to blogs. During the past years, style bloggers have gained a legitimate space within the fashion industry and have contributed to style blogging being considered a legitimate profession with various opportunities for monetisation (Draper and McDonnell, 2017; Luvaas, 2013; Pedroni, 2015; Rocamora, 2015).

Overall, due to their personal character, style blogs have been framed as more closely related to the early online diaries (Serfaty, 2004; Sceidt, 2006; Hodkinson, 2007) whose development Siles (2011) explored. As Hookway (2008) argues, blogging that includes aspects of an individual's life, such as lifestyle blogging and personal style blogging, takes on a self-referential narrative form, something that still exists and is evident in the blogs I have studied. As I discuss in the empirical chapters, (life)style blogs constitute a type of online personal narrative (Rocamora and Bartlett, 2009; Titton, 2015) that often resembles a networked multidiary. Thus, even though blogging has evolved to encompass influencer culture, elements that pre-date social media platforms were still found in my study. This is important since, as Siles (2012) argues, bloggers as digital diarists create a particular reflexive relationship with themselves (p.412), which I trace throughout my study while considering affordances. Much like diaries, blogs as digital multidiaries offer users the opportunity for self-reflection and the potential to gain insight into specific events, or even in emotionally demanding situations (Barker, 2008, p.81). Consequently, blogs can be viewed as socially embedded diaristic accounts where the self is digitally narrated (Nardi et al., 2005). Because of this self-narrativisation that bloggers undertake, blogs as digital multidiaries offer the authors a way of practising life (Lejeune, 2009). This means that blogging as an active, reflexive practice of self-narration brings 'new

possibilities to autobiographical acts' (McNeil, 2003, p.30) and new ways of constructing and communicating digital masculinities.

The rise of the social media influencer

Blogging is a dynamic and ever-changing practice, both adapting to communication technologies and influencing the genre through user practices. The past years have seen the rise of the term social media influencer as a denominator describing practices that have been previously linked to bloggers. In my study, as I investigate self-representations, it is important how the bloggers identify themselves. Some use the term blogger, some influencer, some have adopted the broader term of content creator or use those terms interchangeably. As such, I also use the terms blogger and influencer interchangeably throughout my study, as what is important is not the fluid labels and terminology the bloggers adopt, but the practices that characterise their blogging. Overall, no matter whether the term blogger or influencer is used, what is evident and of importance from the practices of the individuals in my study is what Siles (2017, p.195) locates as crucial web-enabled changes:

- 1) the fundamental change in the scale of self-representation practices enabled by technology,
- 2) the significance of neoliberalism for contemporary practices of subjectivity,
- 3) the demand of constant provision of self-accounts in daily life.

Generally, influencers are social media users who monetise their activities and promote products (Leban and Voyer, 2020). This might not seem much different from what the bloggers did; however, it implies a closer relation to social media platforms. Social media influencers are essentially content creators who, in my study, are closely linked to Instagram. Nieborg and Poell (2018) talk about a platformization of cultural production, where social media affect the way content is created and have given rise to various content creators such as influencers, vloggers, TikTokers and Twitchers, who might be working exclusively within a specific platform or have a broader multiplatform presence like the bloggers in my study. Nonetheless, ultimately what that indicates is 'the penetration of economic and infrastructural extensions of online platforms into the web, affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p.4276). Pertinent to my study this has given rise to social media influencer marketing which refers to 'influencers' marketing activities related to short term and paid activities' (Yesiloglu, 2020, p.13). This further implicates the marketing and advertising efforts of brands who employ or collaborate with influencers to promote their products, otherwise called electronic word-of-mouth (Yesiloglu, 2020) and has given rise to influencer culture, which is essentially a promotional culture based on self-branding and self-commodification.

Irrespective of terminology used, studies exploring style and lifestyle bloggers and influencers have been predominantly based on female content creators and creatives. Female influencers have been reviewed in relation to self-branding and self-enterprise (e.g., Duffy 2015a; Duffy and Hund, 2015;2018; Long and Wilhoit, 2018; Marwick, 2013a) digital labour (e.g., Abidin, 2016; Duffy 2015b), and by more generally exploring various aspects of blogging through female creators (e.g., self-representation (Rocamora, 2011), resistance through representations (e.g., Harju and Huovinen, 2015; Caldeira, et al., 2020a), modest fashion (Lewis, 2013), race (Pham, 2015), blogs relation to the fashion industry (Pedroni, 2015), and mom blogs (e.g., Hunter 2016; Lopez 2009)). Even though studies looking into male fashion bloggers and influencers exist, they are scant (e.g., Draper and McDonnell, 2018). This lack illustrates what Light (2013) argues is a broader ‘lack of attention paid to men’s gendered experiences’ which corresponds to ‘the ongoing problem of gender being predominantly attributed to women’ (Light, 2013, p.250). This has resulted in masculinity being made largely invisible as a site of interrogation of sociocultural forces which often serves to hide its highly constructed nature (Light, 2013); a broader gap that my study aims to address.

Chapter organisation

My dissertation is arranged as follows. Following the introductory chapter, in the second chapter I discuss some of the main elements pertaining to and influencing the practice of life(style) blogging. I introduce the notion of platformization, discuss the concept of affordances and specifically the concept of imagined affordances, discuss issues relating to genres and situate digital self-representations with digital communication. Chapter Three includes my methodological considerations and chosen methods. I explain what data I gathered and how they were categorised, organised and analysed using a thematic lens. I also elaborate on narrative analysis a main conceptual and methodological aspect of my study as I approach the bloggers’ practice through a micro-narrative lens. Chapter Four includes the literature review. I situate gender as a social construct and locate masculinities within it. I discuss the main scholarly theories that have arisen and that are still broadly used within studies of masculinities, such as HMT, and situate in detail IMT and explain how my study fits within the Andersonian framework. Moreover, I discuss two other recent theories of masculinities, namely Critical Positive Masculinity (CPM) by Lomas (2013) and Caring Masculinity (CM) by Elliott (2016), which also inform parts of my study. Finally, I consider masculinities in relation to the digital realm and discuss relevant key concepts from fashion studies, as my research is interlinked with dress and personal style.

The next chapters form the empirical chapters of my study where I explore and analyse my findings. Chapter Five frames bloggers as 'platformized creative workers' (Glatt, 2021, p.1) and explores how the neoliberal context under which the bloggers operate provides regulatory points within their practice. In a quest for algorithmic visibility, (which informs the bloggers' practices), self-management and self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a) become key elements of the formation of digital masculinities. This chapter showcases how a neoliberal logic of self-improvement becomes exacerbated through quantified metrics (Rocamora, 2022) and often infiltrates the bloggers' personal lives, while I also discuss the perceived importance of managing the self as a brand. The chapter addresses a gap in knowledge where the gendered aspect of the neoliberal context has been mainly studied in relation to women and female creators as pertaining to blogging. Neoliberal self-governance has been discussed extensively in relation to post-feminism, with scholars exploring the discursive production of women's subjectivities under neoliberalism (Dobson, 2015; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Rottenberg; 2014). Gill (2008) has gone even further, asking, 'could it be that neoliberalism is always already gendered, and that women are constructed as its ideal subjects?' (2008, p.443). Gill's query has been the subject of considerable investigation by academics in relation to women digital creatives, such as bloggers, vloggers and influencers (e.g., Archer, 2019; Banet-Weiser, 2017; Bishop, 2019; Mahoney, 2020; White; 2017). Studies investigating self-governance and neoliberal female subjectivities have drawn a parallel where 'the autonomous, calculating, self-regulating subject of neoliberalism bears a strong resemblance to the active, freely choosing, self-reinventing subject of post-feminism' (Gill, 2008, p.443), thus, strongly imbuing neoliberalism with a gendered aspect. Other scholars using a Foucauldian lens (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Hurley, 2019; Marwick, 2013; Nathanson, 2014; Pruchniewska, 2017) explore women fashion and lifestyle digital creatives and directly link self-branding to the neoliberal ideologies of self-enterprise and reflexive self-governance. Those studies seem to support the argument that under neoliberalism:

to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, to regulate every aspect of their conduct, and to present all their actions as freely chosen (Gill, 2008, p.443).

It is not in the scope of my research to dispute that argument; however, through my study, it is evident that men are also encouraged to self-manage and regulate their masculinities, especially within the digital realm; something that happens to a large degree due to the imagined affordances of life(style) blogging.

Digital masculinities under neoliberalism have been addressed to some extent by Hakim (2020) and Winch and Hakim (2016). The authors have examined digital representations of masculinities, however, not necessarily of digital creatives or content creators, slightly contesting Gill's (2008) assertion. Winch and Hakim's work showcases that there exist men who, similarly 'to how neoliberal postfeminist culture addresses women as brand managers in their personal lives' are also encouraged to cultivate themselves and their bodies as brands and are (self)subjected to various regulations (2016, p.42). Even though Winch and Hakim's discussions probe into how neoliberalism regulates digital representations of masculinities, by exploring gym culture on Instagram, there is still a lack in situating the role of affordances within the context of neoliberal self-regulation, something that my study aims to address.

Chapter Six focuses on self-branding and how the bloggers use affiliations with brands and products to create their narratives. To illustrate this, I discuss the figure of the modern gentleman. Through my research I found a plethora of bloggers – accounting for roughly one third of my data - who created a branded image pertaining to what they call a modern gentleman. This is constructed by the bloggers' visual, textual and hypertextual (i.e., hashtags) self-representations. In this chapter I discuss how, through brand-consumer storytelling (Woodside, 2010), the bloggers lean into already-existing meanings created within the market and the fashion industry by marketing and advertising and adopt and rework those meanings to construct the figure of the modern gentleman. Moreover, I discuss why the figure of the modern gentleman is well located within the Andersonian framework and how various ideals around masculinities, such as the suited entrepreneur, become reconfigured. Simultaneously, I explore the dialogical relation between the modern gentleman and the imagined affordances located within the websites and social media platforms the bloggers use.

Yet again, self-branding has been extensively discussed in relation to influencers and bloggers (e.g., Delisle and Parmentier, 2016; Duffy and Hund, 2015; Khamis and Welling, 2016; Long and Wilhoit, 2018; Marwick, 2015; Titton, 2015) but the literature is overwhelmingly focused on female influencers; thus there is a lack in addressing self-branding and the production of digital masculinities in the context of male influencers. To the best of my knowledge, only two prominent studies exploring self-branding and male style bloggers exist. Whitmer (2017) has explored how male personal style bloggers use fashion to create self-brands. Whitmer aligns within HyMT and argues that the bloggers in her study adopt fashion styles associated with femininities and non-hegemonic masculinities, adopting stylistic elements from subordinated and marginalised aesthetics (p.123). For example, she points to 'working class masculinities' (p.124) expressed by 'work boots, raw denim,

and bushy beards', a hip-hop influence expressed by Kanye West clothing, and styles from 'black and latino culture' (p.124). Whitmer argues that bloggers appropriate those styles and distance themselves from 'stigmatising elements of hegemonic masculinity' (p.122) such as homophobia and misogyny. However, the bloggers still reproduce structural gender hierarchies as they come from a privileged position; they are able to afford expensive brands to imitate those styles or are able to navigate the fashion industry. Whitmer concludes that there is a simultaneous progression and regression 'whereby privileged bloggers benefit from appropriating these subordinated and marginalised gender performances without an attendant change in structures of power' (p.123). Nevertheless, Whitmer does not delve in-dept in discussing the relationship between masculinities and fashion consumption. She notes that men have been historically active participants in the consumer economy, but this is not situated within a broader contextualisation of masculinity and fashion. Methodologically, Whitmer explored only the webpages of bloggers, situating blogs as 'technologies of surveillance [...] encouraging users to incorporate consumer products into a marketable identity project' (p.121), thus considering neither a multiplatform networked communication nor the regulatory role of affordances in this context.

The second study is by Draper and McDonnell (2018). The authors looked at gay personal style bloggers and discussed how the bloggers use fashion as a self-branding tool. The study was placed within the framework of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) and the branded self-representations of the bloggers were compared to representations of masculinities featured in men's fashion magazines. The authors, even though acknowledging the multiplatform nature of blogging, did not elaborate on the role of platform affordances for the bloggers' self-representations. Unlike Whitmer, who used a HyMT framework, Draper and McDonnell were focused on remediation, offering a comparative analysis with mainstream fashion magazines for men. Remediation in relation to lifestyle and style blogging has been extensively discussed (e.g., Marwick, 2013c; Rocamora, 2012; Titton, 2015), and it is outside of the scope of my study to offer another comparative analysis. Instead, this chapter seeks to discuss, how through self-branding, the bloggers construct narratives that add meanings to digital masculinities while still permeated by the regulatory aspect of imagined affordances.

In Chapter Seven, I focus on the visual representations of the bloggers. I situate life(style) blogging within the broader visual aesthetic communication (Manovich, 2017), with 'aesthetic' in this instance referring to the increasing reliance and importance the users place on creating and sharing 'beautiful images' (Manovich, 2019, p.3). Influencer culture has brought forth some visual tropes (Leaver, et al.,

2020) that the influencers in my study seem to largely ascribe to. As what the bloggers primarily sell is the content they create, images play a crucial role in their practice and are key elements of their self-brands. In this chapter, I discuss the algorithmic strategic imaginary that pertains to the bloggers practice and I explore how neoliberalism has infiltrated the visual realm through the stylisation of the self-at-work. Moreover, I explore the Insta-worthy (Leaver et al., 2020) and link it to algorithmic and sociocultural visibility. By this, I mean that bloggers who were previously excluded from mainstream representations in fashion and advertising, now through blogging and through creating and sharing their digital masculinities expand the repertoires of masculinities (Anderson, 2017). Those expanded repertoires of masculinities can be further linked to the layers of intersectionality that pertain to the bloggers' masculinities and to other elements such as the representations of fatherhood and explored through the concept of Caring Masculinity. In this chapter, I also discuss how, due to imagined affordances, digital masculinities often become replicable and standardised as the bloggers strive to gain a perceived algorithmic recognition. I link this to representations of skincare and unpack the ways that digital masculinities might largely follow the Andersonian framework, but I also discuss how, often, ambivalence arises - something that serves to illustrate the socially constructed aspect of masculinities and, in extent, gender.

Finally, Chapter Eight focuses on discussions and self-representations of mental health. Again, influencers and mental health have mainly been discussed in relation to women (Lehto, 2022; Mäkinen, 2021). In this chapter, I address how bloggers present and frame their struggles with mental health and depression, something that takes on a highly gendered lens, becoming framed by the bloggers as a 'male depression'. As I found in my study, many bloggers have addressed to varying degrees mental health and the fact that men are reluctant to open up and disclose their problems. Moreover, there exist bloggers who not only discuss mental health but inextricably link their struggles to their narratives. In this chapter, I locate how those discussions serve to directly dissociate digital masculinities from a hegemonic framework, firmly placing the bloggers' practices within IMT. Moreover, I explore how those (algorithmic) narratives of mental health or depression can be placed within Lomas' CPM and bridge this theory with IMT. To the best of my knowledge those two studies have not been previously considered together. Finally, this chapter discusses how the bloggers often link mental health to dress, thus adding another layer to that discussion, with imagined affordances being located within the context of mental health.

Chapter Two. Contextualisation of the digital

The world is in the midst of a social media paradigm – a distinctive moment in the history of media and communications shaped by the dominance of social media technologies. By social media technologies, we mean those digital platforms, services and apps built around the convergence of content sharing, public communication, and interpersonal connection.

(Burgess, et al., 2018, p.1)

The social media landscape is broad and vast as there exists a diverse ecology of platforms that ‘vary in terms of their scope and functionality’ (Kietzmann et al., 2011, p.242). Personal life(style) blogging is a multiplatform practice that spans various networked platforms and other digital spaces, such as personal websites, whose specific characteristics shape and influence it. This chapter addresses the sociotechnical fabric of platformization and locates the imagined affordances that often warrant and constrain what the users do, bringing to the forefront the dialogical relationship between affordances and users. Personal life(style) blogging ebbs and flows as it is impacted by the affordances and rapid changes of social media; nevertheless, it still maintains some of its long-standing characteristics, such as a personal focus, with the bloggers often opting for a diary-like approach. Thus, to better capture the fluid and ever-changing aspect of life(style) blogging, I framed it as a specific communicative genre. This way, it is situated within the broader digital networked ecology of personal websites and of platforms that act as ‘powerful cultural shapers’ (Burgess, 2021, p.24).

As I showcase throughout the empirical chapters, the bloggers often follow the conventions of the genre throughout their visual and textual communication. Yet, as the bloggers are in a constant dialogue with the imagined affordances that characterise their practice, the genre of lifestyle blogging becomes shaped and reshaped, showcasing how ‘platforms have the ability to influence and shape digital communication’ (Wilson, 2017). Finally, this chapter discusses digital self-representation, which is a paramount condition of participation in social media (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017). Due to affordances, self-representation is organised along specific ‘activity corridors’ that ‘heavily stylize and shape user interaction’ (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017, p.176). Thus, digital self-representation becomes placed within the schema of networked communication and the genre of life(style) blogging.

Platformization

The term platform has come to characterise the main social media the bloggers in my study use to communicate, such as Instagram, YouTube and Twitter. Gillespie (2010), traces the term to online service companies, such as YouTube, which started self-characterising as platforms - a term that was

widely embraced by ‘the broader public discourse of users, the press and commentators’ (p.348). The broad use of the term platform started to indicate a shift away from the initial perception of social media as social networking sites or SNS (Baym, 2010; boyd and Ellison, 2007; Papacharissi, 2010). Academic discourse during the mid to late-2000s approached SNS as ‘internet-enabled sites used specifically for social interaction’ (Sujon, 2021, p.38). Popular SNS sites, such as Hi5, Facebook and Myspace, were only accessible via a browser; users could connect with one another and generate and upload their own content, but SNS lacked both the technical elements (instant, networked and mobile communication) and business model (based on advertising and data collection) that currently define social media.

Technological, infrastructural, and institutional changes brought about a complexity that has resulted in social media now playing a crucial role in society and the economy (Sujon, 2021). The interrelation of software, new business models and technology is best approached through the notion of platformization. Helmond defines it as ‘the rise of the platform as the dominant infrastructural and economic model of the social web and the consequences of the expansion of social media platforms into other spaces online’ (2015, p.5). In other words, platformization has resulted in a networked ecology where plugins² and other connections can be made to instantly link platforms, websites and digital spaces. At a technical level, a significant aspect of platformization was the development of the Application Programming Interface (API), which allowed for cross-platform connections and flows of information and data (Helmond, 2015). Facebook - now rebranded as Meta - was one of the first companies to make changes that paved the way for platformization. In 2007 Meta introduced the platform for developers app and the platform for mobile, which coincided with the launch of the iPhone. The first feature meant that Facebook became open to third-party developers who could capitalise on its user database, while the second meant that Facebook became untethered from desktop computers, as a new mobile application available for iPhones was introduced. Ultimately, these features changed ‘the way developers worked with social media and set data precedents across the social media ecosystem’ (Sujon, 2021, p.47).

Consequently, these changes marked the transition from social media being single websites to being platforms (Sujon, 2021, p.47), with Facebook taking the lead as one of the most important technical, informational and social platforms (Gillespie, 2010). By being relatively easy to use, social media

² Plugins are software modules that are added-on to a host software to enhance its capabilities. On personal websites and social media plugins are added-on widgets that let users do things such as link and display their social media profiles or share content (Hasna, 2022).

platforms promote sociality by making communication immediate and connecting users while providing tools for the easy creation and distribution of user-generated content (UGC). Thus, social media have now become mobile, interconnected, networked and heavily reliant on data as a business model (Sujon, 2021). Most social media platforms are for-profit institutions; however, participation in many of them is gratis. This seemingly free service provided to users from for-profit businesses does not mean that companies do not have profit. Rather, for most platforms that offer free participation, there are two main ways of gaining profit: directly selling advertising space and, more controversially, selling user metadata to advertisers and other third-party companies (Srnicek, 2016). Metadata are the personal data of the users and all the data the users create by operating on a platform, such as posting, sharing, liking, commenting, and any other action or interaction that a platform allows that serves to generate valuable information. Thus, platforms stir user engagement and participation - through affordances - that serve to create data, which have become 'the newest form of currency' (Perez, et al., 2018, p.241).

Nevertheless, metadata is not merely a by-product of content generation; it is a prime resource for profiling users and their interests since, saleable information is generated by users, often without their knowledge (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009). The technological advantages that now pertain to the digital ecology have brought forth changes in technologies of production (Fuchs, 2014a), where social media platforms have now become 'data firms' supporting business models that rely on the ability 'to harvest and repurpose data rather than from monetizing user activity proper' (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013, p.9). For that reason, social media are geared toward participation and action, such as content creation and high user engagement. As platforms such as Instagram and YouTube aim to capitalise on user-generated content, the process of value creation has started to shift from selling a service or a product to the users who have become the focus of value extraction (Van Dijck and Nieborg, 2009).

Social media as sociotechnical platforms

However, it is not only the technical or economic aspects that are crucial to platformization, as platformization implicates various sociocultural dimensions. As Gillespie argues, social media platforms are not considered platforms solely due to technical elements, such as software or coding, but because platforms afford a particular kind of networked opportunity to 'communicate, interact or sell' (2010, p.351). Platformization, both in terms of technical architecture and in terms of user practices, has brought forth an entanglement of social media with commercial, public, and personal contexts (Burgess et al., 2018, p.1). As such, platforms are sociotechnical systems that play a significant role in shaping the communication and interaction fabric of everyday life (Alaimo and

Kallinikos, 2017, p.175). Following up on the sociocultural aspect of social media platforms, Burgess (2015) further broadens platformization arguing that there now exists a 'platform paradigm' (p.282). For Burgess, platformization goes beyond the internet and social media, and affects 'much of the media and cultural environment' (2021, p.22). Therefore, according to Burgess, aspects of platformization, such as reliance on participation and UGC as well as networked engagement due to data-driven business models, have spilt over the creative and cultural industries, 'deeply reshaping society and culture' (2021, p.22).

Burgess's (2015; 2021) platform paradigm can be linked to the notion of the platformization of cultural production. As Nieborg and Poell (2018) argue, cultural production is becoming progressively dependent on platforms. This means that the work and practices of cultural producers, such as influencers, bloggers and content creators more generally, have become increasingly contingent on a group of powerful digital platforms. The authors mainly refer to GAFAM (Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon, and Microsoft), which, along with BATX (Baidu, Alibaba, Tencent and Xiaomi) in China, have become dominant companies both in relation to infrastructure and economy. As Duffy, et al. (2019) argue, platforms are dynamic infrastructures that 'continuously change their user (front-end) and application programming (back-end) interfaces, algorithms, terms and conditions, developer resources, and business models, all of which impact how cultural production unfolds' (p.2). This is an essential aspect of platformization that pertains to my study and becomes apparent throughout the empirical chapters as the bloggers' practices that serve to construct digital masculinities become highly enmeshed with imagined affordances, a term I discuss further below. Moreover, even though social media platforms are different from the personal websites that some of the bloggers use, as those are not usually owned by powerful private companies such as GAFAM, cultural production is still affected - at least to some degree - by the same issues pertaining to social media platforms, as communication happens in a networked manner (as I elaborate throughout the empirical chapters). Thus, even though websites might not be platforms per se, the platformization of cultural production is pertinent to the overall networked presence of the bloggers.

Individuals increasingly use and depend on social media for personal and professional use. Consequently, platforms are no longer 'mere conduits for delivering content or services but are instead providing a platform which shapes everyday life and carves out enclaves of platform-specific social behaviour' (Sujon, 2021, p.52). The importance of platformization becomes evident in two main aspects in my study discussed throughout the empirical chapters. Those are: firstly, the entanglement of social media, and by extent digital masculinities, with consumption, a process that became

solidified with the introduction of APIs that have traditionally been provided by platforms for commercial purposes (Burgess, 2021, p.30). Increasingly, the social media platforms that the bloggers mainly use, such as Instagram and YouTube, have become permeated with commerce and often act as intermediaries within the broader ecosystem of advertising and web analytics companies (Bivens and Haimson, 2016, p.2). However, this is not always overtly manifested, as the discourse of commodification is veiled under a rhetoric of sociality and connectivity (Beer, 2008).

Secondly, the platformization of cultural production has brought forth changes to visual communication that extend to self-branding and has also led to the emergence of social media visual cultures (Manovich, 2017; Leaver et al., 2020), encompassing both content creators and imagery from brand advertising. The platformization of cultural production through visual-based platforms, which the bloggers mainly use, along with the parallel progression of mobile technologies, have contributed to the mobility and immediacy of content-sharing on social media and websites (Schrock, 2015) and the increasing amalgamation of images, videos and texts that advance elements of the pre-platformization era of blogging, such as the diary-like mode of communication, as I explore in Chapter Eight. As the networked aspect of digital communication increases, visual norms are infused across social media (Gries, 2015). For instance, in my study, the bloggers often share the same post or images to their website, Instagram and sometimes Twitter, and even when content is created slightly differently for each platform or not shared cross-platform, it still largely follows the bloggers' overall self-brand, as I explore in the empirical chapters.

Moreover, platforms are both computational architectures on which components and services can be developed and discursive spaces for cultural expression (Burgess, 2021, p.26). Thus, visual communication is on the one hand shaped by platforms and guided by aspects such as the 'like economy' (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013) or communicational norms further discussed in the empirical chapters, yet on the other also offers the ability for users to display identities and belonging, as is evident through the figure of the modern gentleman discussed in Chapter Six. The platformization of cultural production also shapes - at least to some degree - the manner in which consumption becomes embedded and implicated in the bloggers' self-brands and the visual modes through which the bloggers communicate. Burgess (2021), discussing social media and content creators, notes that platforms 'play a major role in governing the forms of creativity and social interaction that take place through them' (p.24). This happens as platforms regulate what content and behaviours are allowed while also actively encouraging or discouraging behaviours through technical measures and policies (Burgess 2021), or in other words through the imagined affordances that I locate as regulatory

elements in the bloggers' practices.

Affordances

Social media platforms are sociotechnical systems; therefore, both social and computational features shape them and coexist within them (Sujon, 2021, p.109). Concurrently, the primary social media platforms used by the bloggers in my study, i.e., Instagram and YouTube, have become highly commercialised spaces, where advertising and metadata play important operational roles. That means that social media are not neutral and impartial communication channels; instead, the design of social media platforms and the associated technology include cultural assumptions and social norms (Gillespie, 2018). The platformization of cultural production, which spans the whole of the bloggers' networked digital communication, is located in the use of platforms and personal websites and is intricately linked to affordances.

Affordances play an essential role in constructing, consolidating and moderating the social with the technical. As Davis and Chouinard (2017, p.214) note, 'affordance refers to the range of functions and constraints' that encompass what a user can or cannot do on a platform. Affordances govern all platforms (see Bucher and Helmond, 2018; Hurley, 2019; McVeigh-Schultz and Baym, 2015; Nagy and Neff, 2015); however, they are not limited to the technological aspect. Instead, affordances occupy a space between technology and culture. Technology and culture shape each other in what has been called the social shaping of technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman, 1999). Affordances and users are in a constant dialogue where they mutually influence each other (Nagy and Neff, 2015). Hence, the social moulding of technology provides 'a kind of middle ground between technological determinism and social construction' (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.2).

In my study, this dialogical relationship between affordances and influencers is traced throughout the empirical chapters. The term affordance in media studies is a highly contested one (Davis and Chouinard, 2016). The concept of affordance was conceived by Gibson (2015 [1977]), who worked in the field of ecological psychology and conceived affordance as a relational property. His intent was to propose a theory of visual perception and used the term to designate all kinds of action possibilities inherent in the physical environment by focusing on the relationship between an animal and the environment. The concept of affordance was then taken up by Norman (1988), who worked within the field of design studies in human-computer interaction. Norman's aim was to enhance good design, and he was primarily interested in the design of devices and everyday things. He theorised affordance as the perceived and actual properties of a thing that determine how it could be used. Subsequently, the notion of affordance was picked up by Gaver (1996), who approached it as

technology affordance. His primary concern was to highlight social interactions along with individual action and sought to draw attention to the complex environmental factors which shape social interaction. By using the term technological affordance - even though Gaver strays away from technological determinism - he establishes that the material qualities of affordances play a significant role in constituting sociality and communicative actions.

The term was later picked up by communications scholars. It was approached as a social affordance of communication technology (Wellman et al., 2003) and as the social structures that take shape in association with a given technology (Postigo, 2005). More specifically, Hutchby (2001) conceptualised communication affordance to provide a middle ground that considers how technologies are both socially structured and situated but also have material qualities. The term communication affordance also focuses on the impact of technology on communication more generally (Schrock, 2015). However, it lacks a more explicit connection to user norms and practices. With platformization, the advent of social media and the increasing numbers of individuals communicating and negating all kinds of activities through platforms, the notion of affordances and the relationship between users and technology is not adequately approached through those conceptualisations as they either stir too much towards technological determinism or place unequal emphasis on the users.

Imagined affordances

For my study, I align with the notion of imagined affordances. Nagy and Neff (2015) conceptualised imagined affordances, arguing that the manner in which affordances had been approached lacked the situational sensitivity needed to consider the complexity that exists within social media communication. For that reason, they proposed the term 'imagined affordances' to bring together more complex features of social media, technical characteristics and users. They argue that besides technology, researchers need to consider the cultural characteristics and the dynamically changing materiality within communication (i.e., the ever-evolving smartphones and technological devices that increasingly allow for better-quality images and videos or the increasing refinement of in-house app filters and so forth) as well as the emotional aspect that social media use entails. In this sense, imagined affordances 'emerge between users' perceptions, attitudes and expectations; between the materiality and functionality of technologies; and between the intentions and perceptions of designers' (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5).

Therefore, users have an active role in how they perceive affordances. For instance (and as I elaborate in the empirical chapters), influencers who seek to maximise their visibility engage with platforms in

ways that they perceive will facilitate that, such as maximising their engagement and following visual trends. Of course, certain constraints bind the users on a material, software and sociocultural level; for instance, social media posting policies or the length of a video a user can post. However, the users' intentions, feelings and expectations need to be accounted for when considering affordances. For my research, I am concerned with a type of communication and content purposefully created; hence imagined affordances allow me to consider: 1) the technological features of the platforms; 2) the intentions of the bloggers and the expectations they might have from each platform; 3) the sociocultural contexts of the platforms that include the platforms' policies and regulations and modes of usage with a particular focus on Instagram as this is the main platform used by the bloggers in my study.

I also draw on arguments from Bucher and Helmond (2018) to further implicate the specific platforms I explore, and I acknowledge the role of algorithms and specifically algorithmic visibility - an essential aspect of imagined affordances discussed throughout the empirical chapters in relation to digital masculinities. Bucher and Helmond argue for a platform-sensitive approach to social media affordances as not all platforms feature the same characteristics or modes of use. For instance, in contrast to Instagram, which is a visual-based medium used excessively by influencers for promotional communication (Yesiloglu, 2020), Twitter is a text-based medium where activism and political discourse are prominently featured (Burgess and Baym, 2022). This means that the manner in which influencers in my study use Instagram and Twitter (even though very few actively use Twitter) is different between the two platforms but still serves to construct a consistent self-brand, as I discuss in the empirical chapters. Therefore, the imagined affordances are not the same for all the platforms, and the communicational specificities of each platform need to be considered.

Bucher and Helmond (2018) also indicate the need to acknowledge nonhuman agency, specifically algorithms. Algorithms are part of social media's software, consisting of lines of code that act as instructions. Put simply, algorithms via the human input of code writing can execute complex digital functions (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011). In most social media platforms, algorithms form an opaque aspect of software architecture and how they operate is not shared by the companies- they are, in other words, 'black boxes' (Pasquale, 2015). Importantly for my study, as social media are geared towards the creation of data, platforms encourage and reward participation and engagement, usually with visibility. Thus, users are always, at least to some degree, subject to the capitalistic inclinations of the platforms that have developed algorithmic assortment in light of user engagement (Coudry and Mejias, 2020). This has been described by Cunningham and Craig (2019, p.94) as platform

precarity and refers to the ways that users, especially content creators such as influencers who monetise their activities on platforms, try to work with affordances or subvert the algorithms while playing the 'algorithmic game' (Bucher, 2012). As 'algorithmic ranking determines who and what gains visibility on social media' (Cotter, 2018, p.896), this creates an algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017a). Thus, the imagined affordances that govern personal life(style) blogging play a crucial role in what is created, circulated and seen, which, to an extent, involves what digital masculinities are created, circulated and seen. Moreover, as social media platforms are geared towards user engagement and participation, users are stirred towards creating data that are subsequently algorithmically processed, making user experience customised and affecting what they view in their feeds. As Bucher and Helmond (2018, p.249) attest:

Rather than thinking of affordances of social media platforms as one-way relationships whereby either the technology affords something to users [...] or users afford things to technology, the presence of the algorithms in particular suggests that such unidirectionality does not hold. By clicking and liking end-users fuel the algorithms, which in their turn generate information flows fed back to the end-users.

There exists, then, a two-way relation between affordances and users. On the one hand, social media platforms capitalise upon and exploit user activities for economic purposes, but on the other hand, users appropriate the platforms' elements, often influencing and shaping them (Van Dijck, et al., 2018). For instance, as commercial practices and promotional communication overtake Instagram through user action (for example, as brands collaborate with influencers and the latter tag the brands or as users tag brands more generally) the platform has now developed tools that respond both to transparency requirements that many countries, including the UK, necessitate, such as clearly indicating when a post is sponsored, and tools that make purchases seamless, such as direct links to brand profiles or websites as well as in-app purchases. In fact, a variety of the features and conventions of social media platforms, such as the use of the hashtag on Twitter³, were 'collectively created by users and only later implemented by the platform' (Burgess, 2021, p.24). Currently, hashtags are a significant part of promotional communication, being used by the influencers in my study in manners that implicate both the algorithmic and sociocultural visibility of digital masculinities, as I discuss in the empirical chapters. As Vittadini (2018) argues, this dialogical and

³ Bruns and Burgess (2011) have traced and explored how the adoption and the use of hashtag as a tagging element on Twitter was not a designed-in feature of the platform. Rather, hashtags started to be used and were adopted broadly by users, something that led to the adaptation and incorporation of the hashtag in Twitter around 2007.

dynamic relation between platforms and users that constantly reshapes the platforms means that platforms are in a constant beta state – they are continuously open to change.

Finally, for my study, algorithmic visibility has also been a matter of methodological concern, as I discuss in the methodological considerations in Chapter Three. Furthermore, in the empirical chapters, I elaborate on how imagined affordances explicitly or implicitly implicate and establish communicational and visual conventions that, for my study, often merge seamlessly throughout the networked presence of the bloggers. As the bloggers operate through various networked platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube and many still have personal websites, the imagined affordances for each mode of communication are different. However, the bloggers' self-representations ultimately need to be coherent, as this is a crucial part of self-branding. Burgess (2021, p.25) argues that differences between platforms have emanated from the coevolution of the affordances of each platform, the user practices and the business models. Overall, life(style) blogging has been affected and shaped by the various platforms the bloggers have encountered through their networked practice. Life(style) blogging ultimately merges platform usage to create an amalgam that can be viewed as a dynamic and ever-evolving communicational genre. This is evident, for instance, through the visual tropes and trends relating to Instagram and its imagined affordances that have seeped into the visuals shared on websites, while similarly, there is a noticeable aspect of the diaristic element of personal blogging that predates social media and that can still be found through Instagram as the empirical chapters showcase. Therefore, as the bloggers use a variety of platforms and personal websites, life(style) blogging essentially becomes a networked multiplatform practice, influenced by imagined affordances but not bound to any platform, dynamically adapting to the endless ebbs and flows.

Personal life(style) blogging as a communicative genre

To better contextualise the networked aspect and amalgam that life(style) blogging is and account for the imagined affordances that shape the practice, I approach it as a distinct type of communicative genre. This allows for a fluidity in accounting for the various platforms and personal websites the bloggers use while they simultaneously communicate coherent self-representations. Approaching personal life(style) blogging in this light allows me to frame my discussion through a multiplatform lens and, more specifically: 1) to discuss the characteristics associated with this genre and 2) to account for imagined affordances.

The term genre refers to recognisable forms of communication (Miller, 1984; Swales, 1990), such as fashion magazines, political newspapers or reality TV shows. In his seminal essay on genres, Miller

argues that a genre refers to 'a conventional category of discourse based in large-scale typification of rhetorical action' (1984, p.163). In other words, Miller frames genres as specific categories of text that arise when they become considerably typified and recognised by the audience. Miller argues that genres are based on social norms and stem from social actions; thus, a genre 'acquires meaning from situation and from the social context in which that situation arose' (1984, p.163). As such, genres, according to Miller, are social, situational, open-ended and involve action.

According to Lüders, et al. (2010), genres are generalised circulations of texts or relatively stable patterns of practices that are identifiable. As such, genres are analysable forms of interaction and provide contexts for themselves through preceding texts and emerge as new stages of already-existing genres (Lüders, et al., 2010). Genres are also social concepts constructed and negotiated through a discursive manner based on social conventions, indicating a shared frame of reference (Miller, 1984). Alternatively, as Thumin (2012) states, they are a contract or a tacit understanding between the audiences and cultural producers. One of the ways this tacit understanding is created and maintained is through discourse communities. Discourse communities refer to the producers and the consumers of genres that signal the distinct values and norms of a social community from which the genres draw and reproduce (Swales, 1990). For instance, a personal life(style) blog and its followers can be considered a discourse community, where specific commercial (i.e., self-branding) and visual (i.e., visual aesthetic communication) practices are transmitted, and expected, as I discuss in the empirical chapters. In this sense, genres meet certain communicative and normative assumptions among their producers and readers while acting as 'horizons of expectations' for the readers and models for writing for producers (Todorov, 1990, p.18).

Conceptualisations and approaches to genres have relied heavily on textual consideration and analysis (e.g., Berkenkotter and Huckin, 1993; Miller, 1994; Swales, 1990; Todorov, 1990). However, broader characteristics such as images, visual aesthetics, and even webpage design should also be considered within digital communications. Those can be either genre-specific or appear in a wide range of genres (Lüders, et al., 2010). Lomborg (2013), analysing digital paradigms of genres, differentiates between the software and the functional level showcasing that a genre, apart from the content, is influenced by the platforms it operates on and the platforms' technologies. In other words, genres are influenced by software elements such as algorithms and various other affordances. However, within studies of digital communication, the concepts of medium and genre are usually conflated. At the same time, there are no definite conceptual agreements as to what defines a medium and what defines a genre (Lomborg, 2011, p.58).

To situate the discussion specifically around blogging, two conceptualisations are more prominent: the approach of blogs as genres (Engholm and Hansen-Hansen, 2014; Herring et al., 2005; Lomborg, 2011) that include sub-genres (such as style blogs, lifestyle blogs, mental health blogs, mommy blogs and such) and the approach of blogs as mediums that include specific genres within them (Lüders, et al., 2010). Lüders, et al. (2010, p.952) argue that mediums and genres should be distinctly differentiated and approach genres as an intermediary between the medium and the text (with text, they refer to broader communicative features of the blogs, including videos and audio, images and web design). Through this reasoning, genres are situated below the software level, while they are both influenced and restrained by both the medium and the textual practices. Through that, what becomes apparent is the separation of the medium as understood in terms of technical features (such as the platforms or websites used for the blog) from the notions of the genre approached in terms of communicative conventions and expectations.

On the other hand, Lomborg (2011), with whom I most closely align, approaches blogs as genres. He argues that apart from communicative conventions, software and technological features also influence blogs. Those features include the ready-made templates that bloggers often use, such as Blogger and WordPress, with their various affordances, such as the chronologically reversed manner of communicating and the archive option. This way, the conventions and expectations of genres can also be found on the software level, and by regarding blogs as genres, more flexibility is given to the analysis. Lomborg's analysis is missing the networked aspect of blogging and a more detailed discussion of other social media platforms used by the bloggers. Nevertheless, approaching personal life(style) blogging as a distinct communicative genre in Lomborg's sense allows a fluidity in considering platforms and websites and the overall networked character of blogging as a multiplatform practice situated across various and diverse social media. This approach allows me to consider the norms and trends of each platform and the increasing platform contingency that relates to cultural production (Nieborg and Poell, 2018).

The concept of life(style) draws from the notion of lifestyle which is closely associated with consumer culture (Chaney, 1996). As Chaney (1996) argues the concept of lifestyle and what it signifies is not rigid and cannot be easily defined. However, in the context of my study lifestyle becomes closely related to 'a style, a manner, a way of using certain goods, places, and times that is characteristic of a group' (Chaney, 1996, n.p) – something pertinent and crucial to the influencers of my study. What shapes a lifestyle, then, is not mere spending patterns, but the particular ways in which consumer

goods and other material resources are deployed in everyday life settings (Dunn, 2008), or in other words the personal narratives of the influencers that are immersed in consumption. In this definition, it is not so much what is purchased or possessed by the consumer as it is how commodities enter into the consumers' lives. Lifestyle is an 'observable and complex pattern of expressive social and cultural practices based on the stylised use of commodities, settings, situations, and time' (Dunn, 2008, p. 128). Approached as such it becomes highly pertinent to the influencers in my study while it is actively used in the construction and communication of masculinities. McCracken (1988) uses the term lifestyle to indicate the tendency of deploying goods to create coherent cultural and aesthetic unities – something explored in the empirical chapters and actively related to narratives and affordances. As explained in detail in the introduction, for my study I am using the term life(style) to point to and merge elements pertaining to style/lifestyle blogging, lifestyle as a theoretical concept and genres.

A genre approach of personal life(style) blogging allows for a consideration of elements and norms of specific industries and of aesthetic traditions, as well as a broader attentiveness to the sociocultural environment and audience expectations (Neale, 2002). In the case of life(style) blogging that can be linked to the history and early iterations of blogging and personal style blogging that had diary-like characteristics, something still visible and to the fashion industry that the bloggers are highly enmeshed with and to conventions established through advertising more generally. Moreover, producers are also members of the audience. Thus, within a digital media culture that allows and is geared toward participation - in other words, a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006a) - often there is no clear-cut differentiation between producers and consumers; individuals from a blog's discourse community can also be bloggers or content creators themselves, something that can influence genre practices and norms.

Bruns (2006) coined the term produser to account for the consolidation of producers and consumers in the interactive environment of digital media. In the case of blogging, the bloggers/producers are also consumers of social media, of other blogs, of fashion media and of advertising. Thus, as members of the audience, the producers or produsers do not experience genres in isolation (Hill, 2007). Instead, they acquire a more active role in the shaping of the genre's conventions. Since life(style) blogging is a multiplatform practice, cultural production and, by extent, conventions are fluid and contingent (Poell, et al., 2022) on imagined affordances. As Nagy and Neff (2015) note, platforms have an inherent temporality; the manner in which users relate to platforms creates a feedback loop where platforms are shaped and reshaped constantly adapting. A prominent example that I discuss in more depth in Chapter Seven is the transformation of Instagram from a personal instant photo sharing platform to one that accommodates, bolsters and capitalises on the promotional

communication of brands and influencers and also the everyday (Leaver, et al., 2020). Thus, the genre of life(style) blogging is continually changing and in a constant dialogue with imagined affordances, individual users and brands-as-users while still maintaining some of its long-standing characteristics that pre-date social media, such as a self-reflexive diaristic mode of communication.

Networked publics

Consequently, the concept of genre is closely associated with the audience both in terms of content production (i.e., producers) and genre expectations (Todorov, 1990). Apart from the notions of producers, the audience of social media has also been conceptualised in light of the platforms' sociotechnical affordances and their networked nature. Ito (2008) was one of the first scholars to talk about a networked public. The term refers to the users of social media who are also the audience of social media. Hence, the users are also often producers of genres which highlight their active role (Marwick, 2013). The notion of the networked public becomes important for my research as it is elemental in the conceptualisation of the (digital) networked masculinities that Light (2013) has conceptualised, discussed in detail in Chapter Four.

Networked publics are shaped both by the imagined affordances that encourage and constrain user behaviour and the increased audience participation they allow. As such, the networked audience 'can be (re)actors, (re)makers and (re)distributors' (Ito, 2008, p.3) who engage in a shared culture through social exchange. This illustrates how life(style) blogging has been influenced and shaped by previous iterations of lifestyle and personal style blogging and why it often exhibits a high degree of homogeneity (both conceptually, i.e., the figure of the modern gentleman discussed in Chapter Six, and visually, i.e., visual tropes and clichés discussed in Chapter Seven) as the bloggers are simultaneously content creators and part of the networked public who are consuming blogs and various other lifestyle and fashion media and advertising. The bloggers, on the one hand, strive to adhere to the genre's conventions so that they are recognisable within the genre both by the networked audience and by the algorithms, as algorithmic visibility entails increased rewards such as engagement and followers (Cotter, 2019), with implications such as the algorithmic replicability of digital masculinities discussed in Chapter Seven. On the other hand, the bloggers try to differentiate and diversify their content to be distinguished within the genre they operate in, as the influencer industry is saturated and competitive, and thus they inevitably contribute to the progression of genre conventions.

Within participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006), apart from producers (Bruns, 2006) being closely related to networked publics and genres, there is also the notion of prosumers (Ritzer, et al., 2010). As de Certeau (1984) has noted, consumption and production of cultural objects are intimately connected. But through digital media and social media platforms, the predominance of UGC has offered a proliferous ground for what is called digital prosumption (Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). That refers to the simultaneous consumption and production of content. So, in this sense, the two concepts, producers and prosumers, are quite similar. Networked publics take on the role of prosumers/producers by actively creating content and participating and generating data through likes, comments or follows (O'Neill et al., 2013). In the neoliberal context in which social media operate, the practices of prosumption and produsage provide the platform's metadata and information about users that can be used for commercial purposes (Beer, 2009; Beer and Burrows, 2013). What is more pertinent to my study, however, is that the changing nature of consumption and production has had implications for masculinities, as the concept of masculinity has historically been associated with production. This is discussed in Chapter Four.

Finally, academics have been critical about the networked audience assuming the role of prosumers and producers, regarding this as a form of exploitation (e.g., Fuchs, 2010b; Zwick et al., 2008; Van Dijck, 2011). However, digital labour is not the focus of my study. Nevertheless, as social media platforms mature, the relationship between the creation of content and networked publics has become more streamlined. Structural changes in the media landscape have contributed to the configuration of 'an industry and culture populated by native social media entrepreneurs' (Cunningham and Craig, 2021, p.1). Those creative entrepreneurs, otherwise known in my study as content creators, are the bloggers, vloggers, influencers, streamers and, more broadly, anyone who monetises - or aspires to monetise - their content, often undertaking a multiplatform approach (Cunningham and Craig, 2021). Notwithstanding the potential precarity of this type of prosumption, this has endowed members of the networked public with 'a significant space for new, and much more diverse, voices with the means for cultural assertion as much as commercial media production' (Cunningham and Craig, 2021, p.3), as illustrated, for instance, through the notion of the Insta-worthy in relation to digital masculinities, which I discuss in Chapter Seven.

Digital self-representations

Ultimately, the UGC the bloggers create and post, be that images, texts, videos or audio, falls within the domain of digital self-representations. Like Caldeira et al. (2021), I approach self-representation in light of cultural and media studies where self-representation is understood as the symbolic creation of media texts (p.2). A key scholar who has extensively discussed representation and whose

work is worth revisiting in the context of the contemporary digital representations of the bloggers is Stuart Hall. Hall is crucial in gauging the meaning-making power of contemporary media systems and the representations found within them (Procter, 2004). He argues that 'it is in and through the systems of representation of culture that we "experience" the world: experience is the product of our codes of intelligibility, our schemas of interpretation' (1985, p. 105). The meanings that masculinities take on are inextricably linked to representation. Those meanings are multifaceted and hinge on how masculinities are constructed, created and communicated while involving various aspects such as the influencers, the networked publics and various other stakeholders at (such as influencer agencies, advertisers or fashion brands).

Pertinent to that is Thumin's (2012) conceptualisation of digital self-representations which I align with. Thumin argues that by participating in social media, users inevitably engage with self-representation; from simply setting up a profile to structuring their whole practice around content sharing or monetisation (as most of the bloggers in my study do), users communicate through acts of self-representation that ultimately form a necessary precondition for participation in social media platforms. According to the author, digital self-representations are the fairly conscious, mediated representations of selves that can be found on social media and other kinds of digital media. Thumin frames digital self-representations in a way that allows for a consideration of the various aspects that pertain to the digital communication of the bloggers in my study, i.e., imagined affordances, genre, and networked publics. Thumin argues that when a user produces a self-representation, either textual, visual or through audio/video, the user produces a bounded text; those texts, however fleeting and ephemeral they might be, act as markers of self-representations. Thumin attributes a high degree of consciousness and agency to the producers of self-representations while acknowledging that when producing digital self-representations, decisions always exist about which aspects of the self to represent and how to represent the self. Within this context, Thumin also considers the everyday experiences of the individuals that create self-representations (2012, p.8) this is in line with the digital narratives my study explores and are discussed in the empirical chapters.

Thumin notes that as bounded texts, digital self-representations have 'the potential for subsequent engagement' (Thumin, 2012, p.6), thus allowing for reflexivity to be considered. In this sense, reflexivity, which is traced throughout the empirical chapters, relates closely to Giddens' (1991) argument that the self is a reflexive project. Giddens argues that the self is made by being continuously worked and reflected upon. The author further links the notion of the self to self-narrative, arguing that individuals are '*trying to keep a particular narrative going*' (1991, p.54, italics

in original). This marks a point where Thumin's theorisations merge with Giddens' and is particularly relevant to my study through the various personal narratives the bloggers create. Overall, I approach digital masculinities through the lens of reflexive personal narratives communicated through digital self-representations.

However, Thumin argues that all communication is mediated; therefore, the bounded texts produced from digital self-representations are subject to processes of mediation, namely institutional mediations, cultural mediations and textual mediations. More specifically, the institutional processes of mediation refer to media as industries and institutions (Thumin, 2012, p.58). This type of mediation allows for a consideration of the specificities in terms of the business and commercial interest of platforms as well as architectural characteristics in terms of affordances. Even though Thumin does not elaborate on affordances, she notes that 'feelings about the digital play a part in the processes of mediation shaping contemporary self-representations' (Thumin, 2012, p.11), thus pointing to the dialogical relationship between institutions and users and the implied imagined affordances that this entails (Nagy and Neff, 2015). Cultural processes of mediation implicate the cultural elements involved in the production of self-representations, namely aspects that have to do with the personal viewpoints of the producers (Thumin, 2012, p.59), again implying a connection with imagined affordances. This is situated outside of the institutional context of social media and encompasses the abilities, expectations or understandings of the producers of digital self-representations, according to Thumin. Finally, textual processes of mediation refer to the context of digital self-representations and what they include, i.e., the broader content presented as text, images, video or audio (Thumin, 2012, p.60). That can be further linked to the notion of the genre relating to expectations and norms in the context of the networked public and visual aesthetic communication. Thumin has discussed genres in relation to digital self-representations and processes of mediation, but she perceives self-representations to be a distinct type of genre. Thumin's discussion is not as analytical and critical in relation to genres as Lomborg's (2011), and this is a point of contention in my study from Thumin as I approach life(style) blogging as a distinct type of communicative genre that primarily contains self-representations and includes various conventions and specific communicative manners, as I trace in the empirical chapters.

Social media platforms offer to users a variety of self-representational modes, such as texts, images, videos, and audio. However, and as Barbour, Marshall and Moore (2014) note, there exists a constant negotiation between the users of digital platforms and various forces that seek to impose or maximise limitations under which the users can act, or in other words, the imagined affordances that pertain

to digital communication. Thumin's processes of mediation capture this dialogical relationship of user agency and user practices and the various other sociocultural and structural elements that circumscribe them. Finally, another reason that Thumin implicates mediations with digital self-representations is to differentiate between representations in terms of form and politics (2012, p.3). The mediations of self-representations, either institutional, cultural or textual, are simultaneously both a political and a cultural matter due to the various interconnected associations they hold. Thumin means cultural in the sense of digital communication and the ways that self-representations are 'both produced by and productive of our digital culture' (Thumin, 2012, p.4), something closely related to Nieborg and Poell's concept of the platformization of cultural production (2018). In terms of political, Thumin refers to the ability of individuals to represent themselves the way they want, albeit often in restricted and mediated manners, consequently liberating digital culture from having 'one set of people to represent another set of people' (Thumin, 2012, p.8). Thus, digital self-representations can take on explicitly political claims, for instance, in delivering first-hand accounts of individuals or even providing therapeutic benefits (traced throughout the empirical chapters, namely in relation to the figure of the modern gentleman, the notion of the Insta-worthy masculinities and self-representations of disability and narratives of mental health), while allowing for the association of intersectional elements such as class, race and gender (Thumin, 2012, p.8).

Nevertheless, the concept of self-representation did not arise with social media; self-representations inherently involve communication (Rettberg, 2018, p.430), and individuals have been producing self-representations in many modes for centuries, through self-portraits, personal letters or diary-keeping (Kidd, 2015). However, one of the main differences with pre-digital self-representations is that digital self-representations, through social media platforms more specifically, have the potential to reach a larger audience than ever before (Rettberg, 2018). So, even though self-representations have existed in various forms, in the context of platformization, the technology that envelops social media and the various other adjacent devices such as cameras and mobile phones and software such as editing software have facilitated the easy creation of self-representations and broadened their communication in various forms. According to Baym (2015a), a characteristic of social media is that they often 'harness what people were already doing', turning those practices into 'revenue streams' (p.1). Therefore, even though social media have challenged and altered the ways individuals communicate, including the ways self-representations are formed, shared and theoretically contextualised (Thumin,2012), platforms, through their policies and affordances, have ultimately taken advantage of an already established cultural practice, turning it into a profit scheme as digital

self-representations have tremendous economic value to platforms by being ascribed with metadata exchange worth (Fuchs, 2014; Trottier, 2012a; 2012b).

Summary

Life(style) blogging is a practice that spans various channels, namely social media platforms and personal websites. The bloggers often communicate in a networked manner utilising, in varying degrees, the diverse mediums they use for their blogging. Consequently, life(style) blogging exists through an amalgam of communicational mediums that influence the bloggers' practice. Platformization, or the consolidation of platforms as a key economic and infrastructural model of the web (Helmond, 2015), has evidently seeped into the cultural industries within which the bloggers operate 'affecting the production, distribution, and circulation of cultural content' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018, p.2). This can be located in the affordances of the platforms that steer user practices and interactions. There exists a dialogical relationship between affordances and users, as users have their own 'perceptions, attitudes and expectations' (Nagy and Neff, 2015, p.5), and relating specifically to blogging, the manner the bloggers engage with the platforms and their websites is defined by imagined affordances that are traced throughout my study and placed in conversation with the communication of digital masculinities. In my study, I approach life(style) blogging as a distinct type of communicative genre which allows for flexibility in terms of navigating the multiplatform networked nature of blogging and allows for a consideration of convention and norms.

Digital masculinities are ultimately communicated through digital self-representations. Self-representations are a necessary condition for participation in social media platforms and, of course, in blogging (Thumin, 2012), encompassing all the elements the bloggers use to communicate, i.e., text, images, video and audio. Self-representations and, by extent digital masculinities, are reflexively constructed and sustained through the bloggers' self-narratives, as discussed throughout the empirical chapters. Nevertheless, those reflexive self-representations that ultimately serve to construct digital masculinities are subject to processes of cultural, textual and institutional mediations that can be located in the imagined affordances of blogging, the genre of life(style) blogging and other elements that influence it, such as fashion media and advertising.

Chapter Three. Methodology

The nature of information captured on different social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn and Instagram offer rich, naturally occurring data and present endless opportunities for research.

(Beninger 2018, p.57)

Social media platforms and personal websites are constantly in flux; they are dynamic and ever-changing spaces. As McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase (2018) note exploring social media requires an understanding of how platforms work and an awareness of their technical specifications. Therefore, my approach to studying lifestyle blogging has been nuanced and multidimensional, considering both technical characteristics and user norms and practices as illustrated by the bloggers in my study. For my research, I have employed a mix-methods methodology combining visual and textual analysis, thematic and narrative analysis and semi-structured interviews. I have approached the websites and social media the bloggers use as sites of production and circulation of digital branded narratives. Approaching the bloggers' communication through the concept of narratives opens up a 'methodological repertoire' (Quinn, 2005, p.6) where there are no strict rules of analysis, allowing researchers to be flexible to suit the demands of their study. Combining these methods offered me a way to explore and understand how the bloggers produce cultural value and meaning in relation to masculinities within the ecology of social media platforms.

This chapter discusses the methods used in my research. Combining the chosen methods allowed me to scrutinise images and texts and unpack self-narratives. According to Creswell and Poth (2018, p.67), narratives are closely linked with personal experiences; thus, they are expressed through the lived and told stories of the individuals, which in my study are located within the bloggers' self-representations. Consequently, engaging with the bloggers this way allowed me to unpack individual stories through the digital self-representations of masculinities. Moreover, since I am exploring personal experiences, approaching my research through digital narratives befits the Andersonian framework of IMT, discussed in Chapter Four, which is geared toward understanding individual experiences while also addressing specific cultural instances and transformations (Borkowska, 2020).

Digital content creator, #lifestyleblogger, influencer

I have been an avid reader of lifestyle blogs and a keen Instagram user and content creator myself for a long time. I have followed bloggers for many years through various platforms and seen first-hand through my study the changes that have occurred throughout the past decade. One of the most

prominent changes in the blogging ecology has been the rise of Instagram and its use as the preferred platform for influencers, which, as I discussed in the introduction, has also played a significant role in the rise of influencer culture. Thus, throughout my research, I observed the nascency and maturity of influencer culture. For my study, I started collecting data in mid-2018 and concluded in early 2022. I scrutinised websites and social media accounts, tracing them all the way back to their beginnings, with some websites going back as early as 2008. In that respect, I traced the changes from the second wave of blogging, as Findlay (2017) frames it, to the full-on encroachment of consumer culture and self-branding that fuels influencer culture. During the data collection period, I witnessed and navigated in real-time the decline of the use of websites by the bloggers, the rise of Instagram as the leading platform for influencer promotional communication, and the overall ‘fall of the blogger’⁴ - by that, I mean the use of the term blogger that has been broadly substituted by the term influencer. Even though practices relating to blogging still primarily exist, as I trace in the empirical chapters, in my study I observed how the bloggers slowly stopped using their websites and dropped the term blogger, adopting terms such as influencer or content creator and generally adapting and evolving following the imagined affordances of the platforms they use that ultimately influence the genre of life(style) blogging.

Nevertheless, blogging has been and still is, in many cases, linked to a personal website. When I first started collecting my data - as I had set out to investigate bloggers - it was paramount for the subjects of my study to operate a personal website. My initial search started from UK menswear bloggers that I was aware of and already followed, such as Buckets and Spade, Dapper Kid, Grey Fox Blog, Gallucks, What Neil Did (full list of blogs included in the study in Appendix A). I started combing through these blogs to gauge at what other bloggers they follow and suggest to their readers which usually happened through the websites’ blogrolls⁵. This can be viewed as a type of snowball sampling (Parker, et al. 2019). Snowball sampling, which is one of the most used sampling techniques in qualitative

⁴ In terms of other social media platforms, most of the bloggers in my study have never been active on Twitter, but there are a few who have been and still are. Almost all the bloggers had stopped using Facebook by the time I started my data collection. A platform that had been used by many bloggers but has been abandoned is Pinterest. In terms of YouTube, a few of the bloggers have used and still use the platform. My data collection had concluded before the board popularity of TikTok broadened; however, this platform has still not been taken up by most of the bloggers in my study. See appendix A for a complete list of activity and platforms used by the bloggers.

⁵ When I started my research, it was common for bloggers to have a section on their blogs where they recommended other bloggers to their audience. A blogroll is usually a page or a sidebar of a blog or website where the bloggers list their favourite blogs. This feature was used by most of the bloggers who used websites when I began my data collection. A blogroll was a common feature in ready-made website platforms such as Blogger, indicating how affordances have operated and solidified norms of the genre, and it dates back to early weblogs and online diaries, where bloggers included hyperlinks with the pages of other bloggers (Siles, 2011).

research, involves a small initial number of data points or participants who recommend other participants so eventually a chain of participants is created (Parker, et al. 2019). For my research, snowball sampling also took the shape of scanning bloggers' websites as the bloggers often collaborated with or attended events where other UK-based menswear bloggers were tagged in blog posts and images. Concomitantly, I searched through Google, blogging platforms (namely Bloglovin'⁶) and blog awards sites, such as Vuelio⁷. More specifically, I was scanning Google using terms that were closely related to my scope and aims, namely UK fashion blogger, UK menswear blogger, UK style blogger, which usually led me to blogs or articles that promoted blogs. In terms of Bloglovin', there was a sub- category of menswear blogs, so I filtered through UK-based ones while in Vuelio I combed through the Menswear category over the past years to look for the nominees. Concomitantly, I scanned Instagram looking for hashtags, namely #UKmenswearblogger, #menswearstylebloggerUK, #menswearfashionblogger and other popular hashtags used by bloggers already identified, i.e., snowball sampling. Finally, through Instagram I also used the 'Suggested For You' section which proved a useful algorithmic tool in sourcing bloggers. Through this affordance, a user is fed with similar profiles to the ones they are viewing or the ones they interact with often. Overall, through my Instagram searches I excluded profiles who only had a presence via Instagram as, circling back to the initial scope and aims of my study a website was paramount.

However, and more importantly, my search specifically through Instagram highlights the prevalence of algorithms and the impact they might have on research on social media by stirring visibility on some profiles over others. In most social media platforms algorithms are powerful but invisible architectural elements and shapers of what users see and interact with (Bucher, 2012). Thus, algorithms also affect digital research on social media as they are responsible, at least to a degree, for the materials that researchers have access to (Gruwell, 2018). Hence, platforms can partly 'construct our research' and also 'shape research practices' (Gruwell, 2018, p. 2), which in practice shaped my research as the platform of Instagram acted as a structural element of which profiles, I was granted visibility. This also circles back to discussions of algorithmic (in)visibility that are explored throughout the empirical chapters. Therefore, algorithms in my research have both methodological

⁶ Bloglovin' was one of the most used platforms for blog searches. Bloggers sign up using their websites and choose the blogging category they pertain to, with the most-used categories being fashion, beauty, and lifestyle. Each category hosts both female and male bloggers, but there is a separate category for men's fashion. The platform has now rebranded as an influencer marketplace, called Activate (<https://try.activate.social>, 2022). Their website states that they operate on the field of influencer marketing.

⁷ Vuelio (<https://www.vuelio.com/uk/>) is a UK-based PR agency that specialises in influencer marketing. The company organises and hosts yearly awards for bloggers and influencers but has now completely dropped the term blogger from its awards lists, solely using the term influencer.

and empirical consequences. In practice, this illustrates how visibility in some platforms, such as Instagram is shaped and influenced by the algorithms that act as 'black boxes' (Pasquale, 2015). However, Christin (2020) argues that despite the opacity that algorithms have researchers should stop focusing on limitations and reflect more productively on how algorithms act as socio-technical tools that shape out studies. Christin (2020, p.898), argues that by enrolling and leaning into algorithms in research 'a productive way to analyse complex and opaque' relations opens up. Even though she is specifically talking about ethnographic research, this can be extrapolated and useful for fashion studies and the intersections of the digital too.

Therefore, it is possible that participants were included or excluded through the affordances that actively shaped my research methodologically. As I am investigating self-representations and (in)visibility the algorithms, particularly of Instagram, might have excluded profiles in reaching my sample, especially profiles that did not a high number of followers or were shadowbanned (discussed in more detail in Chapter Six). The influencers, in my study form a quite homogenous group. Of course, there exist variations in age, ethnicity, sexuality and intersectionality are addressed in the literature review and throughout the empirical chapters. Nevertheless, the extent that algorithms shape the bloggers' practices and affect homogeneity - for instance in visual communication as discussed in Chapters Six and Seven- and the extent that algorithms influence my end as what reaches me as a researcher are, at some degree, inextricably linked. That should not mean that my observations have no critical or analytical merit, but rather it showcases how digital research is affected by the particularities and whims of platforms (Christin, 2020).

As my data eventually reached saturation (Birks and Mills, 2015) and my dataset includes profiles with varying numbers of followers the inclusion or exclusion of participants, in my study speaks more on how algorithms shape and impact researchers. As Gruwell (2018) argues, platforms, and the affordances and the algorithms that structure them are not neutral and they often have an active role in the overt, (e.g., 'Suggested For You' affordance) and covert (e.g. the algorithms that decide what profiles I will view in this section), ways and the manner researchers encounter materials.. The recruitment of the participants for my study was not solely based (or majorly based on) Instagram suggestions and Instagram sourcing, but the visibility that some accounts receive, and the potential inclusion/exclusion of participants can further be reflected upon. For this, I lean on Gruwell's arguments who calls researchers to reflexively engage 'more critically' and 'more rhetorically' with 'the social media platforms we study' (2018, p.2). As I discuss and engage with notion of algorithmic visibility throughout the empirical chapters, similarly who might be excluded or who is included in my study is shaped by the exact same algorithmic visibility and, ultimately, shapes knowledge (Gruwell,

2018). Therefore, Gruwell's (2018) argument is that researchers should reflect on the 'rhetoricity' of social media, or in other words reflect on the ways that platforms mediate and create spaces that researchers use for their study and also on how research practices might construct the platforms themselves. This is reflected in my study, both methodologically and in the empirical analysis where the manner that platforms actively structure and interact with digital masculinities are traced. As Gruwell notes 'social media platforms demonstrate plainly how technologies, material conditions, cultural values, and the researcher herself all work to create not a transparent, static text but a dynamic rhetorical ecology' (2018, p.2). Therefore, for this study I worked with non-human agents who actively shape and influence visibility. As I searched and engaged with UK-based menswear and lifestyle bloggers, specifically through Instagram the platform fed me increasingly similar content (which can explain saturation) showcasing how 'researchers do not just passively *use* social media platforms: we actively *produce* them'' (Gruwell, 2018, p.3 italics in original) which in extend shapes epistemology and knowledge.

Overall, after meticulously looking through all the above sources, I managed to identify the majority of the sixty-four bloggers who encompass my study. Some bloggers were subsequently added as I either discovered them later or as their blogs were created subsequently to the initial data collection (see appendix A for full list of blogs). Overall, the bloggers in my study vary in age, race and sexuality, and they also vary in market sector, something that is addressed through the lens of intersectionality in the empirical chapters and related to masculinities. Even though all the bloggers work within the genre of life(style) blogging and all present menswear and collaborate with clothing brands, some are more focused on skincare, some are more focused on travel and others are more focused on fashion or design. Nevertheless, this is precarious, and bloggers often stir their focus according to promotions and possibilities for collaborations with brands. For example, many of the bloggers in my study were initially focused on menswear but moved to the broader lifestyle sector to expand their collaborations, audience and income as the segments of skincare, travel and lifestyle are on an upwards trajectory in relation to influencer marketing (Geysler, 2022a). However, personal style and menswear still form an essential part of the bloggers' narratives; for this reason, my study draws significantly from studies on masculinities and fashion.

The bloggers form a relatively homogenous group in that: 1) they are predominantly urban-based, 2) they are digitally savvy, demonstrating a high degree of knowledge in using software for posting and

editing images and navigating various platforms, 3) they present themselves as university-educated⁸ and 4) they are mobile in the sense of recreation and/or professional travelling, as is communicated through their social media channels. As blogging is fluid and volatile to trends, the bloggers in my study have increasingly started using Instagram as their primary communication tool. Some have shut down their websites completely, others have kept them online but have not been active on them for years, while others still use them frequently. Also, in terms of self-identification, most of the bloggers use the term influencer or content creator, while some still identify as bloggers. Nevertheless, life(style) blogging practices share similar characteristics, as I discuss throughout the empirical chapters. Therefore, I will be using the terms blogger and influencer interchangeably throughout my study.

Digital narratives

For my study, one of the ways I approach the bloggers' self-representations is through a narrative lens. That means that the self-representations of the bloggers that communicate their digital masculinities and give an insight into their professional, personal and often quotidian experiences ultimately spin their self-narratives. Digital narratives also bring together the construction and representation of masculinities (and gender more broadly) as a cultural meaning-making process (Hall, 1985). As Hall (1990, 1996) has shown, representation, and especially self-representation, takes on a self-reflexive mode that is closely linked to identity and its construction. Therefore, digital narratives discussed through the prism of digital self-representations can showcase the various cultural meanings that masculinities take on.

A prominent characteristic of the genre of life(style) blogging, despite the high level of immersion with consumer culture, is that communication is framed through the bloggers' personal viewpoints and the sharing of autobiographical details and personal accounts is prevalent. Although blogging does not meet all the criteria of a narrative, principles of narrative analysis can be adapted for my study. As Linde (1993) argues, by narrating the self in a social context, the narrative provides a means by which we can convey and negotiate our sense of self with others. Narratives consist of various styles, and as a method, narratives comprise a plethora of analytic modes; thus, there is no definitive

⁸ This was found by the information bloggers include in their bio or LinkedIn when available and by information found on blog posts where bloggers have discussed their background, studies or reflected on their time in university. Many bloggers have discussed how they have studied and worked in sectors unrelated to fashion, such as nursing, banking or business. Of course, this information cannot always be corroborated especially when it comes to bloggers I did not interview (educational background was discussed with the bloggers I interviewed), but it goes to further show uniformity and a specific manner of self-representation.

consensus as to what constitutes a narrative (Riessman, 1993). However, as Riessman (1993, p.17), contends, any research topics revolving around first-person accounts of experience can constitute a narrative study. Moreover, narrative analysis is also in line with the highly personal Andersonian framework of IMT, discussed in Chapter Four.

It is crucial then to define what constitutes a narrative relating to my study. A narrative can be viewed as organising a sequence of events into a whole so that the significance of each event can be understood through its relation to that whole. In other words, a narrative conveys the meaning of events (Elliott, 2005, p.14). Elliott (2005, p.14) highlights three prominent characteristics of a narrative, all of which can be found in life(style) blogging. These are: 1) narratives are chronological representations of sequences of events⁹, 2) they are meaningful in the sense that they can provide a deeper understanding of an individual, and 3) they are inherently social in that they are produced for a specific audience. Narratives are not simply records of experience; instead, they are composed for an audience - in my study, a networked public - and they indicate instances that are motivated and purposeful (Riessmann, 2011, p.315). Accordingly, the bloggers do not just describe their thoughts or simply what they did during a day or what happened during a sponsored collaboration. Rather, they deliberately produce and share content, thus actively constructing and communicating digital masculinities through narrativising themselves for a networked public.

Nevertheless, self-narratives should not be understood as free fictions (Elliott, 2005, p.123), as they are products of interactions between the sociocultural elements that frame and provide structure for the narratives and the material circumstances and experiences of each individual (e.g., Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1992; Ricoer, 1984; 1985; 1988). Thus, while everyone has the potential to produce a creative and original narrative about themselves, 'this narrative will take as its template existing narratives which each individual has learned and internalized' (Elliott, 2005, p.123). That is, of course, also in line with how genres operate. Moreover, in the same manner, that digital self-representations are fairly conscious edited and curated aspect of the self (Thumin, 2012), narratives cannot offer unmediated access to the narrators' lives (Atkinson and Delamont, 2006). This aligns with Mishler's (1995) notions of narrative performance, where the interactional and institutional contexts in which narratives are produced and consumed are considered, which has allowed me to consider the

⁹ The blogs and websites of the bloggers in my study have an archive feature that presents in reverse chronological order the posts of the bloggers, and it is common for the bloggers to use this tool whether on a sidebar or on a separate archives page. This again showcases how affordances shape and relate to narratives and how genre norms operate, as it points to the reflexive element of self-representations that are viewed as bounded texts that can be revisited and reviewed (Thumin, 2012).

cultural, institutional and textual processes of mediations in relation to the digital self-representations of masculinities.

According to Hand (2018, p.220), even though digital self-representations on social media can weave coherent and autobiographical narratives, those narratives need to be considered in relation to the particularities of the platforms, such as the speed and immediacy of communication they provide. Consequently, as narratives are being increasingly explored through social media, Georgakopoulou (2018) invites researchers to rethink and reframe what a narrative is. Georgakopoulou (2018) argues that on social media, there exist small stories. These include the mundane and trivial aspects of one's life rather than the life stories comprising significant complications or life disruptions that have usually been explored through narratives. Georgakopoulou (2018) attributes that to social media affordances, as small stories are 'much more widely available and visible in public arenas of communication through circulation affordances' (p.274).

Accordingly, Georgakopoulou also notes that probing small stories on social media requires an exploration of the intersection of the digital narrative and the affordances and their role in what stories will be told and how. Small stories on social media can be considered fragments of narratives, according to Georgakopoulou (2018); they have an open-ended and networked character, thus resisting a neat categorisation of narratives that includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hence, small stories can be placed in the context of a broader self-narrative. For my research, this means considering the differences between websites, Instagram and other social media in terms of communicational modes and imagined affordances. For instance, many bloggers use their websites to write longer texts that often take on a diary-like mode, while communication on Instagram is geared towards image creation and the sharing of everyday and minute aspects of daily life, yet this diary-like mode of communication can still be found on Instagram, as discussed in Chapter Eight.

However, overall, the bloggers' narratives are created through their networked self-representations. This brings me to Lieblich (1998), who suggest a holistic approach when researching narratives. This means that there needs to be an emphasis on understanding each individual narrative in its entirety, which I argue is apt for exploring digital narratives. Building on that, Mason (2018, p.206) argues for a holistic or ecological approach to organising the data when looking into narratives. That involves ways of sorting out the data that do not necessarily use the same lens across the whole narrative. Instead, the weight of data organisation should be on categorising and assembling the material in such a way that it will support interpretations that involve explaining phenomena in specific contexts

(Mason, 2018), as I have done by using thematic analysis discussed below. In other words, this means that whatever is under investigation is viewed as an assemblage or an ecology. Such approaches trace links between the personal and the sociocultural, or the particular and the contextual (Mason, 2018), thus, allowing for imagined affordances to be considered. Consequently, as Elliott (2005) states, the focus on the individual 'does not preclude a sociological interest in social structures, norms, and constraints' (p.46). Therefore, analysing digital narratives could also provide an understanding of masculinities and the broader sociocultural conditions and imagined affordances that pertain to them.

Finally, as my study deals with fashion and personal style a helpful concept that I use particularly in Chapter Eight is Tulloch's (2010) notion of style narratives. Tulloch in her article titled *Style-Fashion-Dress: From Black to Post-Black* explored race and blackness in relation to a historical and contemporary context through the personal fashioning of the self. Tulloch explored individual and collective style narratives in diasporic black cultures, focusing on the US, the UK, Jamaica and South Africa. She uses the term style narratives to explore how individuals 'place themselves in the centre of a vortex of historical, social, and cultural renderings of "black" and "blackness"' (p.283) and how individuals express themselves through dress. Tulloch focused on issues around race, ethnicity and discrimination and looked at how individuals use dress to weave their personal style narratives and navigate ongoing issues of racism and inequalities (p.297). Although I pay attention to race, it is outside the scope of my study to focus on macro-structural elements such as racism and diasporic identities as Tulloch does, but the concept is still very useful in addressing mental health. As Tulloch argues, style is not necessarily what is trending or in fashion at a specific time; rather, personal style is the 'agency - in the construction of self through the assemblage of garments, accessories, and beauty regimes' (p.276). Thus, the personal style, which manifests through the dressed self, is a reflexive, part 'of a process of self-telling that is to expound an aspect of autobiography of oneself through the clothing choices an individual makes' (p.276). Therefore, for my study I have adopted this concept and it has proved an essential theory in merging personal narratives, dress and reflexivity in the context of mental health.

Gathering the data

For my study, data formed the foundation, as theories, analysis and concepts emerged from data analysis (Charmaz, 2006). The data were collected, coded, categorised and synthesised qualitatively, spanning over a three-year period. The process of collection, coding and categorising was an iterative one, moving back and forth between empirical data and emerging analysis (Bryant and Charmaz, 2007). Commonly, research on social media entails 'the study of various platforms that host user-

generated content' and data include 'profiles, updates, posts, comments' (McCay-Peet and Quan-Haase, 2018, p.40). For my research, I primarily gathered textual and visual data generated by the bloggers and posted on their websites, Instagram and other social media - although there were few instances of other social media use such as Twitter and YouTube, as they are not primary modes of communication for the bloggers. Consequently, I relied on two primary data sources for this study: 1) images and text from the websites and Instagram, and 2) interview recordings and transcripts. This created a vast amount of data that I kept in records in Word and Excel. I used memos and notes to code, classify and categorise the data.

The first step of the data collection process required collecting data from each of the bloggers' websites and navigating the blogs' entire histories. Most of the bloggers' websites had dated archives, but even those few that did not have dated archives still allowed for scrolling back, so I was able to go as far back as the beginning of each blog to gather data and gather information on posting activity. Scrutinising websites from their outset, I managed to collect data and highlight themes that repeatedly emerged through images and texts. From the websites, the log for the data from each post included: 1) date of post, 2) title, 3) full text and images, 4) brands featured, and 5) any other additional notes, which included anything seeming particularly noteworthy or tied directly to my research. Regarding Instagram, the information there is more abundant, constant and chaotic compared to websites, especially in relation to Insta Stories. Thus, I initially started scanning Instagram accounts in tandem with researching websites, and after going over whole website archives, my focus was on Instagram; I kept notes, and information, such as hashtags and screenshots trying to link posts to websites when possible. As I discuss below, saturation occurred, which marked the end of my data collection.

Images and text

My data comprise images and text that supplement or have been put in conversation with each other. By text, I refer to: 1) the text the bloggers write on their websites' posts. This varies in length and style and often takes on a long-form diary-like form; 2) any other text such as captions and hashtags associated with Instagram posts, Twitter feeds or YouTube accounts. By images, I refer both to images and to videos found in the bloggers' websites and social media. These are produced by the bloggers, but reposted images from brands and other media also exist. As Rose (2016) argues, images are 'never transparent windows on the world. They interpret the world; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it' (p.2). Indeed, life(style) blogging is a highly visual form of communication, both in the sense that it happens via screens and in the sense that images are produced in significant volumes and are a key site where digital masculinities are constructed and communicated. On the

one hand, the fields the bloggers work in (e.g., menswear, skincare, lifestyle etc.) are also highly visual fields as they relate to advertising. Also, social media platforms have a history of being geared towards the visual¹⁰, nudging users to participate in image-based communication. As image-based spaces can help us uncover elements of our social worlds (Stanczak, 2007), exploring visual communication on social media provides a way for understanding and mapping visual social media cultures (Leaver, et al., 2020) - and in my study, especially as they relate to digital masculinities.

Rose (2016) argues that there are three main 'sites' where the meanings of images are made: 1) the site of production, including genre conventions, technologies and affordances, 2) the site of the image itself, including its meaning and compositional elements, and 3) the site of audiencing that relates to how the audience could interpret images. Rose (2016) further adds that each site has three modalities: a technological, a compositional and a social. Nevertheless, Rose stresses that emphasis placed on each of those sites and modalities depends on the scope of the research. For my study, the first two sites, i.e., the site of production and images themselves, are analysed as it is outside my scope to address audiencing or audience perception, something more closely related to audience studies. According to my research questions, the focus is on self-representations and the production and communication of digital masculinities; as such, how the audience perceives this mode of communication is outside of my scope. Lister and Wells (2001) have also proposed a twofold enquiry for approaching visual data. They note that, firstly, the context of viewing should be considered; that is, where the image is located, whether it is public or private and whether viewers deliberately seek it. Secondly, the context of production should be considered; that is, the motives of distribution - whether the images are advertisements or forms of personal self-representation or both in the case of the bloggers who promote and brand themselves. In my study, this becomes directly linked to imagined affordances and is traced throughout the empirical chapters.

However, apart from looking at individual images, undertaking image research on social media often requires looking more holistically into the visual of the profiles of the users. Hand (2018) notes that due to affordances, the algorithmic processing that orders images on social media can affect how a narrative is constructed; thus, 'images are partly made meaningful in relation to sequence' (p. 219). Moreover, the author argues that because of the vast number of images that exist and that are constantly produced on social media, 'we have to abandon any idea of analysing individual ones' (Hand, 2018, p. 219). Rubenstein and Sluis (2008), even though not referring to social media per se,

¹⁰ Platforms that pre-date Instagram, such as Flickr (launched in 2004), Tumblr (created in 2007), Pinterest (created in 2010) and WeHeartIt (created in 2011) are primarily image-based.

have also argued that the stream of images outweighs the significance of the single image. As such, my study looks at individual photos but places significance on the broader narratives created through visual and textual self-representations.

Nonetheless, a significant part of the bloggers' self-representations comes from text. On their websites, the bloggers include texts of various lengths and contexts. On Instagram, the bloggers include text via captions and hashtags and often edit images to include text. Serafinelli (2017) argues that words serve to communicate motivations and visions while images can convey what words are not always able to describe, such as emotions or moods. In my study, the visual and the textual have been approached as supplementary to one another and analysed in tandem; something that provided a more holistic view of the bloggers' digital narratives. In visual communication studies, the central questions usually involve the interpretation or establishment of meaning (Rose, 2016). Of course, on social media, this does not always come solely from the images themselves but also through the intertextual or hypertextual dimensions of other elements and sociocultural practices related to the visual, such as hashtags (Sturken and Cartwright, 2010; Van House, 2011). Rocamora (2012) has specifically discussed hypertextuality in relation to fashion media and style blogs. She notes that blogs digitally link a 'wide range of written texts and images, brought together in a constantly shifting configuration of networks' (p.94). This way, texts - and all the other elements of blogging, such as images and hashtags - can be placed in conversation with one another and can be located in the networked ecology of social media.

Closely linked to hypertextuality, Hand (2018) argues that 'intertextuality refers to how the meanings of an image (or text) derive from that image but also from the meanings of other images and texts' (p.217). In the case of blogging, that encompasses: 1) the stream of images of a profile or a website that becomes enmeshed with social media visual cultures (Leaver et al., 2020), and 2) visual cues from advertisements and magazines (for instance, the publication *Kinfolk* has been crucial in shaping aspects of visual communication as I discuss in Chapter Seven). Intertextuality aims to envelop images with text and other attributes that together become meaningful in communication. Again, the relationship between affordances and intertextuality should be noted, as the architecture of platforms can often configure the 'possible and preferred meanings of images' (Hand, 2018 p.220), and I would also add the meanings of texts and other elements as well.

Interviews

To gain more insight into the thoughts and experiences of the bloggers, I undertook eight semi-structured interviews. I contacted all the bloggers of my sample via the contact email or contact form

provided on the websites. In this initial contact I mentioned my status as a PhD researcher based in London College of Fashion and included a brief section on what my research aims to find out and the reason, I am contacting the bloggers. Initially, ten bloggers agreed to participate but two interviews fell through as the bloggers stopped corresponding, so eight interviews were conducted in total. The interviews took place after the first cycle of coding, which included textual and visual analysis. This way, I had a broader idea of key themes/patterns of the overall dataset but also, I had meticulously scrutinised and coded the bloggers who were interviewed. All the interviewees were sent consent form (Appendix C).

I conducted these interviews between January 2019 and September 2019. Some of the interviews were conducted via Skype and lasted between forty minutes and an hour, while some bloggers asked me to email them a list of questions that they answered. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed them and then coded the transcriptions, linking the information to the initial codes that had arisen, but before the second cycle of coding. This ensured that the coding process remained coherent. The interviews were valuable in providing more in-depth information, but this did not alter the data collection as data saturation did eventually occur. Gauging how the bloggers performed their self-representations through their interviews was also highly instructive as the bloggers went in more depth into elements that were initially found on their blogs or social media and through the interviews they elaborated on them in more detail.

I chose semi-structured interviews as they allow both a level of uniformity and are also flexible enough to allow for an individualised approach and let new information arise (Dawson, 2009). To prepare I followed Galleta's (2015) steps, especially when it comes to preparing, structuring and undertaking the interviews. Her approach, especially in relation to elements such as preparation and gathering material before the interview (i.e., the initial cycle of coding I undertook), approaching the interview reflexively and allowing for the interviewees narratives to unfold (Galleta, 2015, n.p.) were used as guiding principles. More specifically, I structured the interviews around the categories and themes that arose from coding. Of course, as the initial coding had been conducted the interviews were heavily influenced by my study's broader scope and aims based on the coding framework that was discussed above. Nevertheless, each interview was adapted to each blogger's individual experiences based on what information each had included in their website and the bloggers' particular backgrounds. For instance, Syed Abbas from *Dapper Kid* has severe health issues that he openly discusses on his website, so a large part of the interview was focused on that. On the other hand, Cyrill Ibrahim of the *Cultured Gentleman* includes various posts on his website around elements

of being a modern gentleman, so aspects related to that were discussed in detail in the interview. Both of those interviews were conducted via Skype. On the other hand, for example, Rikesh Chauhan whose blog *RKZUK* and social media presence is heavily structured around mental health asked me to send him a list of questions so that he could answer in writing, which provided useful insight, but a face-to-face interview might have allowed me to delve into more depth in some of the answers.

Overall, the data from the interviews proved valuable along with the rest of the gathered data and are holistically discussed throughout the empirical chapters. Even though some issues that came up in the interviews were sensitive - for instance, discussions around mental health experiences-, everything that was discussed in the interviews was based on information already shared through the participants' websites and social media channels. Here it should be mentioned that as an interviewer I did my best to be attentive to the well-being of the interviewees. Of course, if at any point the interviewees expressed unease or were uncomfortable, I was prepared to stop the interview – something which did not occur, however, I did my best to ensure that I was attuned to the participants' feelings.

According to Hearn (2013) the way that the ontological status of an interview is formed 'largely dependent upon the nature of one's research and the area of study under investigation' (p.200). Therefore, for my study, as the interviews were structured and conducted after the first cycle of coding they were predominantly informed by my main aims/objectives and research on digital self-representations. One key guiding approach for the structure of the interviews was Holstein and Gubrium's (2008, 2011) approach who argue that the researchers should consider the whats and the hows of the interviews. By this they mean that the 'what' which is related to the main scope of a study and the 'how' which relates to the constructed aspects of the interviews, such as the people's experiences, perceptions and meanings need both to be considered. For instance, even though the interviews in my study were structured around key themes that arose after the first cycle of coding and were adapted according to each blogger's communication through their websites and social media channels, there were instances where bloggers had not thought about or were not aware of their positioning in relation to their masculinities prior to our interviews. This relates to what Holstein and Gubrium refer to as the 'hows' and has been addressed in relation to digital masculinities and self-representation throughout the empirical chapters. Popoviciu et al. (2006) note that research on men and masculinities does not often address the 'interplay between, theory, epistemology and methodology' (p.394), something that happens in feminist studies. Therefore, my mixed methods

approach, especially in the intersections of the interviews and the narrative analysis allowed for all those to be considered and presented in the empirical chapters.

According to Holstein and Gubrium (2004) a qualitative interview is an active process where both the interviewer and interviewee are actively contributing to complex meaning-making processes. As such, my gendered nature as a researcher in relation to the interviewees can also be seen as an ontological matter according to Hearn (2013). Hearn discussing interviews as a method for the study of masculinities under CSMM (Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities) argues that 'interviews can themselves be a site for reproducing, or challenging, men and masculinities' (2013, p.28). Men are often 'considered unmarked and normative' (Pini and Pease, 2013, p.2) when it comes to their gendered self-representations, which was observed during the interviews as alluded to above, e.g., Holstein and Gubrium's *hows*, and in my study is reflected in the interviews which themselves act as points of self-representations, either undertaken orally or via text. As such, Pini and Pease (2013) note that researchers need to 'recognize the implicit gendering of their work' as no matter the gender of the researchers, the researchers are 'researching men as gendered beings, then it is obviously necessary for them to give attention to representations of masculinity in the research process' (p.2). Moreover, the researchers themselves and their social locations are '*relevant*, especially in researching certain topics, but not all-encompassing' (Hearn, 2013, p. .34).

Overall, as Pini and Pease (2013) argue theory and methodology are interconnected. Especially when talking about intersectionality and the intersectional identities of masculinities, such as the bloggers in my study, the field of critical masculinity studies is still lacking in that respect in relation to queer or feminist studies (Pini and Pease, 2013, p. 13). Moreover, as one of the intersectional points that my study deals with is disabilities (and mental health issues) this also brings in another epistemological aspect of masculinity research that addresses disabled men while drawing from feminist approaches in developing theory that is grounded in the experiences of disabled men (Goodley and Runswick-Cole, 2013) and the experiences of the bloggers in relation to their mental health I would add. This is approached through my mixed methods research and narrative analysis as 'multiple methods facilitate opportunities for many voices and perspectives in fashion studies research' (Kaiser and Green, 2016, p. 167).

Coding

The visual and textual data I gathered were coded and categorised in tandem, making links and connections. I opted for manual coding and did not use any specialised software. Through the organising and categorising process, I developed themes contingent on ideas and concepts raised and

distilled from the bloggers' thoughts and opinions (Uwe, 2018; Charmaz, 2006). In other words, I started coding the data. Coding in qualitative research is a process of indexing data according to categories that can be used to link data fragments to ideas or concepts (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). According to Saldaña (2016, p.4), attributing interpreted meaning to each individual datum is useful for later purposes of pattern detection, categorisation, assertion or proposition development, theory building and other analytical processes. Thus, coding does not merely involve the labelling of parts of texts and assorting images in codes pertaining to specific topics. Rather, coding brings the data together so that they can be reviewed and analysed in relation to each topic development (Richards, 2009, p.94).

In qualitative coding, the researcher uses the codes to produce concepts, since coding provides a heuristic manner to interact with and think about the data (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.30). According to Seidel and Kelle (1995, p.55-56), the role of coding is threefold: 1) to notice relevant phenomena, 2) to collect examples of those phenomena, and 3) to analyse those phenomena to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures. Thus, coding allowed me to discern significant broader concepts and elements, compile textual and visual instances and finally, use narratives to produce main concepts leading to the study's findings. This process is summarised in figure 3.1 (Saldaña, 2016).

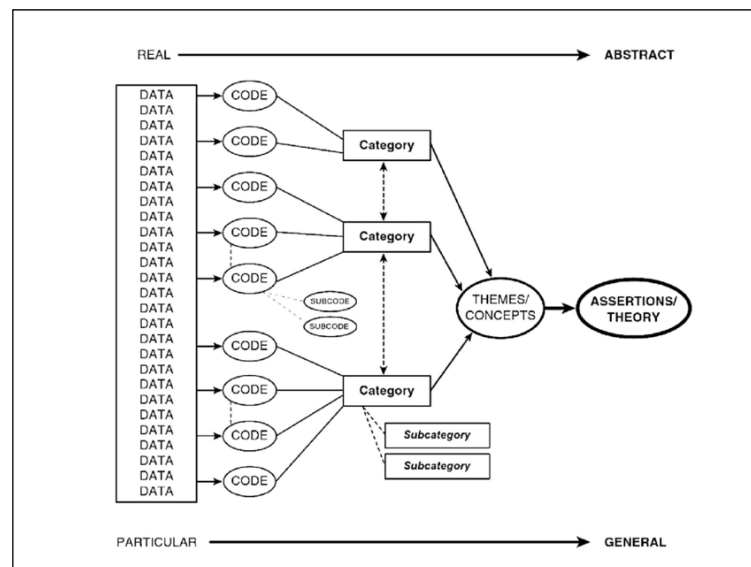


Figure 3.1 (Saldaña, 2016, p.14, figure 1.1)

In relation to coding, Saldaña (2016) proposes two coding cycles, which I applied to my study. The first cycle is the initial coding of data, and, depending on the scope of the study, researchers can choose from various methods for this stage. However, no matter the chosen method, a provisional list of codes that can be determined beforehand to harmonise the study's conceptual framework can

be identified as a starting point (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996; Richards, 2009; Saldaña, 2016). For my study, and according to my research questions and aims, I had initially noted broad categories relating to lifestyle, menswear and masculinities. For the coding process, I applied what is called concept or analytic coding (Saldaña, 2016, p.119). This method can be applied to the first coding cycle and aims to assign data with a word or short phrase that symbolically represents a broader meaning or concept. According to Saldaña (2015), concept coding is ideal for studies focused on theory and theoretical development, since the researcher is guided by disciplinary interests so that they can apply the initial list of codes they have created while being flexible to reflect upon and create new codes as suggested by the data as the collection continues.

The process of concept coding consisted of my going through each blog in its entirety and keeping records starting from the first post and advancing chronologically, coding text extracts, and gathering associated visual information from the websites. Simultaneously, I observed the bloggers' Instagram accounts, where, usually, new content is created more frequently than on their websites. Subsequently, once all the blogs had been coded, I summarised the initial codes that had occurred. Those were related to specific themes and concepts that arose, such as self-branding, links between menswear and masculinities, the figure of the modern gentleman, links between skincare and masculinities, discussions around mental health and particular visual modes of communication, following visual trends. Of course, those categories often coexist with one another. According to Harding (2019), summarising or charting the codes to view patterns, similarities and initial assertions is suitable for studies with multiple participants. Furthermore, some codes were found to overlap, reflecting how topics run into one another and how there may be multiple issues of concern simultaneously (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996, p.37).

Subsequently, I conducted a second cycle of coding in which I scrutinised all the blogs anew to break down the codes into even more specific sub-categories (e.g., diary-like communication, skincare, depression, suit-wearing, entrepreneurship), and investigated whether the codes had been appropriately applied, and noted the websites that were inactive or had been taken down. I also scoped any new websites that had been created. The categories that arise from coding allow the researcher to conceptualise crucial analytic features, make classifications and construct relationships with theories (Birks and Mills, 2015). As Birks and Mills (2015, p.11, italics in original) note, 'categories must not be *forced on* the data, they should *emerge* instead in the ongoing process of data analysis'. Eventually, saturation occurred, meaning that further data collection did not add other properties or new dimensions to the established categories (Birks and Mills, 2015; Richards, 2009). Since my

research is engaged with blogging, with most of the communication being active throughout the data collection process, I had to mark a specific date whereupon the data collection would cease. Therefore, data saturation was not the main objective to signify the end of data gathering; however, saturation of data did occur, as the categories that arose were repeated both throughout individual blogs and across the blogs in my study.

Ethics and copyright

Apart from the interviews, all the other data I gathered stemmed from online sources available for public view, meaning that no website was password-protected, and no Instagram account from the bloggers in my study was a private account. In terms of data gathering and what users should expect in terms of privacy Meta states in the Privacy Centre that information shared on the platform by 'all people, including those under the age of majority' can be 'in our interest and those of the general public to further the state-of-the art or academic understanding on important social issues that affect our society and world in a positive way' (Meta, 2023) – something that my study does by exploring digital masculinities via the posts of the bloggers.

Moreover, even though not used in my study, Meta provides databases and tools from 'privacy-safe public data and products' from their application (Meta,2023) that similar to Twitter can be harvested and used by researchers. Finally, websites and social media are subject to copyright, and any visual or textual data used in my discussion comes with an acknowledgement of the blogger as the copyright holder. Under the Fair Use Act Sections 29 and 30 of the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988, the material can be used for academic purposes without explicit permission.

Nevertheless, apart from copyright issues, freely accessing and gathering user-generated digital data has been a subject of academic debates. On the one hand, researchers argue that since information is shared on public social media platforms without restrictions, such as membership or password, it can be used for academic research without the need for informed consent (Beninger, 2018). On the other hand, others note that even though the information is public, it is still not ethical for researchers to gather and analyse data without explicit consent (Beninger, 2018). To overcome this impasse, Beninger (2018) argues that it is crucial to understand how users view and share their information. Social media and personal website users use platforms and share content in different ways and for various reasons. Some users are active in producing, sharing, and monetising content, while others take on a more passive role in observing and interacting in other ways online (Beninger, 2018). Beninger (2018) also argues that users seldomly read and understand the complex conditions of platform use and data collection, which makes upholding informed consent and disclosure a

challenge either way. Therefore, the weight of the decision on informed consent should be on user expectations (Beninger, 2018); that is, whether a user has intended for their content to be widely and publicly accessible. For content seemingly intended to reach a wide audience such as in the case of the influencers, Beninger (2018, p.69) argues that 'a researcher would not necessarily need to gain consent to use it'.

Consequently, regardless of how public or accessible and without restrictions a site or content is, researchers should decide depending on users' expectations of how their posts should be used (Beninger, 2018). Of course, I do not have immediate access to the bloggers' views on their content being used for academic purposes. Nevertheless, following Beninger's assertions, the bloggers strive for maximum visibility and audience engagement, through their own efforts and through brand collaborations that serve for wider circulation of content. Also, the bloggers in my study publicly discussed various instances of their professional and private lives. Thus, I argue that their content is created and communicated for broad and public consumption. For this reason, I have chosen not to anonymise the bloggers. Even if I did anonymise my sources, images and text could easily be traced back through a website search. Moreover, the names of blogs are essential in my study, especially in relation to the figure of the modern gentleman, discussed in Chapter Six. Similarly, as I make links between data from the interviews and information and data gathered from the websites and the social media accounts of the bloggers, by anonymising the data important elements of analysis would have been missed. Finally, as noted in the empirical chapters, publicly bringing overly personal matters to the forefront is often common for the bloggers as they strive to reach algorithmic visibility. Thus, I have chosen not to anonymise the bloggers.

Summary

In this chapter, I have discussed the main methodological elements of my study. Researching the networked multiplatform practice of life(style) blogging offers significant insight into the construction and communication of digital masculinities. This happens as the bloggers build their narratives through self-representations that reveal fragments of their professional and personal lives (Reissman 2008). The self-representations that encompass images and text offer glimpses into the bloggers' personal, albeit curated, worlds. The bloggers' posts can be approached as small stories that tell of ongoing, and often fluid, situations but are nevertheless 'salient and powerful narrative meaning-making ways in mediated interactions' (Georgakopoulou, 2006, p.4) where mediation can be located within the cultural, institutional and textual levels (Thumin, 2012). Approaching blogging as a form of digital narrative allows a holistic examination of the personal as it is expressed through the technological. Narratives serve as 'the proverbial ferry between the abstract and the concrete,

between cognition and behaviour, and between the symbolic and the material' (Reissman, 2008, p.16). Thus, formations of digital masculinities through highly personal small stories can illustrate both meaning-making and broader cultural elements and conditions relating to masculinities, in line with the Andersonian framework.

Methodologically, by using mixed methods, has allowed me to be 'better attuned to cultural context, better able to see how this context has been woven into the fabric of both living and telling' (DeFina and Georgakopoulou, 2015. p.6). Through narratives, the importance lies in interpreting themes that arise and putting those themes in conversation with one another (Reissman, 2008). Thus, coding and narrative analysis has proved useful in contextualising and categorising an array of social media visual and textual data (Miller, 2011). The upcoming chapter discusses the theoretical framework that pertains to my study and key concepts and notions relating to the study of masculinities.

Chapter Four. Masculinities: a review of the literature

Researching gender is a complex area, increasingly conscious of the complicated relationship between theoretical frameworks, methodological strategies and phenomena subject to examination. It is important to hold these relationships in a critical synthesis, while incorporating insights from recent reflections on representation, identity and cultural difference with reference to men's and women's social experiences.

Haywood and Mac an Ghail (2007, p.10)

My study looks at gender as a social construct¹¹. As a social construct, gender can be conceptualised as a social structure that includes 'social relations within which individuals and groups act' (Connell, 2002, p.9). In those relations, Connell (2002) stipulates that constructions of gendered identities are neither fixed by nature nor entirely imposed from social structures and cultural norms. Instead, through the ways individuals conduct themselves in everyday life, they 'claim a place in the gender order - or respond to a place they have been given' (Connell, 2002, p.4). In other words, individuals, at least to some degree, have agency in the framing of their gendered practices. Through those practices, individuals might conduct themselves as masculine or feminine or exhibit varying degrees of 'gender bending' (Connell, 2002, p.5). Gender arrangements can be at the same time 'sources of pleasure, recognition and identity' and 'sources of injustice and harm' (Connell, 2002, p.6). Nevertheless, as Connell (2002) cautions, there is nowadays an increasing blurring of the gender structure that moves away from traditional sociocultural modes of gender, creating a form of cultural turbulence that disrupts the accepted notions of how individuals are expected to behave.

The sociocultural notions of masculinity and femininity as expressions of gender, according to Connell (2002), are situated within the social structure of gender relations. This social structure where gender is posited includes large-scale sociocultural elements, such as corporations, the educational sector, the media, politics, and the labour market, and micro relations, such as face-to-face relationships and individual practices (Connell, 2002). Therefore, the sociocultural conception of gender encompasses both institutions and personal actions that influence and construct ideas about gender. In other words, within the gender structure, masculinity and femininity are institutionalised; however, they are also an aspect of individual character or personality, as individuals engage in practices, such as the fashioning of the self, the use of makeup, the consumption of media, that can signify, subvert or confirm gendered identities (Entwistle, 2000; Kaiser, 2013). Even though gender is socially shaped and structured, individuals can also actively form their gendered identities (Bradley, 2013). Thus,

¹¹See Risman and Davis (2013) and Whitehead (2002) for detailed discussions on gender theorisations over the past 50 years.

individuals can be perceived as intentional agents (Beasley, 2012) who are affected but not entirely moulded by the institutional structures of society.

Nonetheless, gender is not solely an attribute of individuals, but rather it involves the cultural practices of individuals (Lorber, 1994; West and Zimmerman, 1987), as individuals define and represent their expressions of gender through culturally coded gendered practices. This means that even as intentional agents (Beasley, 2012), individuals are surrounded by cultural notions and assumptions about gender that inform their gendered practices and identities. Hence, cultural values often guide our expectations of gendered behaviour, which are context-specific. For instance, in my study, masculinities are created and communicated within a specific UK context, as the bloggers work primarily within the UK market, while in some cases, the bloggers draw on particular context-specific histories - as is the case with the figure of the modern gentleman discussed in Chapter Six. Cultural values surrounding gender can also be found in consumer culture and advertising, something pertinent to my study as the bloggers are closely affiliated with brands in various sectors as well as the fashion industry (Pilcher and Whelehan, 2016).

Moreover, gender has been approached through the lens of performativity. Specifically, Butler (2006, p.xv) argues that gender is 'manufactured' and 'stylised' through 'sustained acts' closely associated with the body. Gender thus, involves various cultural, historical and political contexts which become inextricably linked to how it is produced, maintained and naturalised (Butler, 2006, p.4-5). As such, masculinities viewed through the bloggers' digital networked channels are created and communicated through cultural codes that intersect with various categories (Crenshaw, 1991) and take on meaning through self-representations (Hall, 1985).

Within the gender structure, individuals interpret and negotiate behaviours (Connell 2002), often testing and expanding the boundaries of accepted notions of gender expressions, such as expressions of masculinity (Richins, 1991). The interpretation and negotiation of gendered expressions are evident through the bloggers in my study who are situated in a particular heightened point of the cultural turbulence (Connell, 2002) where notions of gender are disrupted both through institutional aspects, such as elements within consumer culture and media imagery and through personal practices and self-representations. This chapter discusses the main concepts and notions relating to the study of masculinities and situates my study within the Andersonian framework of IMT.

Masculinity

Although the biological expression of men might often be associated to masculinity (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009), masculinity should not be conflated strictly and necessarily with men. Since gender is a social construct, not reduced to biological characteristics, masculinity should not be strictly collated with male bodies or biological determinism¹². Like gender, which is an interplay between structures and individual practices, masculinity can be viewed as the 'behaviours, languages and practices, existing in specific cultural and organisational locations, which are commonly associated with males and thus culturally defined as not feminine' (Whitehead and Barrett, 2001, p.15–16). This reading of masculinity implicates both sociocultural associations and personal expressions that inform the cultural coding of masculinity. An important element of Whitehead and Barrett's definition is the idea of common association. As many academics have demonstrated, ideals surrounding masculinity are fluid, constantly changing over time and space (Beasley, 2005; Coles, 2009; Connell, 2005; Flood, 2002). Moreover, masculinity is not 'an isolated object, but an aspect of larger structures' (Connell, 2020, p.67). Thus, notions and expressions of masculinities should be negotiated within the specific sociocultural contexts in which they are located and expressed.

The social constructions and representations of masculinity within specific sociocultural contexts are, in other words, ideologies of masculinity. With this understanding of masculinity, Bordo (1997) proposes that masculinity is related to cultural ideologies and representations of gender, or 'idealizations', which can be aspired to equally as much by men and by women (p.149). Those ideologies are communicated mainly by media representations (and self-representations, I would add) and as Bordo (1997) posits, are open to all genders as they can be aspired to regardless of gender and are disseminated through institutional discourses with social or communicative purposes, such as advertisements or fashion imagery. Bordo (1997) references specific examples stemming from advertisements, the media and the fashion industry to demonstrate how visual representations of gender can create and communicate gendered expectations and stereotypes or ideologies. For instance, men's representations are often coded with particular ideals around masculinity through advertising imagery and films (e.g., Chapman and Rutherford, 1988; Edwards, 2006; Geczy and Karaminas, 2017; Jobling, 2014; Jackson and Moshin, 2013). Likewise, idealised versions of masculinity are created and communicated through images in the fashion sector and consumer industries (Frank, 2014).

¹² This point is contextualised in detail by post-structuralist studies such as the framing of female masculinities (Gardiner, 2012; Halberstam, 1998; Noble, 2004), the conceptualisation of lesbian masculinities (Love, 2016) and literature of queer gender expressions such as queer masculinities (e.g., Baker and Balirano, 2017; Gottzén, 2016; Heasley, 2005).

Concomitantly, ideologies about masculinity are created through media representations but can also be subverted and challenged. Galasinski (2004), building on Bordo (1997), notes that since ideologies of masculinity are linked to culture, they often come with contradictions. It is evident then that ideologies of masculinity presented through cultural structures such as advertisements or media often 'provide a shared symbolic language for identifying certain practices as signs of masculine character [...] [offering] symbolic resources for crafting conformist and oppositional presentations of masculine selves' (Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009, p.283–84). Therefore, cultural products and imagery, such as films, fashion imagery, advertisements and blogs, become effective ways to propagate gendered discourse and create new ideologies of masculinity.

Nevertheless, Bordo (1997, p.150) cautions that we do not live in a 'post-gender' age, and cultural instances that try to overthrow or expand accepted ideals about gender do not necessarily reflect the everyday, lived experiences of individuals. Even though Bordo conceived those arguments more than twenty years ago, they still hold, in part, true. Granted, visual imagery through advertisement, media, and the fashion sector offers instances where expressions of gender have advanced, as I discuss further below, (e.g., gender-neutral, gender-subverting, inclusive elements (Bowstead, 2018)) and posit throughout my study, but stereotyping in terms of gender cultural coding still exists (Waling, 2016). Still, those instances reflect representations of masculinity through culturally produced institutionalised instances. On the contrary, by looking at masculinity through the interplay between sociocultural elements and the self-fashioning and self-representations of individuals, as my study does, I argue that it provides the potential to consider lived experience and personal narratives. In my study, the bloggers are more closely intertwined with ideologies of masculinity delimited through the fashion industry, advertising, and the lifestyle influencer sector within the UK context. Those could serve as the institutional mediations of Thumin's (2012) self-representations that are, of course, bound by platform affordances. As such, the bloggers, through highly personal experiences communicated via their digital narratives, can follow, negotiate, subvert and construct idealisations of masculinity (Bordo, 1997).

Hegemonic Masculinity Theory

Over the past three decades, the interdisciplinary field of Critical Studies of Men and Masculinities has been advancing the study of masculinity, focusing on sociocultural constructions of masculinities and their impact on different groups of men (and women and gender(s) more generally). The fluidity of the concept of masculinity is well-acknowledged, and various prominent theorisations of masculinity have been developed. One of the key frameworks for the study of masculinity is Connell's

(1995) HMT. HMT has been widely used in sociocultural studies of masculinity and more specifically in relation to advertising and media (e.g., Avery, 2012; Messner and de Oca, 2005; Ricciardelli, Clow and White, 2010; Thompson and Holt, 2004) but has also been heavily critiqued (e.g., Beasley, 2008; Demetriou, 2001; Griffin, 2018; Hearn, 2004; Howson, 2006) and reframed to acknowledge sociocultural changes (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005; Messerschmidt, 2018) as I discuss further below.

Connell (1995) argues that masculinity is not fixed and singular, ubiquitously pertaining to all men; rather, it is fluid, socially, culturally and historically constructed, interwoven with issues such as able-bodiedness, class, nationality, race and religion. Thus, to encompass this plurality, Connell (1995) adopted the plural term masculinities, which has been widely taken up by scholars in cultural and media studies. This plurality is connected to the plurality of representations of masculinities (1995). Even though Connell has not linked this to Hall's work directly it is evident that the various representations of masculinities apart from cultural meanings and significations also create power imbalances, stereotypes and can have a real material impact (Hall, 1985).

This plurality is also closely related to the notion of intersectionality firstly developed by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991) and posits that social categories such as race, class, gender and able-bodiedness are overlapping and interdependent. This term has been mainly used to analyse discrimination, inequalities and disadvantaged individuals. Intersectionality has been framed as a key theoretical framework to discuss the interrelated relations between different layers of oppression (Collins, 2000) firstly applied in relation to women of colour. Nowadays, intersectionality has been used in relation to masculinities and the concept has been focused on issues of identity, representation and power (Carastathis, 2014). More broadly, recent work on intersectionality showcased how interrelated categories are not parallel or static, neither on an identity or everyday level nor on a structural level (Hancock 2007b), which is very important analytically for my study. Thus, intersectionality allows for a flexible conceptual and analytical understanding of the complexities of gender, race, class, and sexuality through the lens of difference (Baca Zinn et al., 2005). Inevitably, the concept of intersectionality has received criticism; some call it a 'buzzword' (Davis, 2008), while others claim that it is too vague and this aids in depoliticizing oppression (Carastathis, 2014). Nevertheless, intersectionality still holds important analytical merit, especially when reviewed in relation to the concept of hegemonic masculinities as is discussed further below and in the empirical chapters.

Still, the plural expression of the term masculinity did not come without debate. Various academics have argued that the plural term of masculinities often serves to homogenise men, affixing them into categories and encouraging fixed viewpoints and does not relate to what men actually do in practice (e.g., Hearn, 1996, 2004; MacInnes, 1998; Schrock and Schwalbe, 2009). Nonetheless, the plural concept of masculinities has endured well across the decades, especially pertaining to studies on media, advertising and fashion, indicating the multitude of representations (e.g., Beynon, 2002; Breward, 1999; Geczy and Karaminas, 2017; Hall, 2015; McNeil, 2000; Nixon, 2003), enveloping both social norms and the individual's actions. For that reason, I have adopted the plural term masculinities in my study.

Notwithstanding the plurality of masculinities, Connell (1995) argues that at any given time and place, one hegemonic masculinity exists. In any given culture, multiple masculinities can exist, but only one constitutes the most 'culturally exalted' (p.77) way of being a man. The concept of hegemonic masculinity was first proposed by Carrigan, et al., (1985) in an attempt to describe the hierarchical interaction between masculinity and the embedded notions of power and domination in the study of men (Connell, 1987). Connell further developed and refined the concept in the seminal book *Masculinities* (Connell, 1995), where she undertook ethnographical research on Australian high schools and labour politics. In the book, Connell (1995) proposes an understanding of masculinity that considers dominant comprehensions of men's practices encompassed and sustained by social institutions such as the state, the education system, the military or corporations. Thus, the concept of hegemonic masculinity seeks to showcase the interconnection between structures - mainly male-dominated - and individual practices. By considering the institutional aspects and the power those structures assert over individuals, Connell articulated and defined one dominant form of masculinity that she coined as hegemonic.

HMT is mainly linked to notions of power and status. As it bears a social constructionist perspective of gender, HMT aims to articulate the social processes by which a masculine hierarchy is created and established. Those social processes, Connell (1995) argues, include two interactional mechanisms: physical domination and discursive marginalisation. Domination includes the material acts that subordinate specific groups of boys and men, and marginalisation represents the discursive challenging of the legitimacy of particular masculinities (Connell, 1995). Through those mechanisms, three categories of masculinities arise: complicit, subordinated and marginalised (Connell, 1995). Complicit masculinities include individuals who take advantage of the benefits they can attain under a hegemonic regime while not actively promoting or consciously subscribing to specific hegemonic

values. Thus, complicit masculinity keeps the hegemonic form of masculinity in power because of individuals aspiring to attain or at least mimic it (Connell, 1995). In terms of subordinated and marginalised masculinities, Connell (1995) argues that they are both ostracised by the hegemonic form of masculinity. Subordination refers to hierarchy and dominance refers to the broader gender order; for instance, able-bodiedness can serve as a point of exclusion in particular contexts. On the other hand, marginalisation refers to the external structures of the gender order. However, as social structures, subordination and marginalisation interact and affect each other. For instance, class and able-bodiedness can act as structural mechanisms of subordination and marginalisation. Consequently, the idea of hegemonic masculinity exists in opposition and in relation to other masculinities (De Visser et al., 2009). Moreover, even though individuals may not actively seek hegemonic practices to assert their gender identity, they can often subtly align themselves with it (i.e., complicit masculinity) (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Connell did not associate hegemonic masculinity with a particular set of traits; nevertheless, through studies conducted under HMT, hegemonic masculinity, specifically as it pertains to a UK-US context, has come to be characterised by specific attributes such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, control, domination, violence and emotional stoicism (Arxer, 2011; English, 2017; Messerschmidt, 2012, 2016). Hegemonic masculinity, then, can be viewed as a particular ideology of masculinity (Bordo, 1997), both structurally dictated and individually prescribed. White (2019) notes that a way that hegemonic ideologies are articulated and propagated is 'through the production and maintenance of masculine archetypes such as the executive, politician and sports star' (p.12). Simultaneously, hegemonic masculinity has been linked to the corporate word and the image of the neoliberal entrepreneur (Connell, 2012), as I discuss in Chapter Six.

Overall, idealisations and stereotypes present ideals that individuals can draw upon to assert their masculinities. Even though Connell has not drawn on Hall's work to relate media representations to hegemonic conceptualisations of masculinities, the role that media play in that as meaning-making modes is apparent (Hall, 1977; 1986; 1991). As such, the media play a crucial role in disseminating hegemonic representations through advertising, film, magazines and popular culture (Hall, 2015). As Schrock and Schwalbe (2009, p.279) argue, it is both through the engagement with representations and forms of masculinities found in media and through everyday praxis that individuals master sets of practices that denote their masculinities. Therefore, traits such as bodily displays of aggression expressed in physical and emotional strength (de Visser et al., 2009) or emotional detachment (White, 2019) are not only becoming linked to the most 'culturally exalted' (Connell, 1995, p.77) way

of being a man in a given context, but also give 'expression to men and women's aspirations' (Howson, 2009, p.23)¹³, as discussed in detail throughout the empirical chapters.

HMT: critique and response

Overall, HMT bears a social constructionist perspective and aims to articulate the social processes by which a masculine hierarchy is created and instituted. HMT has provided a useful theoretical framework to approach and analyse masculinities; nonetheless, it has been critiqued and reviewed by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) to address criticism and reflect sociocultural changes since its initial formation. One of the main critiques of HMT is the use of the term hegemony. As McCormack (2011) observes, terms used within HMT, such as hegemony and complicity, i.e., complicit masculinities, are vague and convenient overarching terms that slide between several meanings. Those terms can provide varying and often conflicting interpretations, which are not always adequately defined. As Flood (2002) notes, the notion of hegemony in Connell's writing is often used as a political mechanism tied to the word hegemony in terms of leadership, while other times, it refers to dominant (most powerful and/or most widespread) versions of manhood. On other occasions, hegemony is approached as an empirical reference to specific actual groups of men (e.g., politicians, entrepreneurs), while at other times, hegemonic masculinities are being confounded as both an archetype and a process (Messerschmidt, 2016). Thus, the very word hegemony is not only inadequately defined, but it is often interchangeably used to encompass a plethora of concepts.

Even if the terminology becomes refined, the application and empirical aspects of HMT have also been problematised. As Whitehead (2002) argues, most men do not express or perform the patterns of hegemonic masculinity. This constitutes hegemonic masculinity, as an ideal that most men cannot attain (Edley, 2017). In this context, the social factors that result in hegemonic masculinity are left unclear. Also unclear is whether there is only one hegemonic strategy at any point in time or whether hegemonic strategies can vary across different parts of social formation, creating conflicts or tensions for individual men between different hegemonic ideals as they move horizontally across social practices (Wetherell and Edley, 1999, p.3). Tied to that is the critique of Connell's (1995) conceptualisation of the dominant, subordinated and marginalised masculinities. Those classifications are loosely conceived as structural mechanisms for the reproduction of gender order, but there exists insufficient empirical evidence or conceptual logic to support this position

¹³ Hegemonic masculinity, as a concept of masculinity in general, does not solely pertain to men, but rather encompasses the gender order more broadly, as has been shown by Connell (2002). For instance, Haynes (2012) explored how female lawyers adopt hegemonic ideologies, associated with masculinity, through their dress (i.e., power dressing) to convey power and signify a perceived higher status in relation to their fellow female colleagues.

(Demetriou, 2001; Grindstaff and West, 2011). Thus, by having a strict hierarchical categorisation, HMT fails to account for the complex and conflicting discursive positions that men and individuals take up in society (Wetherell and Edley, 1999); for instance, in relation to neoliberal creative entrepreneurship, representations of mental health or disabilities, as I discuss in the empirical chapters.

Demetriou (2001) is one scholar who critiqued HMT at length. One of the points he contests is the claim that non-hegemonic masculinities and behaviours are entirely subordinated. He asserts that when necessary for maintaining male dominance, the hegemonic archetype incorporates elements of non-hegemonic masculinities. Through these observations, Demetriou (2001) conceived the notion of a hybrid masculinity. According to the author, within hegemonic masculinity, '[there] is a hybrid bloc that unites practices from diverse masculinities' (Demetriou, 2001, p.337). This concept was refined and advanced into Hybrid Masculinity Theory by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), which has been widely used in fashion and cultural studies (e.g., Barber, 2016; Barry, 2015, 2017, 2018, 2019; Barry and Weiner, 2019; De Casanova, Wetzell and Speice, 2016; Greenebaum and Dexter, 2018). HyMT posits that there is a discursive distance between privileged men and ideologies of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014). This is done as individuals incorporate elements of subordinated and marginalised masculinities in their practices, such as particular fashion choices or the use of makeup, while still maintaining and perpetuating the power relations that produce gender inequalities (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014).

Notwithstanding the critiques, Connell has countered that HMT is an essential heuristic utility in the analysis of the social organisation of groups of men and 'has stood up well in the 20 years of research' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.846). However, acknowledging the fluctuations in her writings between the meaning of hegemonic masculinity as a legitimating strategy and as a merely dominant ideal and the issues over dominant, subordinated and marginalised masculinities, Connell reconfigured the concept by proposing the notion of socially dominant masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). Socially dominant masculinities refer to the masculinities which are more socially central or more associated with authority (i.e., politicians, corporate managers) and social power than others (i.e., privileged in terms of education, class, and able-bodiedness). However, even after this revision, the overly structural understanding of masculinities under HMT leaves limited space for the nuances and personal experiences of masculinities. By emphasising macro-social structures, HMT lacks in making connections to the everyday lives of individuals and their self-presentations or personal narratives (Flood, 2002; Hearn, 2004). The concept is too rigid to capture

the nuances and contradictions of subjective masculinities, personal experiences, and emotions (Seidler, 2006), while it is often too abstract and devoid of any 'real' (i.e., actual lived experiences) of men as Hearn (2010) argues. HMT - and HyMT, to some extent - assumes that masculinity is always and only about the pursuit of power (Ralph and Roberts, 2018); thus failing to apprehend the contemporary social dynamics pertinent to digital settings (Anderson and McCormack, 2016; Caruso and Roberts, 2018; Scheibling, 2019) that can also account for possibilities for positive change (Lomas, 2013; Lomas et al., 2016; Seidler, 2006) and a more positive reconfiguration of masculinity (Demetriou, 2001), as traced throughout the empirical chapters.

Finally, and linking HMT back to the concept of intersectionality, Christensen and Jensen (2014) argue that HMT needs to be re-articulated by 'focusing less on deterministic and stable power relations and more on contradictions, antagonisms, ambivalences, ruptures and on-going struggles' (p.67). This way intersectionality can firstly complement HMT as it stresses the interplay amongst gender, race, class and other various other categories while simultaneously making visible the different power structures at play (Christensen and Larsen, 2008). While secondly, an intersectional approach may offer both a methodological and a theoretical tool to better analyse the complexity of differences (and inequalities) amongst masculinities (Christensen and Jensen, 2014). Interestingly, as Christensen and Jensen (2014) argue, Connell did not explicitly use the term intersectionality, but there is 'nothing in her work that excludes the use of this theoretical concept' (p. 68), as evidenced by Connell's use of the plural term masculinities and the argument that gender is being continuously produced and reproduced in interplay with other social categories.

Nevertheless, as Christensen and Jensen (2014, p.82) note the influence of intersectionality to studies on masculinities has been very limited in comparison to women's studies. According to authors such as Christensen and Jensen (2014) and Davis and Zarkov (2017), the open-ended nature of the concept is a great advantage as it allows for flexibility to connect with other concepts, such as HMT and IMT, which is important for my study. Finally, as seconded by Pini and Pease (2013) even though the lens of intersectionality has been used little in studies on masculinities, and less so in studies on the digital, it is a very useful concept in uncovering 'the complexities and contradictions in the lives and experiences of men' (p.10-11) as my study seeks to do.

Inclusive Masculinity Theory

Even though HMT has offered a conducive framework for scholars to underpin their studies for decades, other theorisations of masculinities also exist¹⁵. A theorisation of masculinities that, as mentioned above, is widely used within cultural, media and fashion studies is HyMT (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014), which expands on HMT and involves what has been called a simultaneous ‘progression and regression’ (Whitmer, 2017, p.122) within the gender order. This means that privileged men appropriate subordinated and marginalised masculinities without generating changes in power structures to improve the positions of the subordinated/marginalised individuals or groups they appropriate (Barry, 2018). Thus, HyMT, like HMT, is heavily focused on hierarchies of privilege and power relations.

Even though HMT and HyMT have offered significant conceptual tools for researchers to frame their studies, their overreliance on hierarchies based on hegemony and oppression and their lack of addressing microsocial settings and practices such as self-representations and personal narratives as well as the predominantly negative manner they delineate masculinities pose significant limitations for my research. In the context of my study, the cultural turbulence that blurs gender roles and sociocultural expectations serves to disrupt accepted notions of how men are expected to behave (Connell, 2002). The importance placed on ideologies of hegemonic masculinity through those frameworks fails to recognise other dimensions of masculinities and their practices and communication; for instance, the promotion of skincare and makeup by the bloggers, the redefinition of the figure of the modern gentleman and the figure of the entrepreneur or the narratives of mental health, all of which represent instances better situated with a framework that considers personal stories and micro-settings.

Thus, for my study, as I explore personal narratives, I most closely align with Eric Anderson’s (2009) IMT. The main premise of IMT is that there exists a ‘softening’ of masculinity. Anderson (2009) argues that recent generations of men have become less associated with traditional (or orthodox as he calls them) masculine values that represent traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. Attributes that have been culturally and historically coded as masculine (especially in a UK-US context where the majority of IMT studies are focused), such as aggressiveness, competitiveness, control, and emotional

¹⁵ Other theories include the concept of pastiche masculinity (Atkinson, 2010), sticky masculinity (Berggren, 2014), post-feminist masculinity (Gill, 2014; Rumens, 2017), protest masculinity (Roberts, 2018) or Disney masculinity (Macaluso, 2018) but they lack the theoretical rigour and empirical research of HMT, IMT and HyMT and can broadly be incorporated into those theorisations.

stoicism, are negated, while behaviours culturally coded as feminine such as openly talking about one's feelings and showcasing vulnerability are more easily adopted. Thus, men are said to embrace a 'softer, more liberal, and open version of masculinity' (Gough, 2018, p.6). Anderson (2009) argues that one of the main reasons for this softening is the regression of homophobia, or, most specifically, the decline of homophobia, which is the fear of being perceived as homosexual - again specifically in a UK-US axis. Hence, regardless of their sexualities, men can break from hegemonic/traditional ideals culturally coded as feminine through media and broader cultural representations, i.e., showing emotionality or wearing makeup, which has resulted in softer renditions of masculinities.

In contrast to HMT, IMT forgoes strict hierarchies and posits that individuals relate to one another horizontally, achieving status not through dominance but through other means, such as popularity. Whereas hegemonic masculinity operates through exclusion, specifically of the feminine or Other, inclusive masculinity accommodates and even integrates such qualities to develop more diverse strategies for achieving status. Akin to HMT, IMT approaches gender as a social construct and masculinity as a configuration of gendered practice; however, contrary to HMT, which looks at this configuration of practice through hierarchies of social structures, IMT considers microsocial and interpersonal relations. Anderson (2009) argues that approaching masculinities through IMT produces two primary forms of masculinities: orthodox and inclusive. He notes that it is difficult to precisely articulate what defines orthodox masculinities; nevertheless, it can be argued that they can be on a par with orthodox gender norms that have been shown to exhibit homophobic, misogynistic, and aggressive attitudes and behaviours not unlike hegemonic masculinities (Nayak and Kehily, 1996; Plummer, 2016).

Through orthodox masculinity, Anderson seeks to create a concept that captures the ideologies of masculinity that have been historically valued in Anglo-American cultures in the 1980s and 1990s while departing from Connell's (1995) hegemonic perception. Orthodox masculinities are not hierarchically situated and do not compete for power, as is the case with hegemonic masculinity. Even though orthodox masculinities still exist, as not all masculinities are inclusive, changes in culture, society, and the (digital) media have made possible the parallel existence of inclusive masculinities. Accordingly, neither form of masculinity, orthodox or inclusive, maintains a hegemonic position. While Connell (2005, p.77) notes that 'at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted', Anderson (2009, p.8) states that 'two dominant (but not dominating) forms of masculinity will exist: one conservative and one inclusive'. Consequently, inclusive masculinities may be culturally esteemed among particular groups and settings yet are not hegemonic as they do not

attempt to dominate, marginalise, or subordinate any of the other masculinities within a given culture (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2011).

Apart from IMT, two other recent conceptualisations of masculinities that I use and elaborate on in detail in the empirical chapters come from Elliott (2016), who has talked about a Caring Masculinity and Lomas (2013) who has talked about a Critical Positive Masculinity. CM refers to the 'rejection of domination and [the] integration of values of care, such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality, into masculine identities' (Elliott, 2016, p.241). This is a theory that posits that individuals in the context of care or caregiving work and various other settings that are in close relation to emotional aspects do not always fit into HMT or HyMT frameworks. The concept of CM is not as well-rounded a theoretical approach as IMT or HyMT, but it complements my analysis and is used in Chapters Seven and Eight in relation to representations of fatherhood, mental health and depression. Similarly, CPM refers specifically to health and mental health and posits that men 'have the potential to find more constructive ways of doing masculinity' (Lomas, 2013, p.167). In other words, by admitting vulnerability, opening up about their emotions and seeking professional help for health and mental health issues, men can have more positive personal experiences while detaching elements such as vulnerability and portrayal of weakness from masculinities, thus, negating hegemonic frameworks, which again is a concept I evaluate in relation to mental health in Chapter Eight.

Beyond hegemony: IMT, critique and response

Anderson does not attempt to replace the concept of HMT; rather, he contests that HMT could accurately describe the operation of masculinities under specific cultures, which was the case in more rigid sociocultural times in terms of gender expressions when the concept of HMT was first created. However, it becomes increasingly less applicable in contemporary contexts. Overall, IMT diverges from HMT in two distinct ways. First, individuals displaying elements of inclusive masculinity are more likely to hold attitudes and practise gendered behaviour that undermine the values of orthodox masculinity, which historically has included principles of homophobia, misogyny and violence. Second, considering that gendered power should not always be equated with or reduced solely to a logic of nomination (Moller, 2007, p.269), the existence of inclusive masculinity within a given culture does not necessitate the exclusion of other forms of masculinities through dominance and subordination. Therefore, while inclusive masculinities may be culturally esteemed among particular peer groups, for instance within life(style) blogging or the fashion industry, they are not hegemonic as they coexist within a given culture with other masculinities but without competing for dominance (Anderson, 2009; McCormack, 2011).

Nonetheless, HMT is not rendered obsolete. Anderson does not advocate for the abandonment of HMT since the existence of inclusive masculinities does not indicate a 'gender utopia' (Caruso and Roberts, 2018, p.644); as gender inequalities remain a global issue. However, the expanding literature on IMT can contribute to the field of masculinity and gender studies by exploring instances where men's and boys' practices appear inclusive and egalitarian, e.g., situations where hegemony has 'failed' (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005, p.853). Borkowska (2020), discussing the application of HMT, IMT and HyMT in studies of masculinities, argues that scholars can situate their studies under any of those theories according to the context of the research subject. For instance, as Borkowska notes, researchers aiming to capture the complex interplay between changes in the labour market in a localised context in relation to constructions of masculinities could frame their thesis within HMT to focus on issues such as class inequalities or employment opportunities considering socioeconomic structures and the macro-level changes of industrial infrastructures. Likewise, if the focus is on individual experiences, IMT is a more conducive theory. However, Borkowska (2020) cautions researchers to pay attention to the complex interplay and interconnected nature of the theories, which can often be seen as overlapping and complementary ideologies. As my study deals with personal narratives, the Andersonian framework allows me to approach and analyse digital masculinities through the bloggers' self-representations and also address gaps within this framework; for example, the overreliance on the personal and the lack of broader sociocultural elements that often act as mechanisms of governance - such as the imagined affordances I trace throughout my study.

Inevitably IMT has received criticism. The most prominent critique is that studies under IMT have been overwhelmingly restricted to young, white, Anglo-American, middle-class university students or university-educated individuals. As such, it can be suggested that men who enjoy a privileged status and embody traditional markers of masculine success (e.g., in sport, work or wealth) can more easily engage in traditionally feminised practices without having their masculinity diminished (Gough, 2018; O'Neill, 2015). However, studies are increasingly undertaken where class and other sociocultural contexts are being explored¹⁶. More specifically, on the criticism IMT has received in

¹⁶ Roberts (2013) studied working-class men in the service industry and found that men had a softer attitude towards the emotional labour required in this sector, while the men in his study also rejected notions of traditionally gendered domestic responsibilities. McCormack (2014) studied the dynamics of a working-class high school in the south of England, showcasing that even though some parameters of privilege impede working-class youths from engaging in inclusive behaviours, such as public emotional displays, inclusivity is nonetheless not prohibitive. Finally, Blanchard, McCormack and Peterson (2017) further took up McCormack's (2014) premise and demonstrated similar findings in their ethnography of a working-class high school in the

relation to class, Anderson (2009) has noted that class is not the sole indicator of inclusivity in masculinities; other factors, such as religiousness, might be more exhibitiv indicators. In the context of my study, individuals come from various classes and racial backgrounds, and vary in terms of age. What the bloggers do predominantly have in common is a university-level education, being digitally savvy and demonstrating extensive knowledge of the lifestyle sector and the fashion industry within which they operate. As Anderson (2009) argues, and other IMT studies concur, even though considerations of class or race can impact the gendered practices of individuals, those are not always defining factors. For example, in my study, where I explore the digital masculinities of bloggers everyone can potentially blog or create content for social media. Often within the social media realm, it becomes challenging to classify individuals in class-based categories since, especially in digital contexts, ‘trying to distinguish the privileged from the marginalised [...] is an increasingly difficult task’ (Anderson, 2009, p.159). Moreover, views on the democratisation of fashion (McQuarrie, Miller and Phillips, 2013) or democratisation of communication due to technological advancements, i.e., participatory culture (Benkler, 2006; Jenkins, 2006b), are rife, and even though there exist entry barriers in social media content creation and the digital fashion industry do exist (Langlois, 2013; Mole, 2019, Pham, 2011), often issues on race and class are overtaken by other issues such as knowledge of the field or the undertaking the self-branding practices.

Masculinities in the digital context

Anderson’s studies, and most of the studies within the framework of IMT, have been primarily focused on younger individuals. Even though Anderson has acknowledged this generational gap in IMT and has now produced articles studying older individuals (2018; 2019), research on men at the university and post-university level, which Anderson calls ‘generation I’ (Morris and Anderson, 2015), remains the majority. Andersson and McCormack write:

Male youth today are better dressed digital hippies. They are young men who have grown up with less interest in religion or soldiering. They have gay friends, and value solving problems through talking instead of fighting. They readily express what men of my generation would have considered a highly feminised notion of masculinity (2014, p. 69).

northeast of England. Research is also increasingly undertaken under IMT in various other parts of the world, linking the theory to specific sociocultural instances. Notably, Hamdi, Lachheb and Anderson (2017) explored male homosexuality and homophobia in Tunisian culture; Hasan, Aggleton and Persson (2018) documented shifting attitudes towards work, religion, and sexuality among men aged 19–75 in Bangladesh; Philip (2018) explored young urban Indian men in relation to new practices of fashion, consumerism and romantic expressions; and Hu (2018) illustrated increasing diversity, and in some cases ‘softness’, in the way Chinese men are depicted in Chinese movie posters.

Anderson directly links younger individuals and attitudes relating to the contemporary zeitgeist to the softening of masculinities and focuses on two crucial main components. Firstly, he states that young men in the UK and USA have grown up in a more fragmented society than existed some decades ago; therefore, the rigid structural forces in 'which masculinities are embedded and which have weight in the social order as a whole' (Connell, 2012, p.8) nowadays are not organised religion and the army as much as they used to be when HMT was first conceptualised. Instead, corporations and markets, i.e., a neoliberal context, have taken over (Connell, 2012). This neoliberal framework and its link to the softening of masculinities in relation to the branded self and the reconfiguration of previous iterations of masculinities is explored throughout the empirical chapters. What is more, as the bloggers vary in age, my study moves away from a strict 'generation I' context.

Additionally, a second central aspect of the IMT is that it showcases 'expanded repertoires of gender behaviour' (Anderson, 2018, p. 244) that are mainly attributed to the digital realm. Morris and Anderson talk about members of generation I - however, not exclusively this generation as is evident from my study - who take advantage of 'computers, smartphones and other technologies to display affection for each other digitally, by sharing photos, videos and emotional care work on social networking sites' (2015, p.4). Anderson directly links the digital natives (Dingli and Seychell, 2015) of generation I - who have grown up surrounded by online technologies and whose lifestyles are predominantly built and shaped through and with digital communications - to the softening of masculinity. This notion has become consolidated through Morris and Anderson (2015) who, focusing on digital communications by generation I, explored how the creation and sharing of audio-visual and textual content can include what they call emotional care work, which is characterised by emotional support and generally being emotionally open and non-aggressive in the public digital displays of masculinity. This can be further linked to the concepts of CM (Elliott, 2016) and CMP (Lomas, 2013), bringing those theories into conversation with IMT, as I do in my study.

My study is not limited to a younger demographic, as my sample is mixed in age groups. I would argue that the link Anderson (2015) makes between digital communication and inclusive masculinities, especially as far as it affects influencers, should not be restricted by age but rather by the use of digital communication, i.e., the undertaking of practices relating to influencer marketing. Finally, even though Anderson does not reflect in depth on affordances when discussing the digital context, the use of digital communications largely involves affordances, which in my study I approach through the idea of imagined affordances (Nagy and Neff, 2015). Consequently, since digital communication is the

primary concern, my study explores how inclusive masculinities are established via the interplay between imagined affordances and practices, which does not necessarily need to be bound by age.

Of course, digital communication and social media are multifaceted. As Gough (2018, p.12) reminds us, digital expressions of masculinities 'may be destructive rather than creative, negative rather than positive, closed rather than open'. One example is the so-called manosphere (Ging, 2017) which is fraught with misogyny, homophobia and racism as part of extreme right-wing views. Fringed communities like Alt-Right have used Twitter, YouTube and other apps to communicate and propagate their views (Bleakly, 2021; Daniels, 2018). Nevertheless, as IMT stresses, contemporary - digital - media have made possible the existence of multiple masculinities, not necessarily tied in a hierarchical manner, with inclusive and softer expressions amongst them. Thus, context and situation are important when discussing IMT and digital settings, and, as discussed throughout the empirical chapters, influencers within the field of the lifestyle and fashion sectors do demonstrate inclusive masculinities through their digital self-representations.

Indeed, this is also in line with the concept of networked publics and the multiple parallel existence of the digitally enabled spaces for various 'social, cultural and civic purposes' (boyd, 2010, p.39). Various online communities (such as mental health forums) and individual channels (such as YouTube vlogs) exist and are underlined by positive displays of masculinities, where men 'are developing their digital masculinities in a climate of mutual support' (Gough, 2018, p.13), as is evident in Chapter Eight, where I showcase how the bloggers create and communicate narratives of depression, actively destigmatising public discussions of vulnerability in relation to mental health. According to Gough (2018), individuals take advantage of social media affordances, such as anonymity (of course, this is not the case in my study, on the contrary, the bloggers display highly personal and branded narratives) and display self-representations that advocate for practices that can benefit them in various aspects of their lives, i.e., seeking support for mental health issues. For instance, men have been historically discouraged from talking openly about issues such as their mental health and emotional well-being (de Boise, 2015). However, recently, due to the changing perceptions of masculinities and digital accessibility, men are more inclined to engage with such discussions and online support groups (Gough, 2018). Thus, as Gough (2018) concludes, digital realms can offer valuable insight into how masculinities can be expanded and can be represented as inclusive and softer. In the context of my study, this is further linked to dress, where I have discovered an interplay between digital masculinities, mental health and personal style, as discussed in Chapter Eight.

Scholars have highlighted how online communications and digital media are spaces where gendered identities, including hegemonic masculinity, are produced (boyd and Ellison, 2007). However, those spaces have also enabled the dissemination of a broader range of representations of masculinities (Seidler, 2006). Considering the relationship between digital communication and platforms to masculinities, Light (2013), one of the first scholars to discuss digital masculinities, contends that there needs to be a more specific framework to approach masculinities in digital contexts. He argues that to research and analyse digital masculinities, that is, any form of digitally expressed and communicated masculinity, researchers need to consider the sociotechnical aspects of communication. In other words, he posits that issues relating to platform affordances, such as networked publics, abilities of reproducibility/replicability of content, possibilities for anonymity and broad searchability (Light, 2013, p.252) are inseparable from digital masculinities and result in what he deems networked masculinities, which are 'the masculinities (co)produced and reproduced in conjunction with digitally mediated networked publics and their associated properties' (Light, 2013, p.253).

Therefore, to integrate studies of masculinities under any theory - e.g., HMT, IMT or HyMT- with digital media and the broader context of platformization, the concept of networked masculinities becomes a valuable tool. In my study, the notion of networked masculinities is used to trace the various self-representations of the bloggers that often exist throughout multiple platforms and websites. As the bloggers operate throughout various networked platforms, their digital masculinities are networked in the sense of being created and shared via various interconnected channels with diverse imagined affordances. However, the concept of networked masculinities does not solely implicate the production of masculinities, for instance, through digital self-representations, but rather involves the co-production and re-production of those masculinities that implicate 'people and things' (Light, 2013, p.253). By people and things, Light refers to affordances - or imagined affordances in my study - and networked publics - and, by extension, what this entails in relation to genres, as discussed in Chapter Two - that are tethered to and influence digital masculinities. For instance, White (2019, p.13) notes that specific sites and forums relating to men have FAQs¹⁷ sections that only state the purpose of a website and often delimitates its use but are, in fact, an element that serves to actively co-create masculinities. In other words, this is an extent of affordances and in my study imagined affordances and perceptions about algorithms are located throughout the empirical chapters.

¹⁷ FAQs or Frequently Asked Questions are usually found in sites, forums and apps and serve to elaborate on issues around usage, technical aspects or community guidelines.

Networked masculinities 'as with masculinities more generally, are not only, or indeed necessarily, constructed by us' (Light, 2013, p.257). Consequently, the networked masculinities in my study expressed by digital self-representations implicate personal practices, imagined affordances and various other cultural elements, such as connections with advertisements and brands, all of which provide the processes of cultural mediations, institutional mediations and textual mediations (Thumin, 2012). In this way, networked masculinities are inscribed with particular layers, with the most pervasive and powerful, according to Light (2013), being commercial readings or commercially influenced readings (p.257). This is the case for the bloggers in my study, as they construct and communicate themselves as brands and are primarily 'legible in culture through and within the logic and vocabulary of the market' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.14), as I discuss in the empirical chapters. This further implicates notions of self-branding and entrepreneurship and masculinities under a neoliberal context. Entrepreneurship has been closely linked to a power-hungry corporate masculinity and narratives of success and privilege (Gill, 2013) - in other words, ideologies of hegemonic masculinity. But, as I discuss in the empirical chapters, the bloggers in my study fall within 'alternative depictions of masculinity' featuring 'a more flexible version of entrepreneurial masculinity [...] associated with the app and social media sector' (Gill, 2013, p.346).

Studies on social media platforms and networked masculinities in relation to IMT remain few. Notably, Morris and Anderson (2015) investigated three YouTube vloggers based in the USA and Canada to examine how masculinity is exhibited through the vloggers' representations. The study includes an analysis of videos and interviews and showcases that the vloggers express emotion, affection and non-homosocial tactility. The authors note that 'these young men represent themselves as non-aggressive, emotionally open and embracing of their femininity' (p.2). Therefore, by being open and showcasing vulnerability, these vloggers subverted and expressed behaviours traditionally stigmatised among men (Goodey, 1997). Another study exploring IMT in the digital realm is Caruso and Roberts' (2018) exploration of men's body positivity blogs. The authors investigated the social construction of contemporary masculinities through studying a men's body positivity blog and found inclusive attitudes towards gay men and trans-masculine men, expressions of emotional vulnerability and active repudiation of misogynistic attitudes. However, neither of those studies discussed affordances.

Masculinities within the context of fashion

Finally, as the bloggers in my study are closely linked to the fashion sector and often actively construct their digital masculinities through dress, as discussed in Chapter Six (the figure of the modern

gentleman and its relation to the suit) and Chapter Eight (style narratives closely linked to mental health), this section will briefly discuss concepts relating to masculinities within fashion studies. Fashion is, undoubtedly, a form of communication (Barnard, 2013; Eicher et al., 1995), with dress and appearance forming key sites for the communication of masculinities (Cole, 2014). The study of men's fashion has not received as wide academic attention as women's fashion (Edwards, 2011, p.42). Nonetheless, the active role that dress has in the construction of masculinities (Reilly and Blanco, 2019; Ostberg, 2012) is well-established. The concept of masculinity in relation to fashion has been widely studied in the past few decades - especially since the 1980s, when the rise of menswear (bolstered by fashion designers and fashion weeks dedicated to men) and male-oriented consumer products (such as men's fashion and lifestyle magazines, cosmetics and accessories) led to these products starting to become established market sectors (Edwards, 2011, p.48).

Some of the first scholars to address masculinities and fashion through the latter's communicative qualities were Chapman and Rutherford (1988). The authors addressed fashion and masculinities in relation to the media in a UK context and argued that media representations actively construct masculinities, considering the new man¹⁸ as an example. Another key scholar is Mort (1996), who explored the consumer practices of men in the UK - London more specifically - from the 1980s to the mid-1990s, looking at the way changes in men's fashion magazines, the advertising sector, and retailing industries influenced coetaneous masculinities. Mort showcased the interconnected nature of fashion industry, masculinities and the market, and even though the sociocultural context that he explored has significantly changed, the importance of clothes as a communicative agent for masculinities is still relevant. Similarly, the correlative relationship between masculinities as a form of personal expression and the industry of fashion as communicated through advertising is still highly relevant. This becomes pertinent, for instance, in bloggers presenting themselves as modern gentlemen, who adopt and rework elements and notions found in the fashion sector and advertising. Finally, Nixon (2003) is another scholar who explored the cultural economy of fashion, again focusing on masculinities and patterns of consumption in the UK and US. The author noted the significance of male fashion imagery and advertising targeted at men, which serves to direct attention to the visual construction and communication of masculinities, highlighting the pluralism of masculine identities.

¹⁸ The figure of the new man was constructed and communicated through men's lifestyle magazines during the 1980s and 1990s (Hall, 2015). The new man reflected men that actively participated in consumer culture, by consuming fashion, accessories, skincare products and men's magazines. In relation to masculinities the figure of the new man was perceived as a liberal progressive form of masculinity freely partaking in consumer culture (Mort, 1996). The new lad was another configuration of masculinity in a UK-context, that represented a more 'conventional masculinity, featuring heavy drinking, sport, heterosexual promiscuity' (Hall, 2015, p.59), closely linked to what Anderson (2009) would connote as orthodox masculinity.

Recently, scholarship on masculinities and fashion has evidenced the active role of men in the consumption of fashion and fashion media and the plurality of masculine identities constructed through dress¹⁹. Within this, there are scholars who link masculinity and fashion to the already-established theories discussed above, such as IMT and HyMT (Bowstead, 2018; Rees-Roberts, 2013). Scholars also argue that recent shifts in men's fashion, most notably: 1) the increased spending in the sector, 2) the proliferation of high street shops where retailers are introducing more varied and trend-based menswear collections and 3) the varied cultural perceptions relating to fashion and menswear that have severed a discourse linking fashion to a primarily feminised sector, have all served to destabilise hegemonic masculinity (Bowstead, 2018; Rees-Roberts, 2013). Bowstead (2018) offers a comprehensive discussion of changes in menswear and the fashion industry in recent history, noting how institutional support for menswear in terms of funding has increased. Currently, the menswear sector in the UK is on an upwards trajectory accounting for £57.63 billion annual expenditure (Statista, 2022b). It is evident, then that the menswear sector in the UK is a profitable one for influencers while also serving as a space for self-fashioning.

However, apart from market growth, Bowstead (2018) also argues that as fashion is inextricably linked to the sociocultural zeitgeist, an expansion of gender perceptions is observed within the menswear sector. Bowstead uses Anderson's ideas of IMT to showcase how designers and fashion houses, such as Craig Green, Grace Wales Bonner, Gucci, Lanvin, and Raf Simons, construct and communicate softer versions of masculinities. The author concludes that:

sustained by investment from the luxury sector and from the high street and in dialogue with inclusive forms of masculinity, men's fashion continues to develop, to explore new terrains, new aesthetic and formal tendencies (2018, p.2).

Through his detailed investigation, Bowstead (2018) traces how, since 2010, menswear designers have 'taken apart interrogated and played with masculine archetypes in ways that unsettled and denaturalized them' with many introducing 'a provocatively queered and feminized menswear aesthetic that explicitly challenges the values of aggression, dominance, and invulnerability that characterize what Connell termed hegemonic masculinity' (p.146).

¹⁹Indicative scholarship includes Cole (2010; 2014); Cole and Miles (2021); Geczy and Karaminas (2017); McNeil and Karaminas (2009).

The communicative power of fashion inevitably brings forth questions about the consumption of fashion that can be linked to broader changes in relation to consumption and production as pertaining to assumptions about masculinity. Historically, consumption - especially of fashion - has been constructed as feminine (Edwards, 2006). As Edwards (2011) notes, the rise of industrial capitalism in the Global North resulted in the separation and gendering of consumption and production, with labour and production linked to masculinity. In other words, there was a supposed feminine realm of consumption and a masculine realm of production (Osgerby, 2003, p.59). However, scholarship has illustrated that men have been active consumers and, what is more, active consumers of fashion, dispelling the marginalised position that masculinity had taken in relation to consumption (Breward, 1999; 2003). Men are not only active consumers, but it has further been argued that masculinity can be 'defined by what a man consumes' (Alexander, 2003, p.551). This is in line with neoliberal ideologies, where individuals are approached through their capacity to consume (Davies, 2005). Alexander (2003) goes as far as to argue that the diversification of representations of masculinities found in contemporary popular culture and media is largely due to the marketing efforts of multinational companies 'for the purpose of increasing sales and profits' (p.552). Nevertheless, and as my research showcases, even though there exists a significant correlation between the market and the construction of masculinities as collaborations with brands and the use of products is a key aspect of the bloggers' narratives, digital masculinities should not be solely reduced to representations of masculinities through the market. As is discussed in the empirical chapters, the bloggers actively draw from meanings associated with brands and products but often rework those meanings through a process called brand-consumer storytelling (which I discuss in Chapter Six in relation to the figure of the modern gentleman) while often creating deeper and more beneficial associations; for instance, as shown in the correlation between style narratives and mental health, as I discuss in Chapter Eight.

The historically strict dichotomy of production and consumption has been debated (Ritzer, 2010). Especially regarding the digital domain, consumption and production - especially of content - become remarkably blurred. As such, the aspect of consumption seen as feminine and production as masculine (Avery, 2012) becomes more nuanced. The bloggers in my study work within the axis of consumption/production or prosumption, as discussed in Chapter Two, where digital content is actively consumed and produced. Thus, the construction of digital masculinities, as far as it relates to the bloggers in my study, becomes further disassociated from the framework of a gendered historical dichotomy of production and consumption. Consequently, the digital masculinities of the bloggers are '(co)produced' through connection to the market, as expressed through collaborations and the

consumption of brands and products and are 'reproduced' in association with the imagined affordances that pertain to the genre of lifestyle blogging (Light, 2013, p.253).

Summary

Masculinity as a social construct is created through and exists within specific sociocultural instances. The plural masculinities have been conceptualised and broadly used to encompass the varied constructions and representations of masculinity. Connell's HMT is one of the most applied theoretical frameworks for the study of masculinities; however, it poses significant limitations for my research, as my study places emphasis on individual narratives. As I discuss in the empirical chapters, HMT cannot adequately capture the bloggers' narratives, while there exist various instances where the bloggers actively negate elements associated with hegemonic representations of masculinities. Consequently, the Andersonian framework, which posits softer representations of masculinities, located especially in the digital realm, better captures the bloggers' narratives. Within the digital realm, Light (2013) has drawn attention to, what he calls, networked masculinities, which are created and communicated in conjunction with networked publics, as well as the affordances of digital media, where expressions of gender are reflected and produced through the interplay between users' interaction and software (Marwick, 2013, p.60), traced throughout my study.

Masculinities need to be situated contextually, accounting for the context within which they are produced and communicated. The bloggers are digital cultural creatives, associated with the sector of lifestyle, fashion, design and skincare. Consequently, the bloggers' masculinities are created in conjunction with the brands they promote or use as the bloggers draw - but also often actively rework - cultural meanings expressed through their networked communication via a combination of textual and visual self-representations. From a market perspective, meanings surrounding masculinities that ultimately impact ideologies of masculinities (Bordo, 1997) are created through the media, i.e., lifestyle and fashion media, and through branding and advertising efforts. As Bowstead (2018) notes, especially in the field of fashion but also in the skincare sector, as I discuss in the empirical chapters, there exist brands that also create and communicate softer iterations of masculinities which the bloggers draw from. Consequently, as discussed throughout the empirical chapters, the bloggers' self-representations seem grounded in the Andersonian context with bloggers' self-representations actively expanding the repertoires of masculinities (Anderson, 2017).

Chapter Five. My life, styled: digital masculinities and the neoliberal digital context

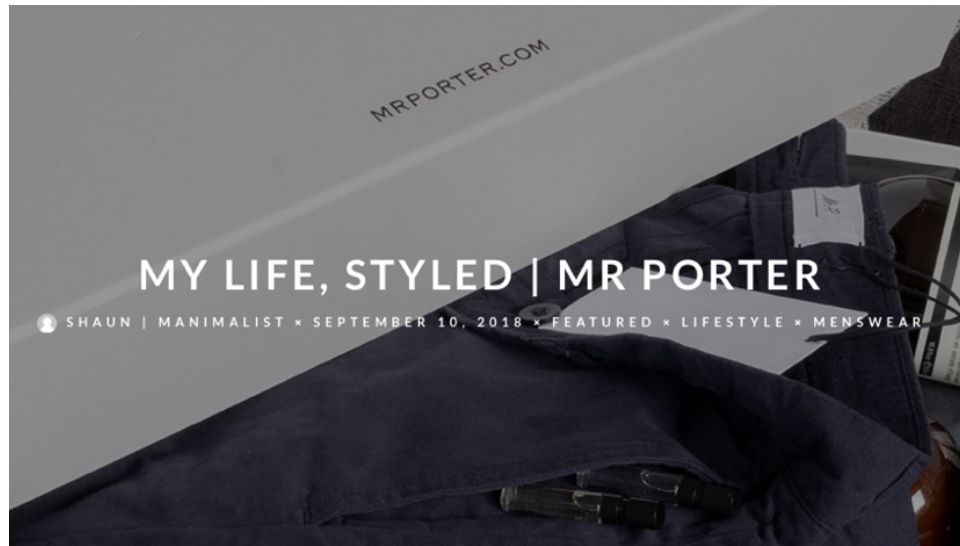


Figure 5.1: Screenshots from *The Manimalist* (2018)

In this chapter, I frame the bloggers as digital creatives and situate their practices within the neoliberal framework in which they operate. I locate digital masculinities within this context and explore the imagined affordances that pertain to life(style) blogging, discussing how imagined affordances often act as points of regulation as the bloggers strive to optimise their digital visibility. Overall, I illustrate how Shaun's life, and other bloggers' lives, become "styled" in light of self-management and self-regulation; as the imagined affordances act as governing elements for life(style) blogging, often infiltrating the bloggers' lives, which ultimately become "styled" through self-branding. Self-management spills into managing the self as brand; thus, the bloggers ultimately curate or style their branded digital masculinities.

Cornwall (2016, p.8) notes that neoliberalism invokes two aspects: the first aspect includes the economic order associated with the expansion of free-market capitalism, the outsourcing of

production and the accumulation of wealth; the second aspect refers to the ways in which individuals undertake and become accountable for the production of self-entrepreneurial activities, such as freelance work and self-branding practices, which are highly pervasive and have the potential to regulate the whole of individuals' lives. This chapter is concerned with this second aspect of neoliberal ideology. Life(style) blogging is imbued in the neoliberal culture, with self-commodification and self-branding being crucial self-enterprising efforts. For the bloggers, self-branding is often an overt issue; as I discuss further below, the bloggers do not shy away from talking about the importance of self-branding, and as I demonstrate in the next chapters, this happens mainly in relation to consumer products. However, before discussing entrepreneurship and self-branding, I first consider the inherent (self)regulations that accompany neoliberal culture and situate imagined affordances.

Locating digital creatives in the neoliberal context

The modus operandi of the bloggers in my study is largely inscribed with current neoliberal values and ideologies. The bloggers present the ideal 'platformized creative workers' (Glatt, 2021, p.1) who operate under the impetus to launch self-enterprising initiatives, undertake freelance projects and communicate branded selves - all elements that can be placed within the broader neoliberal schema. The neoliberal conditions under which the bloggers operate hail individuals as entrepreneurial free agents (Scharff, 2016) who often bear the ability and responsibility to be self-enterprising, resourceful and self-directed careerists (Khamis, Ang and Welling, 2016). Neoliberal ideologies, such as individuals being nudged to perceive their lives as projects that necessitate entrepreneurial investment (Ventura, 2012) under the guise of following their passion (McRobbie, 2016), teamed with advancements in digital communications, such as networked connectivity, have provided the ideal backdrop for freelance creatives to flourish and self-branding as a form of self-enterprise to take centre stage. Gandini (2016b), studying independent freelancers predominantly in the digital media sector, has showcased how, in the Global North, a post-industrial, post-Fordist²⁰ society has been established where the prevalence of information and knowledge creation has contributed to the rise of digital creative jobs. These creative jobs have been established as a combination of entrepreneurial activity with individual talent and creativity, and they have broadly colonised various sectors - most notably the media, fashion and design (e.g., journalism, fashion design, game design, graphic and website design and content creation more generally) (Gandini, 2016b).

²⁰ The notion of the Fordist society is used to characterise societies of industrial mass production of goods that happens in places such as factories and it has been historically paired with an availability of steady full-time jobs (Gandini, 2016b). In contrast, a post-Fordist society includes a mode of production based on financial accumulation and the valorisation of information (Gandini, 2016b). See *Post-Fordism: A Reader* (Amin, 2011) for a more comprehensive view on Fordism and post-Fordism.

Gandini (2016b) places this typology of digital jobs based on creativity and content creation in direct relation to neoliberal ideologies that have permeated society in the Global North within the past 40 years. During this time, societies in the Global North began to shift from a Fordist-based industrial mass production of goods in factories and industrial units to post-industrial conditions with the mode of production based on financial accumulation and the production and circulation of knowledge. Simultaneously, during the 1980s, a set of economic politics broadly known as neoliberalism materialised in the USA under President Ronald Reagan and in the UK under Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and soon started spreading to other countries²¹. Those policies namely included: the easing of the regulatory frameworks for economic and financial activities, thus creating free markets; and the liberalisation of employment systems and regulations, thus supporting more flexible and insecure modes of work. Consequently, neoliberalism posited individual self-enterprising initiatives at the heart of its ideological approach to free markets.

Under this context of neoliberalism, the cultural and creative sectors in the UK started to become increasingly incorporated into the market economy during the late 1990s under Prime Minister Tony Blair, who continued the trend toward the commodification of culture that had started the decade before (Newsinger, 2015). Under neoliberal free-market conditions, various types of steady jobs in the cultural and creative industries started being replaced by short-term projects, bringing about a political economy of insecurity (Sennett, 2007). The neoliberal urge toward budget shrinking and project-based (self)employment, along with developments in communication technologies, gave rise to digital creative freelancers whose endeavours were centred around entrepreneurship and creativity (Christopherson, 2008). The 2007 - 2008 recession, especially in a UK-USA context, further exacerbated work precariousness as layoffs in the media and creative sectors affected steady jobs, thus further contributing to the growth of self-entrepreneurship and freelancing (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2013). This increase in self-employment is also partly cyclical, as some people become self-employed because paid employment is unavailable (Taylor, 2015). Additionally, the advancement of digital communication technology and the rise of social media that have coexisted with job precariousness, especially in the creative sectors, have facilitated the rise of freelancing, self-employment and project-based work (Duffy, 2017). Hence, the bloggers in my study, or, in other words, the creative and self-enterprising digital freelancers, are symptomatic of the neoliberal era,

²¹ For a comprehensive history of neoliberalism see, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Harvey, 2007) *Neoliberalism: The Key Concepts* (Eagleton-Pierce, 2016); *Democracy and Other Neoliberal Fantasies: Communicative Capitalism and Left Politics* (Dean, 2009).

which as Duffy and Hund (2015) summarise, is characterised by ‘destabilised employment, the concomitant rise of casualised and contract-based work, and the logic of flexible specialisation’ (p.1).

In the UK, specifically, austerity policies, such as the cuts in spending in the cultural and creative sectors (Newsinger, 2015) which arose in the aftermath of the recession and recent Brexit uncertainty, have also added to the fact that more people enter the workforce as freelance or self-employed, while many endeavour to supplement their income with additional freelance work (Taylor, 2018). This applies to most of the bloggers in my study, as the bloggers predominantly either: 1) are full-time content creators, creating content for their own blogging activities while often undertaking various collaborative projects such as creating content for other brands, becoming brand ambassadors or managing other social media pages, or 2) have another employment besides blogging, predominantly in a creative sector (such as working as photographers, musicians, writers or stylists; to my knowledge, only one bloggers has a full-time occupation outside the creative sector, working as a hospital nurse (Appendix A)).

Imagined affordances and algorithmic visibility

Neoliberal self-enterprise in relation to digital content creators who monetise their activities, such as the influencers in my study, is highly interlinked with social media affordances. As Marwick (2013) argues, there is a broader parallel between platforms and neoliberal ideologies, with social media actively urging users towards self-enterprise initiatives. Marwick (2013a, 2013b) notes that social media have transformed into ideal online spaces for a mode of self-enterprise that includes self-management and self-branding, and hence is a space of self-regulation. This can be located: within platform affordances that allow and constrain use and content and within user practices positioned within the imagined affordances that instruct and govern the bloggers’ self-representations. Consequently, there exists an interplay between neoliberal endorsements, such as self-enterprise and self-branding that act as frames within which digital masculinities are created and communicated, and with imagined affordances that often assume a regulatory role.

Platforms have different sociotechnical characteristics and use; consequently, imagined affordances might vary. Nevertheless, no matter which platform(s) the bloggers use, they often try to reach as wide an audience as possible and maximise audience engagement; this is important for the economic rewards of the bloggers, as brand sponsorships and collaborations rely on quantified metrics, such as the number of followers, comments, likes, clicks and statistics on audience engagement (Bishop, 2019; Rocamora, 2022). Thus, life(style) blogging requires effort to create and sustain an often multiplatform networked presence. The process of creating, editing and sharing content can be

laborious, and especially on Instagram, the bloggers typically post frequently and consistently in attempts to maximise visibility and follower engagement. However, as platforms deploy 'automated systems to rank content' (Poell, et al., 2022, p.91), in other words, rely on algorithmic curation of content, the practices of the bloggers often become oriented 'toward the demands of the technical infrastructure' (O'Meara, 2019, p.2).

To reach a wide and ample audience, the bloggers operate under an algorithmic quest for visibility. The blogger Adam Walker, author of blog *The Male Stylist*, perfectly summarises this attitude towards increasing visibility. In a post titled '4 things bloggers need to learn/know for the industry to survive', Adam writes, 'content creators, by their very nature, need to be promoting and pushing themselves in order to gain visibility' (Walker, 2018). The visibility that Adam refers to and deems as essential is, ultimately, an algorithmically afforded one. Thus, the quest for visibility is highly tied to algorithms. Bishop (2019) approaches algorithms as software-led 'codified step-by-step processes' that 'afford or restrict visibility' (p.2590). Even though Bishop focuses primarily on YouTube, it can be argued that algorithmic visibility on Instagram works in a similar manner in the sense that it forms an opaque mechanism and is 'afforded by the platform in several ways' (Bishop, 2019, p.2590). As such, it can be argued that on both platforms, content creators are often aware that they need to 'negotiate and maintain visibility' (Bishop, 2019, p.2590). Thus, digital masculinities rely on and are governed, in part, by the algorithmic visibility afforded by the platforms.

The manner in which the algorithms that pertain to the main social media that the bloggers use operate is not disclosed; thus, users often rely on their own interpretations of how algorithms work and how they structure visibility - something highly linked to the notion of imagined affordances. The bloggers operate within an 'algorithmic imaginary' that includes 'the ways of thinking about what algorithms are, what they should be and how they function' (Bucher, 2017a, p.30). As Cotter (2019) illustrates, content creators on Instagram expect to be algorithmically rewarded for their extensive engagement with the platform. Cotter calls this the 'visibility game', where users expect that the algorithm will compensate them with visibility when they engage regularly and consistently with Instagram (Cotter, 2019). The algorithmic rewards within this so-called visibility game include profile visibility, wide audience reach and audience engagement, which are, ultimately, key elements of the financial success of the bloggers (Rocamora, 2022). Consequently, at least to some degree, the bloggers' engagement with the platforms through blogging is regulated by the imagined affordances and the bloggers' perceptions of the algorithmic imaginary, which is thought of as a bearer of algorithmic rewards.

Adam's statement has another layer, which links the quest for algorithmic visibility to the neoliberal context of self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a). As Adam notes, digital content creators, such as bloggers and influencers, need to constantly propel and promote themselves, thus implying that the onus for success rests mostly at the hands of the bloggers. Adam's statements perfectly illustrate how individual responsibility, autonomy and choice are key tenets of the neoliberal ethos (Rose, 1996). Under this context, the individual is often framed as 'the atomised human actor who is responsible for her or his life chances and outcomes' (Lupton, 2015, p.28), which implies that the onus for economic and professional success - or failure - often rests with the individual and, in this case, how they interact with imagined affordances.

The principles of individual responsibility and self-determination encourage self-production and self-improvement hinging upon hard work and personal determination (Marwick, 2013b). Consequently, within a neoliberal context, individualisation becomes an essential principle, and success seems to lie at the hands of each person. The self-managing, enterprising, model citizen of a neoliberal society is the bearer of the responsibility for making 'good choices' (Zukin and Smith Maguire, 2004, p.182). All the while, the imperative for making those 'good choices', which implies a promise of success, involves self-reflexivity and self-regulation. In Adam's instance, this becomes specifically located to the imagined affordances of algorithmic visibility. Hence, it becomes evident how self-management and self-regulation, as key tenets of neoliberal ideology, placed in conversation with imagined affordances implicate the production and communication of digital masculinities. Duffy and Hund (2019) talk about the visibility mandate inserting a gendered element on digital algorithmic visibility by focusing on female influencers. The authors note that the algorithmic mandate of 'putting yourself out there [...] in a heightened degree' (p.4984) governs the practices of female influencers. However, as my study showcases, this also applies to male influencers as their practices are also highly governed by the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017a) that acts as an institutional mediation of their digital self-representations (Thumin, 2012).

An ideal world: metrics and quantified digital masculinities

Within this regulatory framework that the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017a) posits, metrics form an important aspect of the bloggers' practice. Metrics are highly linked to the quest for visibility, as the bloggers not only pursue algorithmic visibility, but they also seek the 'quantifiable markers of visibility' (Duffy and Hund, 2021, p.3). Metrics insights on social media, such as Instagram and YouTube, but also on websites, become possible through the affordances that allow for such data to be gathered and shared. Unlike the more abstract quest for visibility, metrics are crucial for the

bloggers as they are demonstrable data that can be shared with companies and brands and directly impact collaborations and sponsorships. This quantified aspect of blogging is framed by what Gerlitz and Helmond (2013) call the like economy²². The like economy is linked to the nature of platforms as data-driven infrastructures where 'friends, followers, fans and the like operate as de facto currency within the social media economy' (Poell, et al., 2022, p.144).

Ultimately, within the neoliberal framework inside which the bloggers operate, metrics, through algorithms, 'prompt users to rank things, ideas, or people in relation to other things, ideas or people' (Van Dijck 2013, p.62). As Rocamora argues (2022), this quantification of the bloggers' practices is fuelled by neoliberalism and 'goes hand in hand with the commodification of activities' (p.2). Metrics quantify the bloggers' self-representations and hence representations of digital masculinities and create a relationship of reliance where the bloggers try to decipher algorithms to vie for ranking and visibility, increase their engagement with platforms - in my study, Instagram more specifically - and expect augmented metrics as a reward. Thus, digital masculinities become steeped in neoliberal self-management and are often regulated by the imagined affordances of metrics. Joel Mcloughlin, author of the blog Gallucks, exposes the importance the bloggers place on metrics and the frustration they can feel in relation to them. Joel writes:

I think at this moment in time, people see the lifestyle [of the bloggers] and want a piece of the pie [...] they want everything immediately, and if they don't have x amount of followers or x amount of likes right now then they will be deemed as a failure (Mcloughlin, 2017c).

Joel's comment portrays the significance that quantified metrics can have for the bloggers, which are often deemed essential for success or failure. In the same post, Joel further illustrates the importance of metrics noting that he makes his living through brand collaborations, and the return the brands expect is brand (algorithmic) visibility which can translate to sales. Joel writes, 'I make my living by collaborating with brands – brands work with me and see positive results in terms of brand visibility and even sales' (Mcloughlin, 2017). Thus, success for the bloggers is not only an element of self-pursuit, but it can also be a quantifiable measure essential for brand sponsorships and collaborations. This metric logic, as Poell, et al., (2022, p.191) call it, of quantified success (or failure, I would add),

²² Instagram briefly tried to remove likes from posts. In April 2019 the platform announced that they will test feeds without the number of likes in an attempt to address mental health concerns and negative influencer practices, such as the use of bots, to increase likes. However, hiding likes reportedly did not address those problems and Instagram discontinued the default hiding of likes (Newton, 2021). Currently, Instagram offers the option for users to hide the number of likes from a post if they want (Instagram, 2021).

does not solely stem from the algorithms of the platforms but, as Joel illustrates, is also actively pushed by advertisers and brands who often act as data intermediaries (Poell, et al., 2022) as they too seek to maximise algorithmic visibility.

Therefore, it is evident how both bloggers and brands have become immersed in a manner of operating digitally that is highly affected by imagined affordances. This is further facilitated by an array of applications that have been developed for measuring influencers' metrics and their audience impact. Those applications, broadly called Influencer Metrics Tracking (e.g., Traackr, Instagram Insights), offer insights to the bloggers themselves but are also used by brands to identify, track, and evaluate the relevance of each influencer for a specific brand or product. Moreover, according to Rocamora (2022), the prevalence and appeal of influencers to brands are that success can easily be measured and monetised (p.3), and influencer marketing is another space where the 'neoliberalism's economy of numbers is rampant' (p.5).

Consequently, metrics present another networked space, as the applications are linked directly to the bloggers' social media accounts, where the bloggers' practice and autonomy, and by extension, digital masculinities, can be regulated to appease algorithms - in this case, algorithms relating to metrics. In other words, success or failure becomes networked and quantifiable. However, in this instance, self-regulation is located both within imagined affordances and potential brand collaborations. Consequently, this exemplifies governance as it transpires through 'the creation and popularization of technologies that encourage people to regulate their own behaviour along business ideals' (Marwick, 2013, p.12). Thus, the neoliberal notion of managing the self as an enterprise now relies on quantified metrics influenced by algorithms that can regulate and sustain self-management and self-regulation.

Blogger Jordan Bunker, author of the eponymous blog, exemplifies how the quest for visibility - and, by extension - metrics has been, in some cases, internalised and normalised as a key aspect of blogging. In a lengthy personal post titled 'Taking on Too Much', in which the blogger reflects on his freelancing career and elaborates on the optimal approach he should be following to grow his business, he writes that in 'an ideal world' he would want to be on top of his blogging practice. Jordan would do that by 'sharing blog posts weekly', have 'newsletters go out on time (newsletter subscribers, I'm sorry)' and 'keep Instagram ticking over as much as the next person' (Bunker, 2019). Jordan situates a high multiplatform engagement as an ultimate blogging ideal. Even though he might not be using the phrase 'ideal world' literally, regardless, this showcases the valorisation of the quest

for visibility and its infiltration within his broader work view as a freelancer. Even though Jordan might not always follow up this ideal through his practice when his engagement wavers, as is evident through his posting patterns and his own admission, this post still points to the degree that neoliberal ideals have penetrated and regulate the bloggers' practices.

Evidently, from his post, Jordan associates success with the concept of being seen or being algorithmically visible (Bucher, 2012). Nevertheless, this apparent internalisation of visibility also alludes to the broader visibility concerns that bloggers might assume, which are closely linked to (algorithmic) invisibility. Social media inherently bring a 'possibility of constantly disappearing, of not being considered important enough' (Bucher, 2012, p.1171). According to Cotter (2019), the concern of invisibility can discipline bloggers into 'normalising their behaviours' (p.898), which again posits imagined affordances as disciplinary prescriptions of ideal forms of practice and algorithms as disciplinary apparatuses (Bucher, 2012) and that, by extension, govern digital masculinities.

Additionally, Jordan's statement simultaneously illustrates how in many cases, blogging and visibility are not always algorithmically regulated, such as in the case of newsletters. Even though algorithmic ranking and algorithmic visibility prevail on platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, bloggers, especially the ones who still operate on a personal website, can also undertake actions outside of the algorithmic imaginary. Jordan mentions newsletters - a form of communication written by the bloggers and directly sent to subscribers' emails. Of course, algorithmic visibility and metrics can impact subscribers by directing traffic to a website so that the audience can sign up for a newsletter. However, it shows that for the multiplatform practice of blogging, imagined affordances can be multifaceted. The bloggers often navigate spaces, such as their websites, that are less constricted by platform affordances. Nevertheless, Jordan still reveals how the 'visibility mandate' (Duffy and Hund, 2019, p.4984) that is based on data-driven metrics has become so pervasive that his ideal world would circulate around what he considers as an optimal blogging practice, showcasing the pervasiveness of the ideals of self-management and self-optimisation while simultaneously implying that the peril of invisibility acts as a regulatory aspect that often 'organises participatory norms' (O'Meara, 2019, p.4).

Finally, Jordan's statement also adds a layer in relation to audience expectations. This is evident in the post itself, in which Jordan addresses the audience in a highly personal, diaristic-reminiscent manner while issuing an apology to his newsletter subscribers. Jordan takes the opportunity - or maybe feels obliged - to explain in this long-form post why his engagement with blogging sometimes

decreases, as he gets caught up with other freelance projects or often simply procrastinates (Bunker, 2019). The blogger notes that even though he might not always have the time or energy to create and post content, he understands the need to do so, as his career as a freelancer depends on it and expectations from the audience might have been built up for regular communication. This is directly linked to notions of genre and the norms relating to life(style) blogging within its networked public. Concluding the post, Jordan writes, 'this post might be a touch self-indulgent, but I think they'll be other reading this that put pressure on themselves to achieve a lot and in-turn achieve very little' (Bunker, 2019). Thus, Jordan further places blogging, and the neoliberal mode of creative work more generally within a framework of individualised success or failure. Ultimately, blogging as a networked multifaceted practice becomes outlined through self-regulation and self-management in areas not always associated directly with platforms and algorithms, thus showcasing that the communication of digital masculinities is multifaceted and nuanced.

I am a limited company: managing the self as brand

Neoliberalism, especially as it relates to the bloggers, can be seen as a regulatory condition and has been situated under a Foucauldian framework of self-governance (1988). Rocamora (2011) has studied bloggers under this approach, linking fashion bloggers to Foucault's (1988) notion of the technologies of the self, discussing the formation of identity. However, I am not approaching regulation in this Foucauldian sense; instead, I situate my discussion closer to Titton's (2015) approach. In her study, Titton (2015), situates style bloggers within the broader context of the fashion ecology and illustrates how they create what she calls 'fashionable personae' that emerge from their self-narratives and include self-branding. Titton situates the branded self-representations of style bloggers closer to Du Gay's understanding of self-improvement through reflexive self-management. In other words, self-governance can be located in reflexivity and self-regulation. Du Gay (1995) further links self-regulation and self-entrepreneurship to the notion of the sovereign consumer, something that is elemental for my study, especially when considering how digital masculinities are created through and in conjunction with brands and products, further discussed in Chapter Six.

The neoliberal ideologies of self-enterprise and self-management, along with the encroachment of commodification into the digital realm, are ultimately manifested through digital self-branding (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Apart from a strategy 'to mitigate against an insecure and uncertain social, financial, and existential reality' of digital work (O'Meara, 2012, p.2), self-branding as a form of self-enterprise is encouraged by the platforms the bloggers use, as it propels social media industries. Thus, self-branding enlivens neoliberal notions of quantified success through perseverance and self-

improvement (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Marwick, 2013a; Marwick, 2013b). As already iterated, platform affordances can make self-enterprise quantifiable through metrics. As self-branding is often considered crucial for success in blogging, it becomes closely linked to algorithmic visibility (Marwick, 2013a). Consistent and coherent self-representations form crucial parts of self-branding and are encouraged by social media, which offer algorithmic rewards as compensation (Whitmer, 2019) while potentially making the bloggers 'algorithmically recognizable' (Gillespie, 2017, p.64). Additionally, this has created a loop where branded self-representations are also sought after by brands as social media algorithms favour branded content. Consequently, the relationship between the quest for visibility through imagined affordances and self-branding as self-enterprise indicates another domain where neoliberal ideals of self-regulation and self-management are in a dialogical relation with the sociotechnical elements of platforms.

In the traditional approach relating to marketing, branding refers to the processes of inscribing products and services with cultural meanings and creating personal connections between individuals and consumer items (Arvidsson, 2005; Banet-Weiser, 2012). However, branding, apart from products and services, increasingly encompasses individuals as well (Arvidsson, 2005). Especially in the creative industries, as work progressively becomes project-based, freelancers rely on digital self-branding to advance their careers (Scolere, 2019). Concomitantly technological developments have provided - or sometimes extorted - the opportunity for self-governed entrepreneurs to take advantage of digital spaces and communicate branded selves (Banet-Weiser, 2017). Hearn (2008) defines self-branding as the strategic production of narrativised and image-based representations of oneself. The bloggers' thoughtfully curated digital (textual and visual) self-representations that construct and communicate their digital masculinities exemplify Hearn's delineation. Hearn (2010) also argues that through self-branding individual worth can be based upon the personal capacity to attract the audience and pursue attention aligning with the quest for algorithmic visibility and quantified success or failure.

Nevertheless, managing one's self-representations and embracing self-promotion are not distinctly contemporary social imperatives, nor did self-branding arise with the advent of digital technologies. As Pooley (2010) notes, attempts for impression management have a long-standing pedigree in the cultures of the Global North tracing back to the 1920s²³. However, what differentiates self-branding nowadays are the structural transformations relating to neoliberalism, such as individuality, self-

²³ Further reading on the history of presentation management and personal promotion: *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman, 1971); *Social Networking and Impression Management: Self-Presentation in the Digital Age* (Cunningham, 2013); *Impression Management: Theory and Social Psychology* (Tedeschi, 1981).

regulation, self-optimisation and reflectivity. So, while self-promotion is not a new concept communicating the self as a brand to extract material value, such as income or sponsorships, is a contemporary ideal (Marwick, 2013a). Therefore, self-branding can be viewed as a central tool of neoliberal governance, 'empowering its subjects to conceive of themselves as entrepreneurial subjects, responsible for the success or failure of their own conduct' (Bandinelli and Arvidsson, 2012, p.68). This, of course, coexists with the social media platforms that have created an environment that fosters impression management and attention-seeking behaviours (Marwick, 2013a). As such, digital self-branding might not have been possible 'without the affordable means of information distribution that the internet provides' and 'the features of social media technologies that make self-promotion of a wide scale possible' (Marwick 2013a, p. 166).

Aftab Panthan, author of the blog *Fresh and Fearless*, draws a parallel between branding in the traditional sense of product-branding to self-branding. Aftab notes that it is imperative for bloggers to have branded self-representations to obtain collaborations. In our personal communication, the blogger iterates that 'you need to construct yourself first as a brand to work with brands'. As blogging has become a saturated and competitive field, self-branding has become a prerequisite for collaborations, as it helps brands identify the influencers who are the right fit for their products (Breves et al., 2019). This is also aided by metrics that, through the specialised Influencer Metrics Tracking apps discussed above, provide tools for brands to scope the bloggers' quantified information and networked profiles to judge whether they are a good match for the brand (Breves, et al., 2019). Linking self-branding to product-branding also has another dimension: the branding of products involves evaluation based on consumer feedback and ranking. Since the bloggers operate within the like economy (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2103) - which includes a datafied mode of communication implying ranking - self-branding, similarly to product-branding, can be measured and evaluated. Consequently, self-branding takes on the role of 'a layered process of judging, assessment, and valuation taking place in a media economy of visibility' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.87).

Like Aftab, Joel shows an understanding of the importance of self-branding. In a YouTube video titled 'How to make money on Instagram,' the first and most important advice Joel offers to digital creatives is 'create your own brand' (Mcloughlin, 2018, 2:13). As Joel is a full-time blogger and content creator, it can be assumed that self-branding has played an important role in establishing him as a successful blogger within the field. Joel created his blog in February 2010 while at university, and that was soon followed by an Instagram (2013) account and a YouTube channel (2014). After his studies, as Joel described in our personal communication, he pursued a freelancing career as a blogger, which has

now resulted in his blogging becoming ‘extremely official’. As Joel stated in our interview, ‘I am a limited company, such a difference from when I first started’. The way Joel frames his blogging illustrates his complete immersion with his brand. Joel states that *he himself* is the brand - that *he* is a limited company. This echoes neoliberal ideologies where freelancers ‘especially in the media and the cultural and creative industries, are told to think of themselves as a business’ (Gershon and Deuze, 2019, p.299). Consequently, in this sense, Joel is an entrepreneur of the self, relating to himself through his blogging as if he were a company (Scharff, 2016).

Self-branding not only blurs the line between traditional products and people as brands (Banet-Weiser, 2012) but also makes individuals engage with themselves as enterprises. Nathanson (2014) has described self-branding as twofold: framing both the self and the career. This is illustrated in Joel’s case, where the blogger has become inseparable from his career. Joel’s self-brand has come to signify his whole career- *he himself is the career*. The reflexive management of the self, and of the career as a brand and one’s life as an enterprise, further links the enterprising branded self to neoliberal notions of individualised ambition, personal accountability and responsibility for success and failure (Du Gay, 1996; Rose, 1996). Joel’s career is not necessarily limited to blogging but also extends to other collaborations and professional endeavours. For instance, he has collaborated with the clothing website Nu-In and created a limited-edition menswear line named Gallucks for Nu-In, launched on 14 February 2021. Figure 5.2 contains a screenshot from Joel’s video posted on his YouTube channel, in which he presented his collection before the launch. As shown in the screenshot, the line consists of menswear bearing tags with the blog’s name, Gallucks.



Figure 5.2: Screenshot from Joel’s YouTube video titled ‘*My sustainable clothing collab!*’ (2021)

Consequently, over his blogging years, as Joel has been communicating consistent and marketable self-representations, he has been able to leverage his self-brand for various economic opportunities (Whitmer, 2019). This illustrates how, as Joel branches off to various collaborations, he is essentially

promoting and capitalising upon his self-brand and by extension his digital masculinity. Finally, Joel also exemplifies how self-enterprise and his digital branded masculinity do not represent the traditional sense of the entrepreneur as 'being a business owner or investor' but rather as being an 'entrepreneur of the self' (Banet-Weiser 2015, p.185-186), or a creative entrepreneur of the self, as I explore further in Chapter Six.

Switched-on: an algorithmic infiltration

Self-branding, along with the quest for visibility and quantified metrics, often leads to the infiltration of neoliberal ideals into the whole life of the bloggers and the blurring of the lines between work and leisure (Winch and Hakim, 2016). Due to the advancements in digital technology that allow for constant connectivity along with the neoliberal context of freelance creative work, lifestyle blogging often becomes an always-on mode of self-enterprise (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). When this becomes paired with the genre of life(style) blogging which includes content based on everyday life as lived (Abidin, 2016), the bloggers often become drawn to a "switched-on" mode. John, the author of the blog *The Everyday Man* illustrates this point in a blog post where he discusses his blogging career. The post is titled 'M&S Trailblazers: Blogging and dressing for business' and is a post affiliated with M&S. For this post, John was asked to style blazers for the new menswear M&S line and gave an interview that accompanied the visual content he created (figure, 5.3). In a question that asked him about his blogging career and whether he draws a sharp line between his work and his personal life - 'does it all act as one?' - John noted that often it becomes hard for him to separate his work from his personal life. John writes:

my job is kind of 24/7 one as no matter what you do or where you go to a certain degree you are working, or in work mode, it can be hard sometimes to switch off, even when away on holiday (John, 2016).

As a life(style) blogger, John does not only promote products and brands but his lifestyle more generally and his own self as brand, thus commodifying his whole lifestyle as it is narrated through this blogging and, by extension, commodifying the digital masculinity he communicates. As he admits, he often feels that he needs to be switched on and working even when on holiday, especially since self-branding permeates whole lifestyles and admittedly, holidays offer ideal moments for content creation.



Figure 5.3: Screenshot from *The Everyday Man* (2016)

Nevertheless, blogging does not solely revolve around the creation of content; as discussed above, it entails self-governance and endeavours at gaining and maintaining algorithmic visibility through platform engagement. This is closely linked to neoliberal notions of performance and self-management to maximise productivity which, paired with current digital technologies, especially for digital creative workers, becomes further enmeshed with presentism and social media's - in my study mainly Instagram's - real-time and constant mode of communication (van Dijck and Poell, 2013). This has contributed to changes in the production and communication of culture (Poell, et al., 2022) and the encroachment of neoliberal ideas into everyday life (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Hence, there exists a 'datafication' of digital masculinities through blogging, as the narratives of the bloggers and the 'practices and experiences' that make up the narratives 'are turned into quantitative data' (Rocamora, 2022, p.2).

Similar to John, Robin James, the blogger of Man For Himself, writes in a post reflecting on his blogging journey:

4 years on, and I'm working full-time for Man For Himself Ltd. I'm the only employee, and I'm working every hour of the day. And when I'm not working or sleeping, I'm drinking dirty martinis and thinking about work. It's a passion project that has become my life and one which I'm excited to continue with (James, 2017b).

In Robin's case, the blogger presents the infiltration of neoliberal ideals in his life, filtered through a lens of passion, reiterating findings by other scholars exploring cultural and creative work where doing what you love is framed as a compensation for the precarity of digital work (e.g., Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2016; Taylor and Littleton, 2012). It is evident that the blurring of work and leisure, the constant need to be digitally active, and the need to brand a whole lifestyle (in the case of some

bloggers such as those discussed so far) become highly enmeshed with imagined affordances and the like economy whereby, in search of self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a), the bloggers can intensify their working days (O'Meara, 2019).

For Hall (2011), it is the principles of commodification and individualisation that represent the key tenets of neoliberal culture. Hall frames as exemplars of neoliberal culture: the self-fashioning industries (i.e., fashion, skincare and makeup sectors); the skills of self-promotion; the stylistic gendering of commodities; the representations of lifestyle; the diffusion of advertising; and the representations of self-sufficient urban travellers. Those elements are all found in life(style) blogging, and what is more, as illustrated by John and Robin, the boundaries between blogging-as-work, personal life and self-commodification often dissolve (Pettersson McIntyre, 2021, p.1061). Through life(style) blogging, experiences from personal life that ultimately form personal narratives can be conceived as assets to be commodified (Brydges and Sjöholm, 2019) and become embroiled in algorithmic quests and imagined affordances. Consequently, the bloggers represent the pinnacle of neoliberal promotional culture as they embody the ideal self-regulated, self-optimising consumer citizen. Self-regulation and self-management occur both through imagined affordances and through the logic of commercialisation, further demonstrating the pervasiveness that platforms have in everyday life by algorithmically shaping and regulating experience and determining the (in)visible (Gillespie, 2017), and ultimately influencing the construction of digital masculinities, as is illustrated throughout the empirical chapters.

The commodification of lifestyle along with the blurring of work/leisure, apart from exemplifying neoliberal culture and the infringement of commercial discourses into all realms of social life (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Hearn, 2008) also showcases one of the main entanglements between capitalism and neoliberalism. While capitalism describes an economic system based on the accumulation of wealth, neoliberalism encroaches 'as far as possible into every domain of social life' (Gilbert, 2013). Work and leisure under neoliberalism become hazy states, as citizens are now defined through the market and consumption - they become consumer-citizens (McDonald et al., 2017). Especially for freelance digital creatives, such as the bloggers in my study, the imagined affordances of the platforms offer ideal spaces for 'the straddling of labour/leisure into a commercial framework' (Postigo, 2016, p.332). Thus, the bloggers become the ideal self-regulating, self-managing consumer-citizens of the neoliberal societies (Sender, 2006), where 'the datafication imperative bleeds into various realms' of the bloggers' lives as their 'value gets translated into quantifiable data' (Duffy, 2017, p.149-151).

No matter whether this mode of work is framed around a narrative of passion and love for the creativity that it allows, bloggers do not shy away from reflecting on the negative effects this switched-on mode might have. Aftab, in a long-form diary-like reflective post titled 'The competitive era of blogging is burning me out', which does not contain any advertinments or affiliate content, admits:

I try and keep things positive on Fresh and Fearless because it was always been a workspace for me to express my creativity. To showcase my talents and keep an online diary, for when i'm old. However, I'm struggling to keep up (Pathan, 2017).

Continuing this post, Aftab focuses on Instagram and notes that he often feels tired from 'staying up until the late hours to get content up and out within 24 hours to ensure I always have new content going up'. This statement, along with Aftab's frequent and continuous presence on Instagram, demonstrates that the blogger might try to appease both the algorithm and the audience through increased engagement. Aftab, similarly to Jordan, reveals how the need for constant (multiplatform) content-sharing becomes algorithmically mandated to facilitate visibility (Bucher, 2017a) but is also somewhat expected from the networked public of this genre - again showcasing how the production of digital masculinities is highly linked to a self-optimisation presumed to appease the quest for algorithmic visibility (Bishop, 2019). Within this context, digital masculinities become 'cultural artefacts' that, through self-commodification, follow a:

capitalist agenda where every form of creative, artistic and voluntary endeavour can be monetised by a data economy for filling vast swathes of the digital realm with user-generated content (UGC)' (Ibrahim, 2018, p.4).

The only platform I own and control: multiplatform imagined affordances

As noted before, the quest for algorithmic visibility, self-branding and ultimately, the imagined affordances that pertain to blogging are not the same throughout all the channels the bloggers use for their communication. All the bloggers discussed so far sustain a multiplatform presence, utilising Instagram, and their websites, with some operating on YouTube while Robin also has a podcast. Specifically, relating to self-branding, Bandinelli and Arvidsson (2012) argue that it does not only include the crafting of branded self-representations, but also requires wide and broad communication. I have already noted how platforms operate under different sociotechnical characteristics, and each one has its own logic (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), which means differences

in technologies, corporate strategies and economies and user norms. Especially relating to algorithmic visibility, there exist key differences along the platforms. For instance, personal websites do not inherently rank users or offer visibility as a reward like other social media platforms do, nor do webpages actively promote engagement through their affordances. Therefore, at least to some degree, personal websites can offer more algorithmic freedom than social media platforms. One of the essential differences between websites and social media platforms such as Instagram and YouTube is that social media are owned by platform empires, as Sujon (2021) calls them, that are profoundly commoditised and are highly involved in shaping user practices and guiding the users towards increased engagement, through their affordances.

However, personal websites, even though they are still bound by technical features and offer specific plugins for cross-traffic connections, are more malleable in their design and the arranging of their appearance. Bloggers who use websites have referred - both overtly and implied - to the perceived freedom they think they enjoy in this space. For instance, Aftab implies a perceived freedom when communicating through his website. The blogger seemingly owns his website, as he is using a paid-for template from WordPress. However, this freedom can also be located in Aftab's passage above (Pathan, 2017), where the blogger notes that he perceives and often uses his website as a diary. This is further iterated through the 'About'²⁴ page on Aftab's website, where the blogger notes that he started his blog with the intention of it being a digital diary. As Aftab writes:

I embarked on my journey with Fresh and Fearless when I left home and moved to London to start my higher education [...] I used my blog as a way of documenting my life in London (Pathan, n.d.).

As the blogger attests, his blog started growing, but he still uses this space as a digital diary, often offering non-sponsored reflective posts. Granted, this is a branded and commodified form of a diary - something that I explore further in Chapter Eight - but it is a reflexive space with a personal outlook.

Consequently, this points to differences in the imagined affordances of the platforms and websites that make up life(style) blogging. Nevertheless, the multiplatform presence of Aftab's and other bloggers in my study attests to the fact that, through the multiplatform mode of life(style) blogging, with Instagram taking the lead and the branded self-representations that the bloggers communicate,

²⁴ The 'About' section is found in most of the websites of the bloggers and usually consists of a short biography and contact details.

the discrepancies amongst platform affordances can become obscured via the overall scheme of the practice of blogging, which includes cohesiveness and self-regulation. This further illustrates how, in the networked manner in which the bloggers operate, neoliberal ideologies that embed notions of individual freedom, commercialisation and a reflective mode of self-managing and branding the self can be located and how they regulate life(style) blogging and the communication of digital masculinities.

Overall, life(style) blogging makes evident the digital ambivalence inherent to social media use (e.g., Bucher, 2019) which incorporates a digital culture simultaneously involving 'lived experiences' and the 'broader data structures that transform every click into capital' (Sujon, 2021, p.79). This is also evident through Joel, who explicitly comments on the discrepancy he feels exists between using social media platforms for his blogging and using his website. The blogger says in our personal communication:

I don't write on my blog as much as I would like to anymore, I feel like the whole landscape of the internet and how we consume content has changed. Imagery and video content are what people respond to the most at the moment, so I'm focusing on Instagram and YouTube however I will never step away from my blog, it's the only platform that I own and control.

From this excerpt, it is apparent that Joel alludes to the changes in the production and consumption of digital content, which has been impacted by the quest for algorithmic visibility as creativity becomes increasingly contingent (Poell, et al., 2022) on the whims and algorithms of platforms. Joe's answer is highly reflective; the blogger refers to and discusses how his practice has changed due to broader changes in the production and circulation of UGC. This becomes evident through the fact that Joel's use of his website has wavered and he has become primarily focused on Instagram and YouTube. This implies that, at least to some degree, Joel regulates and manages his practice and the communication of his self-as-brand, and thus his digital masculinity, in a manner highly dependent on the imagined affordances of life(style) blogging.

In the passage above, Joel acknowledges the freedom he perceives he has on his website, which he owns. It is not uncommon, especially for full-time bloggers, to purchase a website URL and move away from free website host templates. Joel indicates that he feels less restrained on his website because he has purchased and designed it; thus, admittedly, he feels that he has more control over it. Within the multiplatform practice of blogging, this aligns with the neoliberal discourses that

emphasise individual choices as guarantors of freedom (McRobbie, 2016). Thus, even though Joel cannot control the affordances and algorithms of the social media platforms he uses, he still keeps his website even though he uses it infrequently for blogging, as he associates it with a seeming individual choice and freedom.

Nonetheless, as Joel ostensibly operates on a multiplatform level, and through observation of his practice and his own self-referential admission that he has become more engaged with Instagram and YouTube, it is evident that his practice is still bound by imagined affordances. This is also illustrated from Aftab, who is primarily active on Instagram. Even though the bloggers, especially Joel, as he admits, try to hold on to a perceived freedom untethered from platform empires and algorithmic regulations, his blogging is still regulated by the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017) and the commercial logic enmeshed within social media ecology and the gene of life(style) blogging. Indeed, activities are 'platform dependent' (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), and content creation is conditional upon platform affordances for distribution, analysis, and circulation (Morris, 2015). This actively showcases how networked digital masculinities are '(co)produced and reproduced in conjunction with digitally mediated networked publics and their associated properties' (Light, 2013, p.253).

Nevertheless, even if personal websites allow more freedom and can be owned by the bloggers, all the platforms and webpages the bloggers use offer quantifiable metrics, and the quest for visibility remains - or in the case of many bloggers in my study, the quest for multiplatform visibility - as multiplatform presence can help drive cross-platform traffic amongst the various platforms and webpages. As platforms operate under different imagined affordances, the concept of networked self-branding has been problematised. Scolere, et al., (2018) have explored self-branding under a platform-sensitive approach. Considering that each platform has different sociotechnical characteristics, the authors studied how digital creatives utilise each platform differently for their branded communication. The authors found that platforms play an essential role in self-branding as digital creatives are affected by platform-specific norms and content expectations - or, in other words, platform-specific imagined affordances. Therefore, as digital activities become progressively platform-dependent (Nieborg and Poell, 2018), Scolere, et al., (2018) argue that digital creatives communicate platform-specific self-brands. Situating the digital creatives of their study within the broader social media ecology, the authors contend that 'the "tone", "feeling", "flavour", or "impression" of a particular site' (Scolere, et al., 2018, p.4) guides the users in relation to self-branding.

Platform-specific behaviour, as directed by imagined affordances, does guide user practices (Nieborg and Poell, 2018). Nevertheless, in my study, the self-representations of the bloggers that form their digital masculinities did not fluctuate to a significant degree amongst the platforms whenever there was a multiplatform presence, meaning that self-branding is coherent and consistent. The bloggers usually share the same content or links to content on other platforms and as the majority relies on Instagram as their main channel for communication, they have exhibited that they follow and engage with the tropes and (visual) trends of Instagram (something that I discuss further in Chapter Seven). Of course, Instagram promotes a visually-based mode of communication and user behaviour is accordingly directed by the platform while the bloggers usually communicate from their websites through longer texts and exhibit more frequently a reflective type of communication, as websites are often imbued by an aura of freedom.

Nevertheless, websites are used ever-more infrequently, and the visual content that accompanies websites, their design and the tone the bloggers use are coordinated in a cross-platform manner. Even though self-branding on social media is shaped by platform environments (Ledbetter and Meisner, 2021), in my study, digital masculinities adhere to consistent communication. For instance, Joel posts on Instagram almost daily, posts monthly on his YouTube channel (doing mainly reviews, unboxing and clothing hauls²⁵) and posts less frequently on his website. All his social media channels are linked to his website for cross-platform content sharing, while Joel indicates in his Instagram Stories when new content is uploaded on YouTube. Overall, in terms of product placements Joel focuses on high-end streetstyle and skincare. Therefore, even though Joel might focus on unboxing videos on his YouTube channel, which as a style is characteristically linked to this platform (Bishop, 2018b), and on more frequent visual posts on his Instagram and longer texts on his website, his overall product placements in terms of market segmentation and visual aesthetic are coherent throughout the platforms he uses as can be seen from screenshots from his Instagram (figure 5.4), YouTube (figure 5.5) and website (figure 5.6).

²⁵ Hauls or unboxing videos are a popular type of content found on YouTube; they involve the unboxing and showcasing of recent purchases (Bishop, 2018b).

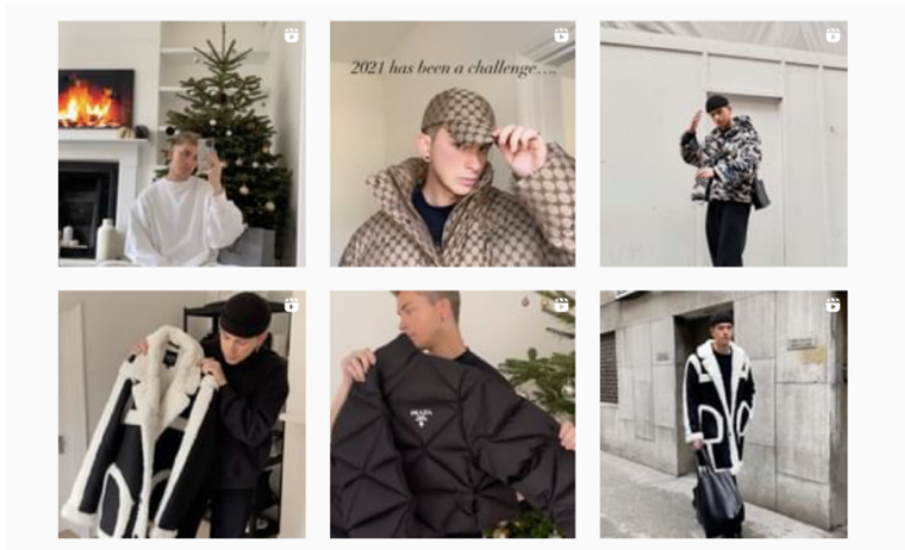


Figure 5.4: Instagram screenshot from @Gallucks (2020)

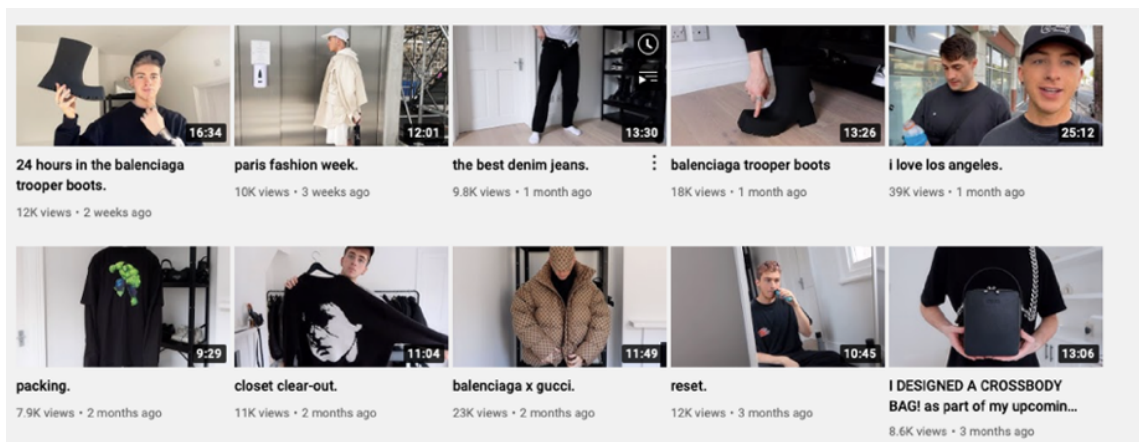


Figure 5.5: YouTube screenshot from Gallucks (2021)

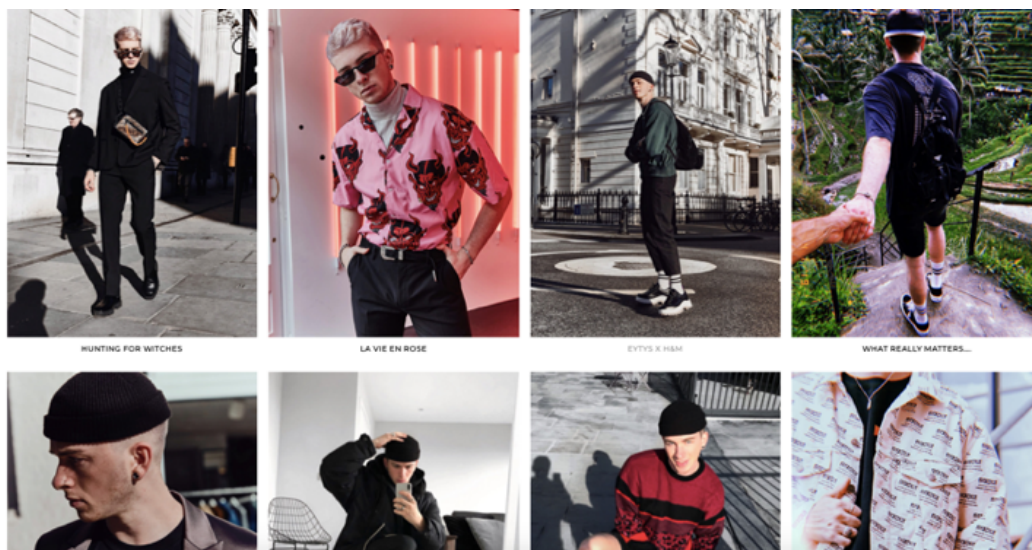


Figure 5.6: Screenshot from Gallucks (2020)

From my study, it is evident that bloggers do have a platform-specific approach in terms of content; however, my findings do not support the more clear-cut distinctions of platform-specific self-brands (Scolere, et al, 2018). As Joel makes evident, bloggers can produce content that is distinctly related to a platform, such as haul and unboxing videos on YouTube, but that does not mean that coherency is sacrificed. On the contrary, coherency is essential for the bloggers, and this can be compromised by a strict platform-specific approach (Labrecque, et al., 2011). Therefore, the bloggers, especially the ones with a multiplatform presence, do not necessarily refrain from each of the platforms' particularities but take advantage of them without eschewing coherent communication. This is explored further in the upcoming chapters but is firmly in line with Light's (2013) context, which places the networked digital masculinities in relation to imagined affordances, especially in conjunction with reproducibility/replicability (Light, 2013, p.252). As the bloggers manage themselves as brands and strive for consistency, the networked branded digital masculinities of the bloggers often become replicable and reproducible, resulting in algorithmic replicability of digital masculinities.

Counter to Scolere, et al., (2018), Van Dijck (2013), considering distinct platform characteristics, argues that when the aim of communication is self-promotion, users have a consistent uniform cross-platform approach. This is supported by my findings. However, apart from self-promotion, uniformity can be located in the genre of life(style) blogging. Gibbs et al. (2015) present the notion of platform vernacular that helps to locate platform specificity and cross-platform coherency in relation to the genre of life(style) blogging. Platform vernacular refers to the 'unique combination of styles, grammars, and logics' (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.257) that each platform has that materialises through the dialogic relation between affordances and user habits. The authors further link the platform vernacular to genres and note that the platform vernacular is a way of 'understanding how communication practices emerge within particular SNS to congeal as genres' (p.256). This makes apparent how genres are co-created between users and technology and prescribe conventions that are easy to follow but dynamic and ever-evolving. Therefore, the concept of the platform vernacular, in my study, coalesces imagined affordances, multiplatform blogging, networked digital branded masculinities and genre. Finally, akin to imagined affordances, the notion of the platform vernacular avoids technological determinism by recognising the interplay of the 'specificities of the platform, its material architecture, and the collective cultural practices that operate on and through it' (Gibbs et al., 2015, p.257– 258).

Concluding thoughts

The bloggers operate within the neoliberal context of digital creative work, where self-management and self-regulation can be found in various aspects of life(style) blogging. One area this is located is in connection to the algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017a), where visibility becomes tethered to algorithmic curation as the social media platforms the bloggers use, namely Instagram and YouTube, are thought to reward platform engagement with algorithmic visibility. It becomes evident then that within life(style) blogging, algorithms pertaining to the sphere of imagined affordances assume a disciplinary position (Bucher, 2012) in the creation and communication of digital masculinities.

Nevertheless, as Cotter (2019) demonstrates, there is a limit to the extent that algorithms control user behaviour and practice. As the bloggers rely on an interpretation of algorithmic ranking and their practices are situated within imagined affordances, the bloggers 'interactions with the platform are beyond the rules instantiated by its algorithms' (Cotter, 2019, p.896). This does not mean that algorithms and imagined affordances do not act as points of regulation for digital masculinities, but, at least to some extent, it allows personal agency in the construction and communication of digital masculinities, evading a techno-deterministic reading of digital masculinities.

Overall, the bloggers operate within a context of neoliberal ideologies that valorise individualisation, hard work, and a reflective mode of being where self-management and self-regulation can be paired with quantifiable digital metrics. The advent of social media and the increasingly heightened commercial logic that penetrates them have transformed the digital realm into an ideal place for neoliberal ideologies to thrive. The bloggers operate in an ambivalent space, where multiplatform communication oscillates and ultimately merges the highly personal and the highly commodified. Within this context, the bloggers often perceive an invisible pressure that urges them to create and share content constantly, to regularly engage with platforms and to be "switched-on". Thus, through the visibility mandate (Duffy and Hund, 2019), not only work often blurs with leisure, but the personal becomes highly visible and forms an essential part of the bloggers' self-brands.

Self-branding has been established as an integral part of the organisational turn toward 'enterprise culture' (du Gay, 1995, p.56). As a form of neoliberal self-enterprise, self-branding has been linked to gendered discourses, notably the logic of celebrating individual choice, freedom and self-expressions as embedded in the consumer marketplace (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Gill, 2007; McRobbie, 2009). Thus, the urge to create and manage the self as brand forms part of the broader neoliberal ideology that valorises self-management and self-governance but also stems from the imagined affordance of

life(style) blogging that serve to characterise the bloggers' practices and normalise user norms and behaviours. Hence, the bloggers are regulated by external factors, i.e., neoliberalism and digital technology, but also exhibit a self-regulated mode of practice influenced by their own perceptions of the ideal manners in which they need to be blogging, i.e., imagined affordances.

Consequently, the networked digital branded masculinities created and communicated through the bloggers' self-representations become (self)regulated through the imagined affordances that act as regulatory mechanisms (Bucher, 2012) and through algorithms that play an essential role in structuring online experiences (Beer, 2008; Cheney-Lippold, 2011; Gillespie, 2014). This infuses the Andersonian framework (which is discussed in detail in the upcoming chapters) with the structural elements that are missing from studies situated under this context. Ultimately, the bloggers' digital masculinities and their lifestyles as framed through narratives become "styled", as they are highly regulated, managed, and ultimately governed by algorithms and the imagined affordances that permeate lifestyle blogging.

Chapter Six. The figure of the modern gentleman: a reconfiguration through digital masculinities



Figure 6.1: Instagram screenshot from @efe.efeturi (2021a)

Throwback. Looking back to times when it was all suited or nothing at all. The conversation has moved forward to a topic of necessity and functionality but in it also recounting legacy heritage and class which is where these come in.... I know things are opening up again but would we ever go back to normal? Let this conversation drive what to want to add to your capsule, but for me I don't think I can walk away from fully suited and booted, it adds a certain kind of panache that has lived over time and we have seen that no matter what era we go into these classic pieces and styles keep coming back even when we try to evolve. It's shown it's apt to stay in time, almost like a continuous heritage. Fashion and style move forward with a string attached to its heritage without doubt.

How do you see suiting in the near future?

#workwear #suitstyle

The bloggers' self-brands are intricately linked to consumption. One of the main ways the bloggers construct their self-brands is by framing and communicating their lifestyles through associations with brands and products (Arriagada, 2021a). The commodities the bloggers use, the brands they affiliate with, the consumer experiences they partake in and even the choice of what social media platforms they use, serve to weave the bloggers' personal narratives (Wattanasuwan, 2005) that ultimately host branded self-representations of digital masculinities. In the previous chapter, I discussed how the

bloggers as 'platformized creative workers' (Glatt, 2021, p.2) operate within a neoliberal framework that urges individuals to construct and manage themselves as brands. Within this context, the imagined affordances of the various social media platforms and personal websites the bloggers use, operate as institutional mediations (Thumin, 2012), and act as points of self-management and self-regulation.

This chapter places self-branding within the context of personal narratives. I draw from the figure of the modern gentleman that some of the bloggers in my study construct to discuss how the bloggers create branded iterations of digital masculinities in conjunction with the brands and products they use that are inextricably linked to their personal narratives. The bloggers presenting as modern gentlemen draw from the long-standing but fluid figure of the gentleman reworking it to compose the figure of the modern gentleman, and firmly place their personal narrative within this context while actively showcasing points of affiliation to the Andersonian framework. Moreover, these branded self-representations the bloggers create and communicate showcase the cultural mediations (Thumin, 2012) that pertain to digital masculinities. By crafting the figure of the modern gentleman primarily through affiliations with brands and products, digital masculinities are not simply 'created within an endlessly open cultural script'; rather, they adhere to premises that make sense 'within a cultural and economic recognizable and predetermined set of images, texts, beliefs, and values' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p.66). The highly commoditised neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate identifies individuals, first and foremost, as consumers. Consequently, as both the bloggers and the networked public of lifestyle blogging are seen primarily as consumers, the self-branded digital masculinities become 'only legible in culture through and within the logic and vocabulary of the market' (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p.14).

Self-branding and the narratives of consumption

In the previous chapter, I traced how the bloggers often manage themselves as brands. Akin to product branding, where brands make use of narratives (Escalas, 2004; Holt, 2004), the bloggers undertake self-branding mainly through narratives of consumption, meaning that they create narratives where brands and products play a crucial role in their formation. Through self-branding, the bloggers communicate 'a personal style of dress as well as a style of identity and of life' (Pham, 2015, p.3). This is branded but is also a 'coherent personal narrative' (Arriagada, 2021a, p.451); coherency is crucial, as the bloggers increasingly need to function in 'predictable and dependable ways' (Carah and Shaul, 2016, p.80) that might make them 'algorithmically recognizable' (Gillespie, 2017, p.2) and reward them with visibility. Glatt and Banet-Weiser (2021) argue that self-branding

inherently includes narratives (p.46). Creating narratives or stories to communicate brands is well-established within product-branding, as marketers use brand storytelling to create meaning and connect with consumers.

Escalas argues that 'meaning ascribed to products and brands can also be generated by narratives' (2004, p.168). Those narratives are communicated by advertising and through various media, (such as television, magazines, radio and the web) and act as vehicles to communicate 'social and cultural ideals to consumers' (Cooper et al., 2010, p.557). Consequently, brands create 'brand narratives' that 'present consumers with lifestyle and identity ideals' (Cooper et al., 2010, p.558). Storytelling is also central in the lives of consumers, as stories - or brand narratives - can act as frames of reference that consumers use to further instill and communicate their own meanings (Escalas, 2004; Woodside, et al., 2008). This is called brand-consumer storytelling (Woodside, 2010) and relates to the 'narratives arranged by consumers where brands and products play a role in the stories told' (Kretz and de Valck, 2010, p.314). In other words, marketers create narratives and stories, but what a brand means to a consumer is also personal, relating to the personal narratives of the consumers, meaning that consumers often incorporate brands into their personal narratives to meet 'self-motivated goals' (Escalas, 2004, p. 68-170). Consequently, brands 'become meaningful to consumers through the construction of narratives or stories' (Escalas, 2004, p.168), with those narratives existing both on the side of product-branding and the side of the personal creation of self-narratives, with the two sides being in a dialogical relationship.

The bloggers build self-brands by creating and communicating narratives of their lifestyles that are indivisible from consumption. The bloggers promote products and affiliate themselves with brands, and often lean into already-existing narratives from brands, but ultimately, as they themselves operate as brands, what they bolster is their branded selves, as was illustrated by the discussion of Joel Mcloughlin in the previous chapter. The bloggers present brands on their social media, in a mix of paid-for promotions and personal purchases, that are both definitive for their self-branding (as they act as conduits of meaning) and help them cultivate their self-concepts (Escalas, 2004, p.170), demonstrating 'self-definition through brand affiliation' (Marwick, 2013b, p.312). Many of the bloggers in my study display a heightened awareness of the already-existing cultural layout, (i.e., already-existing narratives and cultural significance), of the brands they affiliate with. Jordan Bunker exemplifies this in our personal communication by noting:

When it comes to which brands I work with, I try to be as aware as possible of the cultural make-up of the brand and ensure that my values align with the brand before partnering with them.

This alignment of the bloggers' personal values with the perspectives put forth by brands through marketed narratives and storytelling or various other promotional communication efforts is significant for the bloggers, as they weave products and meanings into their self-brands. When it comes to brands, the cultural significance of a brand narrative is created as brand marketers 'attempt to instil meaning into products and brands via cultural codes' (Brioschi, 2006, p.186). Those codes can communicate social and political interests and notions about tradition, quality, luxury, or visual aesthetics. Subsequently, consumers rely on those connotations and combine and adapt meanings to fit their narratives (Brioschi, 2006), as Jordan argues and as I trace throughout the empirical chapters. Thus, the affiliations the bloggers use to construct and communicate their narratives not only tether digital masculinities to consumption but also serve to rework and reconfigure meanings associated with masculinities.

Tracing the modern gentleman

The figure of the modern gentleman or modern gent is a configuration of masculinity that arose through the self-representations of various bloggers in my study (approximately one-third of the bloggers in my research, as is shown in appendix A). The term modern gentleman has often been used by the bloggers themselves and does not consist of a terminology I came up with. Rather, following the bloggers' self-representations the modern gentleman overall reflects the reconfiguration of a cultural and fluid concept interlaced with the rest of the bloggers' intersectional aspects, providing a configuration of their masculinities that perfectly reflects how mutual constitutions of identities and gender often 'takes place in dynamic, paradoxical and often contradictory ways' (Pringle, 2008, p. 110). The figure of the modern gentleman can be found: 1) conceptually in various posts discussing what a (modern) gentleman is, 2) on the titles of blogs, such as The Gentleman Blogger, Twenty First Century Gent, The Gentleman Select, The Yorkshire Gentleman, The Cultured Gentleman, Man about Town²⁶, 3) through hashtags used on Instagram, and 4) overall through the visual and textual self-representations that make up the bloggers' narratives. The bloggers who espouse the figure of the modern gentleman make a remarkably homogenous group in terms of the narratives they communicate. The uniformity is apparent through the analogous products and lifestyle they promote and is also articulated through comparable

²⁶ Man About Town was a gentleman's tailoring magazine launched in the UK in 1953. Another publication with the same name was also in circulation in the UK from 2007 until 2010 and focused on men's fashion and style.

sartorial representations and articulations of similar ideals, such as the promotion of suits and classic menswear accessories such as leather goods and watches (in both instances catering to a broad market spectrum presenting from luxury to fast fashion brands) and the endorsement of similar notions about masculinity that often actively contrast hegemonic or orthodox ideals. The bloggers narrate specific branded selves and situate their consumption narratives within particular ideals of masculinities, thus communicating distinct iterations of digital masculinities. The group's homogeneity can also be attributed to the fact that they draw from pre-existing brand narratives and the genre of life(style) blogging more generally, where the figure of the modern gentleman can be seen as an existing sub-category of life(style) blogging. Thus, genre conventions can also partly stimulate relatively homogeneity (Lomborg, 2011) as well as the quest for algorithmic visibility where influencers strive to be algorithmically identifiable (Cotter, 2019).

Overall, the bloggers draw on the gentleman as a cultural symbol and rework its meanings through the digital masculinities they communicate. Historically, the term gentleman has been 'highly ambiguous and amorphous' (Berberich, 2007, p.4). Ideals surrounding the gentleman have been in flux, changing considerably throughout the years; thus, the gentleman has a fluid quality. Berberich (2007) has tracked depictions of the modern gentleman in early twentieth - century English literature and offers an extensive historical footprint of the concept during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, depicting the broader sociocultural positioning of the gentleman throughout the years. Through her extensive historical and cultural study, Berberich argues that there is no definite consensus about what constitutes a gentleman. From the eighteenth century onwards, the gentleman has comprised a multitude of values, behavioural codes, sartorial codes and morals, but the definitive characteristics of those elements are manifold and contradictory (Berberich, 2007, p.8). Nevertheless, the ideal of the gentleman, even though evasive, has been broadly linked to Englishness. There have been archetypes of the gentleman within British culture since at least the seventeenth century, propagated through cultural modes of representation such as literature or the popular culture of the time (Berberich, 2007). Thus, the gentleman has always implicated mimesis or the following of a set of rules and representations particular to each context and period; or in other words, the gentleman involves the remediation (Rocamora, 2012) of broader cultural concepts and specific fashions and styles through publications and various other media and iconic figures epitomising the gentleman.

Interestingly the bloggers in my study often merge the gentleman with the figures of the dandy and the dapper. This happens mainly through Instagram hashtags, as alongside hashtags that bloggers

predominantly use such as #gentleman and #gentlemanstyle, they also frequently use hashtags such as #dapperman, #dandy, and #dandystyle. Like the gentleman, the dandy has also been 'filled with contention and has been open to multiple definitions' (Cole and Lambert, 2021, p.23). Historically, the figure of the dandy arose during the nineteenth century. As Breward (2003) illustrates, the development of modern fashion during that time created new ways that individuals could curate, present and promote themselves. Dress started becoming a means of 'signifying a unique social identity' and exerting 'cultural influence' (Breward, 2003, p.160). Thus, the dandy was able to wield his sartorial style to become an iconic figure through the unique arrangement of his dress and manners (Breward, 2003, p.160). The concept of the dandy, akin to the concept of the gentleman, as a metaphor for meaning, is a 'powerful' one that has been 'reinvented by every generation' (Breward, 2021, p.7). This fluidity is crucial as it allows for intersectional subjectivities to be located within the masculinities of the bloggers and the digital context where the modern gentleman is produced to be examined, as I attempt in this chapter.

Bryan Beau Brummel is often credited as one of the first dandies. Adopting a sartorial style that was 'restrained, elegant with attention to detail' (Cole and Lambert, 2021, p.13), he was seen as the exemplar of elegant men's style. Brummel was, in other words, a 'paradigmatic dandy' (Breward, 2016, p.125). Brummel was based in London but did not form part of the hereditary elite. He blended impeccable sartorial elegant choices with attention to the urban aristocratical etiquette, and by engaging in what can be considered nowadays as self-branding and networking he managed to rise through the social and aristocratic circles. To do so, Brummel used the 'fashionable arena of London's social life as his canvas for self-promotion' (Cole and Lambert, 2021, p.15). Brummel appropriated the ideals of the English gentleman and the notions of class and urbanism that came with and reworked them, thus instilling the gentleman with new meaning while transcending the rigid class boundaries of the time (Breward, 2016). According to Breward (2003), there lies Brummel's ingeniousness. Brummel appropriated items and ideals that signified the elite urban gentleman of the time and reconfigured them, discreetly disrupting the status quo.

The concept of the English gentleman was the embodiment of English virtues and values (Collins, 2002). The gentleman, was an aspirational figure, often restricted to white, middle and middle-upper class educated urban men (Collins, 2002). However, Brummel illustrates perfectly how ideals of gentlemanliness can be reconfigured. Granted, Brummel due to his whiteness, age, class and educational background could more easily than other marginalised individuals emulate the ideas of the gentleman, but he still showcases how through his sartorial choices, behavioural ideals and self-

promotion he was able to transcend the rigid structures. Of course, Brummel's self-promotion cannot be equated to the self-branding pursuits of the bloggers, as the sociocultural background where Brummel operated is outside the particular neoliberal and technological context where the bloggers exist. Yet, like the bloggers, Brummel spun the dandy's narrative through his self-representations and self-promotion configured to his time. Thus, Brummel's narrative might not be woven in a similar manner to the bloggers in my study, but still, it was woven through the display of a specific lifestyle in which dress, self-promotion and ideals about masculinity were enmeshed.

As Breward (1999) illustrates, Brummel opened the way for other dandies to follow, or in other words, to get inspired or imitate this lifestyle. Overall, the gentleman and dandyism reveal how masculinities are not neutral but 'constitute a system of meaning' (Breward, 2003, p.161-162) through which culture, fashion and the various intersectional subjectivities of the bloggers' (as will also be discussed in Chapters Seven and Eight and linked to disability, body size and mental health) are constructed and become legible. Thus, masculinities are constantly reconfigured, while gender as a category is not parallel or static, neither on an identity micro level nor on a structural macro level (Hancock, 2007, p. 70). For instance, through Oscar Wilde, the dandy was recomposed and fused with ideals about morality and sexuality in the eighteenth century (Glick, 2010). The dandy became prominent again after the first World War in the post-war period. This time, the figure of the dandy was primarily based in Paris and had its own magazine, *Monsieur*²⁷. Dandyism was remediated and communicated through *Monsieur* and became enmeshed more concretely with consumer culture as men were encouraged to consume to create this 'aspirational lifestyle' (Potvin, 2015, p.3). As such, the dandy was reconfigured as 'a fervent consumer and willing object to be consumed within the ever-expanding parameters of modern lifestyle management' (Potvin, 2015, p.3). Thus, once again making visible how through sartorially fashioning the self and encompassing certain ideals, the dandy and the gentleman become cultural artefacts, malleable and fluid, carrying specific sociocultural connotations of each time and propagated through media and advertisements. This illustrates how the dandy and the gentleman become meaningful both through narratives or stories weaved by media and brands and through styling or branding the self as such.

²⁷ *Monsieur* was established in Paris in early 1920s and run as a monthly publication until 1924. It is considered Europe's first men's fashion magazine, with the publication being 'an arbiter of sartorial *savoir-faire* and stylish living for the French man' (Potvin, 2013, p.192). *Monsieur* reimagined the dandy as a queer and elegant figure. The publication had ties with the artistic world of Paris, with artists, painters, writers and ballet dancers being amongst the editors, the featured personalities and the primary readers.

Fletcher (2004) notes that dandyism is something that can be personally achieved and that is thus not bound to culture or ethnicity. Even though this is too simplistic in not considering inequalities, power imbalances and marginalisation (Christensen and Jensen, 2014) in the construction of masculinity the gentleman as an aspirational figure has the ability to transcend rigid structures and categories and absorb intersectional aspects, thus dynamically reconstituting masculinities. Simultaneously, it can be said that this also evidences the persistence of upper/middle class ideals in sartorial practices. Nevertheless, through the influencers in my study it is evident that other categories are also becoming enmeshed. Here it is actively showcased how the principle of mutual constitutions of identities inherent to the concept of intersectionality can be applied to studies of men and masculinity and show how 'class, 'race', ethnicity and gender' can 'shape, form, perhaps even constitute masculinity' (Christensen and Jensen, 2014, p.69).

Even though the dandy and the gentleman have historically had strong connotations with Englishness, Fletcher (2004) argues that one becomes a dandy through enacting certain ideals and fashioning oneself in particular ways, as is showcased by the bloggers in my study. Nevertheless, as the gentleman and the dandy are ideals in flux, 'varying cultural norms will inevitably affect the specific sartorial choices that these men make' (Fletcher, 2004, p.6). The dandy is still a recognisable figure located in various contemporary instances. Svelte (2018) indicates the dandies of Pitti Uomo²⁸ which some of the modern gentlemen in my study frequently attend, often using the hashtags, such as #pittiuomo or #sprezza and #sprezzatura. Sprezzatura (Svelte, 2018) is associated with elegance and is linked to the Italian heritage in fashion, pointing to the historical craftsmanship of leather goods, textiles and suits. As Paulicelli (2014) notes, 'sprezzatura is at the heart of the current expansion of men's fashion, especially as it concerns sartorial suits' (p.161), with Italian brands and products are widely featured by the bloggers in my study. Race and ethnicity are also often key constitutive social categories (Christensen and Jensen, 2014, p.69) that mutually shape and form the configuration of the gentleman, with the modern black dandyism²⁹ as an example spanning men and women (e.g., Glick, 2003; McMillan, 2016, Weilandt, 2021; Zaidi, 2020). In my study, indicative of this

²⁸ Pitti Uomo is the menswear fashion trade fair that started in 1972 in Florence, Italy, and it has now become a bi-lateral global event for menswear and accessories (Lavanga, 2018). In the past decade, Pitti Uomo has been a source of streetstyle photography, and the attires of some suited attendees are labelled under dandy or dapper styles. Overall, Pitti Uomo has been link to the figure of the dandy, with Svelte (2018) approaching the Pitti-Uomo dandy as a style subculture.

²⁹ The dandy has been reconfigured as a black diasporic cultural icon. In 2010, the Dandy Lion Project was founded by Ngozi Odita after an exhibition she curated in a gallery in Harlem, New York relating to global dandyism. Since then, there have been various exhibitions worldwide under the project that showcase historical and contemporary representations of configurations of black and diasporic dandyism.

intersection is influencer Efe Efeturi, who presents himself as a modern gentleman while also often leaning into his Nigerian heritage, interspersing his Instagram feed with promotions of ethnical sartorial representations, as seen in figure 6.2. This actively evidences how individuals can be ‘simultaneously positioned – and position themselves – in multiple categories, such as gender, class, and race/ethnicity’ (Christensen and Jensen, 2014, p.69) through their self-representations that actively shape and create meaning (Hall 1985), where, nevertheless, imbalances, inequalities and asymmetries are navigated as is discussed further below in this chapter. Finally, the bloggers often also use the term dapper alongside the terms gentleman or dandy, a term that has been associated with menswear and style connoting elegance and smart dressing.



Figure 6.2: Instagram screenshot from *@efe.efeturi* (2021b). The caption reads ‘Ad- I said it’s party season so call me Uncle Tunde just for today//wearing *@davidwej_uk* all new ADEBOWALE PREMIUM SHORT SLEEVE 3 PIECE KAFTAN’

Ultimately, in my study, the dandy and the gentleman become merged via the bloggers’ self-representations, and the terms are used interchangeably. The dandy and the gentleman cannot be limited to a single ideal but should be considered an aspiration. As Berberich writes, ‘the beauty of the idea of the gentleman lies in the fact that it can be given an individual flavour to make it into a liveable ideal’ (Berberich, 2007, p.5). The bloggers do precisely that; they turn the fluid idea of the gentleman into a branded communicable figure. Historically ‘the enduring concept of the gentleman found its resonances altered by the particular social and economic circumstances pertaining at the moment of its mediation’ (Breward, 1999, p.249). For the bloggers in my study, this particular

moment of mediation further implicates the digital communication and the imagined affordances that pertain to life(style) blogging.

The art of the modern gentleman: digital narratives and brand-consumer storytelling

'One consumes to be a dandy and consuming allows dandy to be' argues Fletcher (2004, p.73). Ultimately in my study, the bloggers construct and brand representations of the modern gentleman through brand-consumer storytelling (Woodside, 2010), drawing from the well-established but ambiguous cultural ideal of the dandy and the gentleman, symbols which become merged and used interchangeably. This means that the bloggers draw on cultural ideals of the gentleman as an icon of masculinity (Mort, 1996), reconfiguring it for the contemporary digital realm. However, this modern reconfiguration is also mobilised by brands who still use the gentleman as a figure to create their brand narratives. Thus, the bloggers presenting as modern gentlemen exemplify brand-consumer storytelling and showcase how masculinities can be actively reworked.

Indicative is the blog post by Matthew Zorpas, author of the blog *The Gentleman Blogger*. In a post titled 'The art of a modern gentleman', Matthew wonders, 'what does it mean to be a gentleman in today's day and age?' (Zorpas, 2015). The post is sponsored by Mini Cooper, a brand that embodies a quintessential Britishness (Edenson, 2004). Drawing on an already-existing brand narrative, Matthew endeavours to address that question and provides 'the ultimate guide to being a modern gentleman'. This guide consists of a list of sartorial and behavioural advice created 'with the intention of developing a philosophy for men to live by, one which could inspire men from all walks of life'. Matthew frames the modern gentleman as a philosophy or lifestyle where brands and products have an active part, acting as effective elements to weave a modern gentleman's narrative. In the same post, Matthew writes, 'it's not about telling men how to be perfect, nor is it a dictatorial guide, it is more a handbook for life'. In other words, Matthew provides a guide that can turn the gentleman into a liveable idea. The blogger overall presents himself as a modern gentleman, but this post showcases an indicative instance of a blogger using market affiliation to draw from and rework the cultural archetype of the gentleman; a gentleman that is, nevertheless, already reconfigured through the market, as this post is in collaboration with Mini Cooper - a brand carrying an implicit classic Englishness and often creating loose associations with the gentleman ideal.

It is not uncommon for consumers' narratives to follow archetypal patterns (Kozinets, et al., 2010). Holt and Thompson (2004) have argued that consumers often draw from archetypes that are perpetuated through brands and advertising, and through popular media, such as films and

magazines, to enact their stories. The gentleman is an archetype of masculinity that is constantly being perpetuated and remediated through media and fashion imagery. Thus, showcasing how 'the cultural production of masculinities is a diffused process that see the cooperation of countless marketers, advertising agencies, market research companies, news media and magazine publishers' (Rinallo, 2007, n.p.). For instance, configurations of the figure of the gentleman can be found in the James Bond movie franchise, in style editorials of menswear in popular male fashion magazines, such as in British GQ (Burton, 2020; GQ, 2016), and in the advertising of menswear brands. Holt and Thompson (2004) directly link their arguments to masculinities, noting that 'men often use consumption symbolically, using commodities to enact ideologies of masculinities' (p.425). The authors contend that masculinity is constructed through two interconnected facets of cultural production: that is mass culture (or representations of masculinities in media, popular culture and advertising) and everyday or personal consumption practices that have a symbolic layer (p.426) - something that is evident through the figure of the modern gentleman. However, (and importantly, I would add), in my study the bloggers further enmesh this figure with imagined affordances, as I discuss further below. Overall, the modern gentleman aligns with the neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate, where individuals are invited to create gendered self-representations through associations with consumer products (Rumens, 2016), replicating the values of neoliberalism through the self-branded, platformized figure of the modern gentleman.

Like Matthew, many bloggers provide guides or indicate how to become a modern gentleman. Thus, brand-consumer storytelling, apart from connections to the market, becomes infused with traits and values. That way, the bloggers appeal to the ultimate allure of the gentleman that, according to Berberich (2007), is that as an abstract and fluid concept, it can be transformed into a 'liveable ideal' (p.5). For instance, Michael Lyns of MKLYNS, in a post sponsored by the men's accessory brand Azuro Republic, titled 'Defining a Gentleman' (Lyns, 2018), endeavours to outline who the modern gentleman is. In the post, Michael points to a guide created by Azuro Republic that offers advice on styling their products, but ultimately, the blogger notes that for a [modern] gentleman, 'it isn't so much about what you wear, your profession or what you do, it is much more about how you behave and who you are'. Some of the traits pointed out in the post are emotional openness, positivity, and active listening, i.e., showing respect and attention; traits that are in accordance with the Andersonian context. Those traits are identified as paramount for a gentleman but are not discussed in more detail. What is discussed in more detail is how clothes and styling the self can help to shape the modern gentleman - something that makes sense as the post is sponsored by an accessories brand.

According to the post, dressing in style and accessorising properly can help the modern gentleman be more confident. The dandy and the gentleman have had strong historical associations with fashion and dressing well - in other words, being dapper - and menswear brands still draw on this narrative. Michael's post proposes suits as the primary sartorial choice and is accompanied by streetstyle images from Pitti Uomo. Ultimately, the post concludes that dressing stylishly and adopting the gentlemanly traits discussed might require practice but ultimately can lead to self-improvement - thus placing the figure of the modern gentleman firmly within neoliberal ideals of self-management and self-regulation, both in the sartorial and behavioural sense.

Similarly, Charlie Irons, author of *Man About Town*, in a post titled 'What makes the modern gentleman?' (Irons, 2017) teams up with the menswear brand Ermenegildo Zegna and offers his viewpoint. Like the previous post by Michael, this post again points to the remediation of the figure of the gentleman through brands and personal consumer storytelling, as it is an ideal created both through the market and through the bloggers. Here Charlie gives advice on how to style a variety of Ermenegildo Zegna's products, while noting that 'learning to love yourself for who you are is an integral component of being the ultimate modern-day gent'. Consequently, Charlie, too, infuses the sartorial with other elemental qualities. Even though ambiguous, Charlie's encouragement for self-love seems to resemble the traits that Michael discussed in that they both contrast with hegemonic - and orthodox aspects of masculinity, such as valorisation of strength and lack of emotional display (Anderson, 2009; Kimmel, 1996). Comparable to other bloggers discussed in this chapter, Charlie and Michael braid the narrative of the modern gentleman through fashioning the appearance and through ideals, traits and qualities which, even though vague, are communicated via mainly sponsored posts.

Similarly, Gurj Sohanpal, author of the blog *Singh Gentry*, an ex-banker turned full-time blogger who presents as a modern gentleman, offers instances demonstrating how the interplay between brands and the figure of the modern gentleman, i.e., brand-consumer storytelling, is articulated. In the 'About' section of his website, Gurj writes that one of the main aims of his blog is 'to inspire men around the world to have the confidence to express themselves through the clothes they wear' (Sohanpal, 2020a). The blogger has created a series of posts focused on menswear where he features sponsored and non-sponsored content alike, introducing various menswear labels which he deems noteworthy and interesting. For each brand Gurj introduces, he discusses both the specific products

he features and the broader cultural makeup of each brand. Thus, akin to Jordan Bunker, Gurj showcases an awareness in relation to the brands he features.

Gurj tries to feature brands that '[have] progressive approaches to masculinity', 'are environmentally and ethically conscious', or have 'personality' and 'strong identity' (Sohanpal, 2020b.). Even though these traits are left vague and are not contextualised further, Gurj's framing points to the communications of iterations of masculinities removed from hegemonic and orthodox understandings. In a post from the same series called '10 menswear brands you should get to know', Gurj writes:

In a time where social media seems to be at the forefront, it feels impossible to escape the inexhaustible stream of information we consume. It's now common practice to hear about a whole bunch brands on a daily basis. But how do we slow down and digest which ones we resonate with and those that work for us? Inspired by a theme I ran on Instagram stories of menswear brands that you should get to know, I've put 'pen to paper' and created a blog post as a point of reference (Sohanpal, 2020b).

Gurj endeavours to overcome what he perceives as an abundance of menswear brands by focusing on those he considers as carrying connotations he endorses. Of course, that might not always be the case, as Gurj features various products and brands; still, he tries to weave a narrative that incorporates traits of the Andersonian framework. Again brand-consumer storytelling is at play, with Gurj leaning on the cultural makeup of brands to add meaning to his interpretation of the figure of the modern gentleman, directly linking those ideals to his own narrative. This follows Hearn's (2008, p.198) definition that self-branding involves the:

self-conscious construction of a meta-narrative and meta-image of the self through the use of cultural meanings and images drawn from the narrative and visual codes of the mainstream culture industries,

where bloggers as storytellers work with 'shared social and cultural frameworks of interpretation' (Mishler, 1999, p.18).

As the bloggers seem to align configurations of the modern gentleman through consumption with their personal views and values, this aligns with the argument of 'authentic alignment' (Arriagada,

2021a, p.449), or in other words, the view that influencers need to appear as authentic consumers of brands and products (Gandini, 2016a). Influencers promote a plethora of brands, and thus it is not possible to argue that all the brands they feature reflect a more profound personal connection or cultural commentary. However, as for consumers more generally, it is not entirely uncommon for influencers to use brands that are in line with their personalities, personal values and perspectives (Aaker, 1997; Rattle, 2014). Hence, brand alignment with personal values can coexist and even exist outside of the communication of authenticity as a marketing technique (Audrezet et al., 2018). Consequently, authentic alignment takes on the role of a personal expression through the market, as consumers often choose brands and products that 'add meanings to their lives' (Chen, 2013, p.355).

This is exemplified by Rikesh Chauchan, a musician, photographer and influencer, who notes that it is important for him that the brands he works with are aligned with his personal views and fit his blog's overall purpose. Rikesh is a proponent of mental health and is affiliated with CALM, The Campaign Against Living Miserably, a social organisation aiming to destigmatise mental health issues in men, bring awareness to male suicide and challenge hegemonic and orthodox sociocultural conceptions of masculinity (<https://www.thecalmzone.net>), discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight. Rikesh, as an ambassador of CALM, notes in our personal communication that he would:

not work with a brand that endorsed the negative stereotypes of men that revolve around crying or showing emotion as a sign of weakness; how being a man means physically strong only.

In configuring the modern gentleman, Rikesh may not always collaborate with brands that have a specific social or activist aim; however, by working with CALM and integrating the purpose and ethos of this social movement in his narrative, he implicitly connects the figure of the modern gentleman to specific brands and ideals around masculinities. Thus, it is not uncommon that 'decisions about what to promote often reflect influencers' ethical values' (Arriagada, 2021a, p.449). I discuss Rikesh's narrative further in Chapter Eight, where I link Rikesh's (and other bloggers') configurations of the modern gentleman to ideals about masculinities and mental health and discuss notions from CM and CPM, showcasing the multifaced aspect of self-branding, narratives and digital masculinities.

Live the life: a modern gentlemen's journey

Being or becoming a gentleman requires personal effort (Berberich, 2007). As this presents an embodied and lived experience, the modern gentleman is shaped formed and (co-)constituted

intersectionally (Christensen and Jensen 2014, p.85). Moreover, this personal effort is evident so far through the bloggers in the sense of reflective self-management, both relating to the neoliberal tenet of self-management through self-branding and through the imagined affordances, as discussed in Chapter Five, that often act as regulatory points of governance. Nonetheless, the figure of the modern gentleman, as configured by the bloggers, also incorporates stylisation and self-management, both in the sartorial aspect and through the traits that pertain to the fashioning of the self as a modern gentleman. Ben Heath, author of the blog *Twenty First Century Gent*, writes on the 'About' page of his website: 'I should put in a disclaimer here that this isn't a complete guide to being a gent, rather my journey to exploring it' (Heath, n.d). As discussed above, many bloggers formulate their blogs or individual posts as guides to address how to be or how to construct the modern gentleman. Thus, the figure of the modern gentleman is often framed as involving a reflective journey or a becoming, which for the bloggers occurs in relation to self-branding. In this case, self-branding-as-becoming manifests through brand-consumer storytelling and the broader narratives of the bloggers. For Ben, as for Rikesh, consumption often becomes woven with the blogger's struggles with mental health. Ben, who has been open about his struggles with depression, often discusses how men should not be stigmatised when displaying emotions and vulnerability, in accordance with IMT. This posits the figure of the modern gentleman as articulated by Ben in conjunction with a narrative of mental health, something I explore further in Chapter Eight. Thus, Ben's narrative, involves a multifaceted journey that includes his configuration of the gentleman, which becomes encompassed with other elements, - apart from products, such as depression and fatherhood, - again elaborated upon more in Chapter Eight.

As neoliberalism urges everyone to be 'autonomous subjects through consumption [...] and forge meaningful lives through narratives of individual choice' (Rumens, 2017, p.250), through the figure of the modern gentlemen, digital masculinities become branded and reconfigured under neoliberal ideals of reflection and self-governance but also become distant from hegemonic and orthodox representations. Ben, like all the bloggers in my study, assumes the position of autonomy afforded by consumption and unveils the meaningful aspect of his individual choices, through his journey, or narrative, of becoming a modern gentleman. This is a reflexive (and often quantifiable) narrative that involves self-management and self-improvement and which ultimately creates the figure of the modern gentleman through self-branding. Nevertheless, autonomy and individual choice should not be taken uncritically, as imagined affordances play a crucial role in the self-regulation and self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a) of the bloggers' practices. Thus, the modern gentleman is ultimately a branded, self-regulated becoming.

Akin to Ben's journey, Cyrill Ibrahim of *The Cultured Gentleman*, through his blogging, tries to communicate an indicative guide for modern gentlemen. The blogger's main occupation is as a classical pianist and he is of Indian descent as he disclosed in our interview, thus this already implicates aspects of class, race, ethnicity and elitism as he is highly educated and involved in the elite and often exclusionary cycles of classical music as discussed in our interview, making evident how his configuration of the modern gentleman is already multifaceted. In Cyrill's website there is a tab called 'Live the Life' which includes all his blog posts (figure 6.3). The other main tabs of his website are the 'About' page, the 'Dialogue' tab which includes some of Cyrill's recorded tracks; and the 'Events' tab, which contains his upcoming performances.

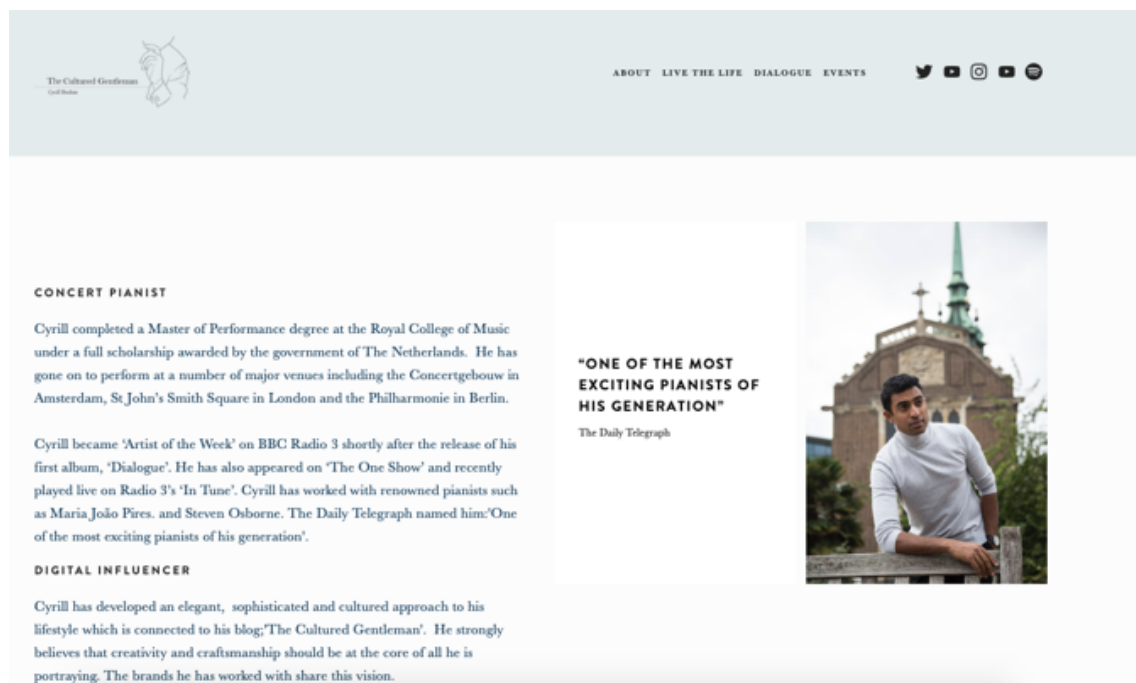


Figure 6.3: Screenshot from *The Cultured Gentleman* (2020)

Cyrill invites the audience to live the life of the modern gentleman, thus actively once again turning the gentleman into a liveable - and intersectional - ideal (Berberich, 2007) through his self-reflexive communication of his narrative. Cyrill, through his blogging, brands himself a modern gentleman; however, he uses the same social media to also promote his musical career as a concert pianist. The influencer has a multiplatform presence that encompasses his website, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube and Spotify, with the latter used primarily to upload his music. His networked configuration as a modern gentleman envelops his position as a blogger and pianist; thus, it pertains to his whole life, exemplifying neoliberalist ideals, namely self-branding, that permeate various aspects of a person's life (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Cyrill has specific ideas about what constitutes a modern gentleman, which are prevalent through his posts, and he elaborated upon these in our personal communication.

For the pianist/influencer, the ideal of the gentleman he embodies 'doesn't come from the word gentry as we know it, from the old-time which refers to the upper classes and lords'; rather, the idea of the gentleman involves 'the process in growing to be a man in a gentle sense'. Cyrill acknowledges the elite historical connotations of the term gentleman (Breward, 2016), and actively tries to detach his own classification from those. Nevertheless, here Cyril's own background that is multifaceted and includes asymmetries also needs to be mentioned. Cyril is from Indian descent and had an admittedly affluent upbringing (he did disclose his grandfather's blooming business in tailoring in our interview). Moreover, Cyril is highly educated and a renown classical pianist, a field where he has received negative criticism from his peers for his work as an influencer in the fashion and lifestyle sector, as he disclosed in our interview.

Through Cyrill, the gentleman again is framed as a process, a becoming through an unfolding multifaceted and layered personal narrative, and this includes 'more than just the clothing stuff', as he argues. The blogger says that it requires 'inner growth', as noted in our interview. Cyrill, elaborating on what he means by personal inner growth, says that it is something that can be achieved through knowledge, through being open to other cultures and people and through kindness towards other people and oneself. Cyrill argues that being gentle as a modern gentleman guides personal growth and can showcase one's vulnerability or, as the influencer says, 'trying to be vulnerable by not always trying to show your strong side constantly'. Under hegemonic or orthodox ideologies where masculinity is associated with stoicism and hardness (White, 2019), the showing of vulnerability has been coded as problematic for men (Goodey, 1997). Thus, through Cyrill's self-branding, the modern gentleman again becomes imbued with qualities resembling IMT while actively negating hegemonic and orthodox ideologies.

Like other bloggers, Cyrill argues that he tries to align the products he promotes and the connections he forms with brands to his personal viewpoints. The blogger notes in our interview that in terms of masculinities, he prefers to work with 'open brands and perhaps sustainable brands' - Cyrill links this to his approach to what an influencer is. For Cyrill, the notion of an influencer takes on a more literal sense; it embodies a content creator who tries 'to influence people's way of thinking, possibly'. For that reason, an influencer 'needs to be extremely clear about what he wants to achieve with his idea and who he works with'. Therefore, for Cyrill, partnering with the brands he deems appropriate for his self-brand is essential in delimitating and communicating his configuration of the modern gentleman, showcasing how brands act as 'imaginary resources for self-expression, and lifestyle construction' (Marwick 2013b, p.310).

In Cyrill's view, then, framing the figure of the modern gentleman and infusing it with certain qualities, such as vulnerability, not only indicates how to 'live the life' but also prompts the audience to follow this ideal of masculinity. This becomes replicable both through outer elements (e.g., attire, personal style) and through inner elements (e.g., personal traits and qualities, namely openness, kindness and vulnerability) negotiated through associations with brands that communicate certain meanings. Indicative is Cyrill's post titled 'Redefining Masculinity', which features the menswear yoga brand OHMME. Cyrill leans into the brand's cultural makeup, which is marketed as high-quality, eco-conscious yoga apparel for men (<https://www.ohmme.com>). Like Gurj's series of menswear posts, this post is part of a series called The Cultured Gentleman Story Collection, where Cyrill collaborates with, sources, presents and if possible, holds interviews with brands that he deems noteworthy. For this post, Cyrill has undertaken an interview with a member of the brand's team, although it is not evident what position the interviewee holds. Cyrill presents OHMME as a 'men's apparel brand who encouraged men to practice yoga and challenge the preconceived ideas of masculinity' (Ibrahim, 2017). At the same time, during the interview, the brand is framed as 'the first men's-only disruptive brand that is challenging the current attitudes towards societal stereotypes and toxic ideas of masculinity' (Ibrahim, 2017).

What is interesting in this post is that apart from actively negating hegemonic frameworks of masculinity, the post is placed under an eco-conscious and progressive frame. Eco-consciousness and sustainability as market positionings of products have been found to bear resistance from male consumers due to feminised connotations (Brough et. al., 2016). Simultaneously, yoga, both as a practice and through the yoga apparel that brands promote, increasingly appeals to the contemporary conscious consumer who, much like the figure of the modern gentleman, is 'informed, well-travelled, cultured, global and mobile' (Mora, et al., 2018, p.177). This also actively showcases how various positions and structures are often asymmetrically intersecting with various categories and often challenge or subvert hegemonic ideals (Christensen and Jensen 2014, p.69), i.e., an eco-conscious and progressive frame, while uphold frameworks of privilege and inequality, i.e., elite, cultures, well-travelled consumer. Finally, yoga, especially in a UK context, is increasingly being positioned under a neoliberal framework of self-improvement as the practice is being redefined and marketed as an aspirational lifestyle brand (Mora, et al., 2018, p.177).

Overall, this post indicates the similar neoliberal frame of reference that both brands and the bloggers operate under. Neoliberal ideals seep into all aspects of personal life, such as exercise, which is

increasingly becoming a highly stylised lifestyle aspect that brands try to capitalise upon; products, such as exercise apparel are increasingly being marketed to consumers to accompany their practices. Whether and how OHMME, as a brand, challenges preconceived masculinity ideals is not clear in the post and should not matter per se in this case. What is evident is that Cyrill endorses and builds on an already-established brand positioning that he thinks is fitting to his own self-brand, i.e., brand-consumer storytelling. Through that, Cyrill actively tries to reformulate connotations of masculinities, overtly linking the figure of the modern gentleman to a redefined progressive mode of masculinity as described by the Andersonian paradigm. What can be indicated from posts such as this is the dialogical manner in which the bloggers draw from brands and actively try to reformulate their self-brands; they do this through ideals associated closely with IMT that are often already in circulation in the market, consolidating the dialogical relationship between the market and the figure of the modern gentleman.

Even though the modern gentleman is primarily expressed through style and appearance - it is framed by life(style) bloggers, after all with ties to the fashion industry - there is an inclination for the bloggers to indicate that personal traits go on par with the fashioning of the modern gentleman. Cyrill sums this in our interview up by noting that 'the connection with the outer and inner is really important to growing as a gentleman'. So far, I have discussed how bloggers link traits to the figure of the modern gentleman; however, Cyrill goes one step further and explicitly identifies the expressions of emotions and vulnerability that, in this opinion, characterise modern gentlemen.

Having defined who the modern gentleman is for him, Cyrill goes further and explicitly links the expression of emotions and vulnerability to digital platforms. Through our communication, it became evident that Cyrill is aware of platform affordances and has his own interpretations of them; a fact that exemplifies the imagined affordances at play. Hence, it can be argued that imagined affordances permeate his practice and, by extent, his configuration of the modern gentleman. Cyrill implicates the technical aspects of platforms (e.g., buttons, limits in the modes of content sharing) with imagined affordances and says that image-based Instagram allows him to post more easily and quickly, but that the platform requires high engagement, as he perceives that users need to constantly create content, echoing the visibility game (Cotter, 2019). On the contrary, Cyrill feels that Twitter allows him to be 'slightly more political'. Twitter has historically been an ideal platform for political conversations and current news communication (Burgess and Baym, 2022). Through the platform, political discussions have been coordinated and various crises have been communicated, primarily using hashtags, which are crucial in connecting networked publics and guiding

conversations (Bruns and Burgess, 2015)³⁰. Thus, it can be argued that Cyrill is guided, and his practice partly governed, by the imagined affordances that pertain to the platforms he uses. As Cyrill's practice is networked, this becomes apparent from his use. For instance, Cyrill's Twitter feed, even though it includes visuals and links to his Instagram, YouTube and his website, is peppered with retweets from politicians, mainly President Joe Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, US Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, and tweets expressing his views against Brexit (Ibrahim, 2021) that are not found in any of the other platforms he uses.

In terms of YouTube, in our interview, Cyrill argues that there is more correspondence with the audience through this platform; thus, he can go 'to depth a little bit more'. This is also the platform where Cyrill says vulnerability can be best expressed. Nevertheless, Cyrill does not articulate how exactly he thinks this happens; for instance, why does he perceive he has more correspondence with the audience on YouTube than on Instagram or Twitter. Cyrill also does not define whether it is the technical architecture of YouTube or the format of the content, i.e., video, that he perceives as allowing him to express vulnerability. Nonetheless, this indicates that imagined affordances affect his perception of the platforms and thus his self-representations. His perception of vulnerability as it relates to YouTube might reside in the biography of YouTube³¹, which, as a platform, has historically hosted vlogging with 'ordinary, mundane and personal' content (Burgess and Green, 2018, p.36). Even though YouTube is now highly saturated by consumer culture, as is Instagram, it can be argued that the deeply personal aspect rooted in the platform's origin still partly remains and forms an important part of participation in the platform (Burgess and Green, 2018, p.98). Cyrill's YouTube channel mainly includes videos of his performances, while there are some videos presenting outfits and a video titled 'On Vulnerability' (Ibrahim, 2018), where the blogger discusses the importance of showing vulnerability in our daily lives. Thus, by perceiving that he can present vulnerability and by including video with such content on YouTube, Cyrill actively showcases how self-branding, imagined affordances and the construction of digital masculinities are tethered and, what is more, placed within IMT.

Finally, Cyrill thinks that blogging would hardly exist outside of the networked space it occupies. The influencer tries to give 'a different message to each one of those platforms'. Nevertheless, this

³⁰ Twitter has been linked to political campaigns and uprisings, most notably the Arab Spring (Bruns, et al., 2014).

³¹ Burgess and Baym (2022) talk about the biography of Twitter as they explore the platform's history, affordances, user practices and content. Similarly, I think that YouTube and other platforms can be considered under a biography tracing their complex histories and how they have reached their current configurations.

messaging - or I would argue, the slightly different aspects of his self- brand - still maintain the same overall approach to his narrative, and all meet in his website. As Cyrill says in our personal communication:

it's a big scope thing to share your lifestyle, not just picture based, but it's also probably what you write, the photographs, what you talk about, which subjects you touch

Overall, Cyrill notes that his website acts as a point of reference. As he puts it '[on the website] I give an overview as much as I can of all the channels'. Thus, displaying different aspects of his narrative according to the imagined affordances of each platform does not mean that his self-brand, and by extension, the communication of his digital masculinity, becomes refracted, but rather it becomes self-regulated through imagined affordances. Consequently, Cyrill makes evident how digital masculinities, and the figure of the modern gentleman in this instance are guided by imagined affordances which ultimately act as governing structures.

#gentleman, #dapperman, #dandy

As I have discussed so far in this chapter, the brands the bloggers use serve both to attach meanings to the figure of the modern gentleman, and, by extension, to digital masculinities but, as is often the case for influencers, affiliations with brands also serve to generate attention (Arvidsson, 2006), or, in other words, heighten visibility. This can be achieved as influencers tag brands and deploy hashtags containing brand names (Marwick, 2015). As algorithms 'predominantly convey and reinforce commercialisation as the dominant value' (Just and Latzer, 2018, p.251), brand tags and brand hashtags constitute another way that users might achieve algorithmic visibility. Nevertheless, the bloggers do not solely include brand hashtags. The use of hashtags by the bloggers also serves another function, as hashtags become active components in narrating and branding the figure of the modern gentleman, both on a personal and on a collective level.

On social media, hashtags primarily have a structural role, as they are annotative and searchable (Zappavigna, 2015). The current use of hashtags originated on Twitter and, as I discussed in Chapter Two, reflects an example of a user-initiated affordance later adopted by the platform. Hashtags have now migrated and are used in a plethora of social media platforms, such as Instagram and YouTube, becoming an integral part of the social media logics (Van Dijck & Poell, 2013) of the contemporary digital media ecology. However, the various contexts where hashtags are used and their cultural meanings differ for each platform (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). For instance, on Instagram, hashtags are usually adopted to accompany images that describe the depicted subject or include words with

particular connotations for a post (Serafinelli, 2018). For example, in the opening post of this chapter Efe Efeturi (figure, 6.1) uses hashtags such as #suitstyle, #menfashion, #photooftheday, #outfit and #bespoke, to describe some of the features of the image, and alongside those, he also uses hashtags such as #workwear (which is linked to notions of the entrepreneur which I discuss below), #fashionblogger and #gentleman to indicate elements that pertain to the broader scope of his narrative. Evidently, the hashtags the bloggers use also play a role in their narrative, representing 'the capacity to create stories on social media by using hashtags' (Yang, 2016, p.14).

The bloggers who present themselves as modern gentlemen use similar hashtags throughout their posts. Of course, these vary according to trending and popular hashtags and are not always the same for each post. However, some hashtags were found to run throughout the posts of most bloggers presenting as modern gentlemen. I have focused my discussion relating to hashtags on Instagram, as this is the only platform that all the bloggers in my study use, while I also acknowledge that some bloggers do not use hashtags at all. Nevertheless, hashtags such as #gentleman, #gentlemansguide, #dapperman, #dappergent, #dapper, #dandy, #pittiuomo, #mensstyle, #menswear, #suits and #fashionblogger are predominantly included on Instagram posts. Although there exist architectural similarities between Instagram and other platforms such as Twitter and YouTube (Highfield and Leaver, 2015), the imagined affordances of Instagram make the use of hashtags specific to this platform. For instance, on the technical side, a tweet is limited to two hundred and eighty characters, including hashtags, while on Instagram, captioning differs as users can include up to two thousand two hundred characters and thirty hashtags in a post. For this reason, some bloggers add comments to include hashtags they did not fit in the caption. Moreover, Instagram as a visual-based platform means that hashtagging has acquired characteristic specificities, such as the hiding of hashtags, which I discuss in Chapter Seven. As Ichau et al., (2019) note, when comparing Twitter and Instagram hashtag use, users engage differently with hashtags between the platforms, as Instagram includes 'more nuanced or elaborate, self-curating processes than Twitter' (3). Therefore, the manner in which the bloggers engage with Instagram through hashtags is platform contingent (Poell, Nieborg and Duffy, 2022).

Carter (2016) argues that apart from affiliations with brands, influencers often affiliate themselves with hashtags. This, apart from potential visibility, is also a way for the bloggers to consolidate their narratives (Carter, 2016). In the same manner that the bloggers strategically associate themselves with brands to create their self-brands, they also deploy hashtags to build and consolidate their narratives. Thus, the figure of the modern gentleman is often also constructed through the use of

hashtags. Much as self-branding has been associated with self-regulation and self-management (Hearn, 2008), hashtag use forms another space where those can be located, as they often form an active part of self-branding. For instance, the bloggers try to simultaneously include hashtags that are broadly used by other bloggers who brand themselves as modern gentlemen; however, they also try to include hashtags that slightly differentiate them - for instance, the broad use of #gentleman and #gent that appears alongside variations such as #gentswardrobe, primarily used by Ben Heath, or #gentlemengn, used by Rashpal Amrit blogger of Style and Stylus.

Hashtags can be thought of as another place of regulation, due to imagined affordances. For instance, perceptions around shadowbanning have caused 'considerable anxiety among influencers' (Cotter, 2021, p.2) and might impact the hashtags the bloggers use. According to Cotter (2021), shadowbanning is a moderation technique used in forums and other online spaces, but on Instagram, it has taken on a particular significance, especially relating to influencers. Shadowbanning is not a technical or official regulatory guideline on Instagram; rather, as a term, it is used by influencers to indicate sudden and significant drops in their algorithmic visibility. This happens as, without notice or explanation, posts do not seem to appear on the platform, which makes influencers' content less likely to reach followers (Cotter, 2021), and as such affect their metrics. Instagram has denied the use of shadowbanning but has not been clear on its response to the claims by the influencers (Cotter, 2021). Shadowbanning does not refer to hashtags and posts that go against Instagram guidelines, but rather it includes content that does not have any apparent reason to be made invisible. Influencers have also observed that using the same hashtags regularly and for each post can lead to shadowbanning (Cotter, 2021). However, since there is no official response from Instagram, the precise way shadowbanning works and how to avoid it is partly based on speculation (Cotter, 2021), becoming part of imagined affordances.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that shadowbanning or algorithmic invisibility does not exist. Instagram has been vehemently accused of shadowbanning people of colour and members of the LGBTQ+ community (Cotter, 2021), strengthening arguments about algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018). The bloggers in my study have not referred to shadowbanning per se or do not necessarily belong to the categories deemed most afflicted by shadowbanning. However, many do belong in those categories, such as Efe Efeturi, who often uses the hashtag #blackmen, or Yele King who frequently uses the hashtag #blackmenstyle. Still, it is not impossible for influencers to be concerned about shadowbanning, affecting their algorithmic visibility (Duffy et al., 2021), and thus their monetising endeavours. Consequently, it can be argued that aspects of the 'algorithmic imaginary' (Bucher, 2017)

- such as this could affect hashtag creation and use, thus becoming a regulatory point for the figure of the modern gentleman.

Through the use of hashtags, the ideal of the modern gentleman does not only become part of a personal narrative but also becomes a collective ideal through the networks of hashtags (Carter, 2016). Apart from being annotative, hashtags have a hyperlink function (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), helping users classify and easily find content (Serafinelli, 2018). This way, descriptive words can be 'organically transformed into hyperlinks redirecting to all other content on the platform labelled with given hashtag' (Ichau, et al., 2019, p.2). Bruns and Burgess (2015) argue that the affordance of hashtags as hyperlinks creates ad hoc publics which can articulate social identities and engage in social movements. The authors focused on Twitter, which has a politically inclined character; however, hashtag collectives around content can also occur on Instagram, indicating shared interests³² (Zappavigna, 2015). The collective use of hashtags has been linked to users associating themselves with concepts, thus taking on collective narrative properties (Meraz, 2017; Meraz and Papacharissi, 2016), Hashtags as means of collective narrative are something recognised by networked publics (Yang, 2016); as such, by adopting specific hashtags, users can not only align themselves with a concept, but the same concept also becomes collectively consolidated by users. Thus, the use of hashtags by the bloggers associated with the figure of the modern gentleman serves firstly to weave this ideal into their narratives and secondly to consolidate more broadly the figure of the modern gentleman within the genre of lifestyle blogging.

Georgakopoulou (2021), studying Instagram influencers, argues that due to the platform's affordances, personal narratives on social media can be co-constructed and thus become networked among users. In other words, personal narratives can be tied to 'broader social issue[s] and shared with the public through the use of hashtag' (Yang, 2016, p.15). Hence, the figure of the modern gentleman becomes both an aspect of a personal narrative and a broader articulation of digital masculinities through the collective use of hashtags. This happens as posts under the same hashtags can be regarded as thematically connected collections of posts offering multiple personal perspectives on a topic or issue and promoting a specific attitude (Ichau, et al., 2019). The hashtag, then, as a facet of imagined affordances, can 'shape components of individual and collective identities online' (Ichau, et al., 2019, p.13). Consequently, when bloggers use hashtags such as #gentleman,

³² For instance, Locatelli (2017) has discussed communities around #breastfeeding created through this hashtag. Similarly, Zappavigna (2015) has discussed interests around #coffee, again created through the hashtag.

#gent, #dandy, #gentlemanblogger and so forth, they both create and add to the concept of the modern gentleman. Granted, not all the users of those types of hashtags necessarily signify the same things, but the bloggers in my study presenting themselves as modern gentlemen form a relatively homogenous category situated within a specific genre, communicating similar connotations of digital masculinities.

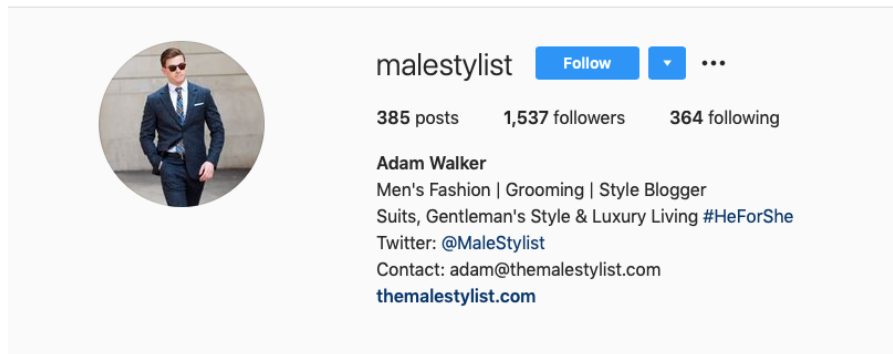


Figure 6.4: Instagram screenshot from @malestylist (2020)

Apart from framing the modern gentleman, the use of hashtags can help infuse this configuration of masculinity with broader sociocultural issues. For instance, through the Instagram profile of Adam Walker, the author of the blog Male Stylist (figure 6.4), the figure of the modern gentleman overtly becomes established, as the blogger uses the phrase 'Gentleman's Style' in his bio. Moreover, the figure of the modern gentleman becomes explicitly associated with other elements such as suits, discussed below, as the blogger not only includes the term 'suits' but explicitly links suit-wearing to the modern gentleman. At the same time, Adam, links this suit-wearing modern gentleman to the HeForShe campaign, as he includes his hashtags in his bio. HeForShe is an organisation concerned with gender equality and represents 'an invitation for men and people of all genders to stand in solidarity with women to create a bold, visible and united force for gender equality' (heforshe.org, 2020). Adam explicitly associates himself with this campaign by adding the hashtag #HeforShe on his profile and on posts, thus primarily linking himself to this movement through the use of hashtags. By adding this hashtag to his profile, the notion of the gentleman - and a suited gentleman, nonetheless - takes on new layers of meaning, again closely aligned to the Andersonian framework.

Adam has previously been vocal on his website about issues regarding feminism, discussing why he thinks all men should be feminists and closely aligning himself with the HeforShe campaign (Walker, 2014). Therefore, Adam infuses his interpretation of the modern gentleman with feminist connotations. The posts where Adam discusses feminism or the HeForShe campaign are not sponsored and do not include any affiliated content; nevertheless, due to imagined affordances, Adam's discussion of HeForShe on his website and the positioning of the campaign in his Instagram

profile slightly differ. Even though Adam can and does include hyperlinks on his website of resources around the HeForShe campaign, such as the official campaign website and social media accounts and YouTube videos that he finds inspirational, such as Emma Watson's speech at the UN (United Nations, 2014), these cannot form part of a broader networked environment. On the contrary, by using the hashtag #HeforShe on Instagram, Adam is able to relate to the campaign more broadly by connecting to a shared and networked public issue (Yang, 2016). Hence, Adam infuses the figure of the modern gentleman with an additional layer of meaning through the adoption and prominent position of this hashtag on his profile.

According to Zappavigna (2015), the primary function of the hashtag is twofold. One is to define an experience, such as using a specific brand hashtag or hashtags like #menswear, #suits or #fashionblogger, which the bloggers use in the more literal sense to indicate what is included in a post or place a post within the context of their practice in terms of genre. The second is to enact relationships, such as the use of #gentleman, #dandy or #spezzatura to indicate an affiliation with the bloggers who brand themselves as #gentlemen. Consequently, there is a networked co-creation of the figure of the modern gentleman. This also reflects the position of social media platforms as co-creators where users do not solely contribute to their digital presence but concomitantly to that of other users (Leaver, 2019). As the collaborative character of Instagram makes it an ideal environment for dialogue (Page, 2013), the figure of the modern gentleman partly occurs through the dialogues of hashtags, actively showcasing the 'co-production and re-production' of networked masculinities implicating 'people and things' (Light, 2013, p.253) - in this case the bloggers and the hashtags.

How to dress like a gentleman: the suit

The bloggers who present themselves as modern gentlemen place a particular emphasis on suit-wearing. In his Instagram caption from the opening post of this chapter, Efe evokes 'times when it was all suited or nothing at all' (Efeturi, 2021a). However, how the suit is framed within specific sociocultural contexts 'tells us more about present moods than about past realities' (Davis, 1992, p.69). The suit as a staple of menswear (Beward, 2016) is an item featured by most of the bloggers in my study. According to Hollander (2016), the tailoring of the suit has been the same form for about two hundred years, with variations in fabrics and decorative elements. But the suit contains fragmentations within its continuity (Hollander, 2016, p.xiii), carrying meaning and symbolic visual appeal (Hollander, 2016, p.7). Even though the form of the suit has remained quite stable, there have been changes in relation to the sociocultural significance of the suit and what the suit symbolises and the meanings it carries, which change according to cultural contexts and periods of time (Hollander,

2016). It has been argued that the suit - as men's clothing more generally - apart from adorning men's bodies serves to simultaneously 'unmark' and 'mark' them (Kaiser and Green, 2016). The suit unmarks men by articulating its hegemonic associations while also marks them by bringing forth marginalized and inclusive aspects of masculinities. However, as gender is dynamic and layered the suit can also 're-mark' (Kaiser, 2012) masculinities through each particular contextual placing and use. Consequently, as clothes - and the suit more precisely - actively produce masculinity and shape the intersectional identities of the individuals (Hollander, 2016) by marking and unmarking aspects of those, the actual manner in which the suit is placed within the broader lifestyle of the modern gentlemen and the manner in which the bloggers frame it serve to attach or detach connotations to the figure of the modern gentlemen.

As the bloggers cater to a variety of consumers that make up their audience, the sponsored content they promote often addresses a broad market spectrum. That is one of the reasons why there exist variations in the suits the bloggers promote; sponsored content relating to suits ranges from collaborations with tailors and stores from Savile Row³³, Italian heritage brands, sustainable options, and affordable brands, such as River Island, Next and Primark³⁴ brands commonly found on the bloggers' feeds. Yet, in this instance, placed within the bloggers' narratives, the suit becomes more important for my study for the way it is framed and connected to notions around masculinities rather than market segmentations. Indicatively, Neil Thornton, author of the blog *What Neil Did*, in a post sponsored by Burton Menswear titled 'How to Dress Like a Gentleman', writes: 'the key gentlemanly style is, of course, the suit. It's the globally recognised calling card of the dapper and refined' (Thornton, 2015a). Evidently, Neil assumes as broadly accepted the connection between the suit and the gentleman or the refined dapper. This is circularly framed in his post, as it appears that the suit is what makes one a refined gentleman while simultaneously, the refined gentleman is suited. Thus, Neil inadvertently infuses the suit with notions of a cultured and refined individual while also instilling it with notions of class. However, as will be explored further in Chapter Nine, in this reconfiguration Neil's issues with mental health and depression are also becoming active points of the re-shaping of the modern gentleman.

The suit is a powerful garment with a potent historical precedent. As Bluteau (2021, p.63) notes the

³³ Savile Row, or the Row, is a shopping district located in London that is considered the centre of British bespoke tailoring. The Row can be traced back to the late seventeenth century and has historical links to the figure of the English gentleman and the dandy (Breward, 2010).

³⁴ River Island, Next and Primark are UK high street stores that offer low-range products, including menswear and suit collections.

suit is laden with symbols and that symbolic layer of the suit also helps to mark/unmark or remark (Kaiser, 2012) the masculinities wearer. Since the nineteenth century, the English suited gentleman has been linked to an aristocratic lifestyle typified by Savile Row tailoring. While Saville Row tailoring still holds commercial appeal (Anderson, 2000) and is widely promoted by bloggers in my study, the suit has been taken out of its strict elite and classed connotations, i.e., masculinities are being remarked (Kaiser, 2012), while retaining its often-historical allure. For instance, Burton Menswear, which Neil, and many of the bloggers in my study, affiliates with for this post, is a UK-based low-range menswear brand, operating since the 1930s (<https://www.burton.co.uk>, 2021). Historically, Burton Menswear has been focused on affordable elegance (Mort, 1996). The company has been one of the largest manufacturers and retailers of menswear in Britain since its launch and one of the biggest brand names in men's suits (Mort, 1996). Consequently, Neil exemplifies how suit-wearing maintains some of its historical connotations of the English gentleman and elegance through self-style but its representation through the figure of the modern gentleman becomes more fluid, intersectional, remarked, yet still often ambivalent and adapted to cater to the broad spectrum of the networked public.

In the same post, Neil stresses, 'I feel that I should say that, for me, being a "gentleman" is so much more than how you dress, it's about the person as well' (Thorton, 2015). Neil directly associates the suit with the gentleman; in a similar manner to the bloggers discussed above, such as Rikesh, Gurj and Cyrill, he emphasises specific characteristics that for the blogger are also essential components of a gentleman. What is more, Neil (in accordance with the bloggers mentioned above), actively disassociates the modern gentleman from hegemonic or orthodox traits as 'a gentleman is someone with manners and compassion, with ideals and ambition. But clothing can be a great way to enhance these traits' (Thorton, 2015). Neil talks about compassion; amongst the other elements he mentions, this one is in direct relation to the Andersonian framework. Interestingly, Neil argues that dress is a way in which traits such as those he discusses above can be enhanced. How and why, he thinks this is done is left unclear and somewhat vague in Neil's post; however, it serves to showcase and reiterate the interconnection between the 'inner' and the 'outer' that Cyrill has also discussed in our personal communication. Consequently, even though Neil relates the stylistically refined modern gentleman to the suit, this association is not restricted solely to the sartorial. Rather suit-wearing is framed as not 'merely a frontier of the self, but a canvas for the self' (Bluteau, 2021, p.64) where the interplay between the suit and various traits and ideals that seem to align with IMT are articulated. This demonstrates two aspects of the suit as placed in the bloggers' narratives: firstly, the manner that the suit re-marks (Kaiser, 2012) masculinities by conveying new aspects and integrating new

subjectivities (e.g., race, ethnicity, class, disability and depression). Secondly, it showcases the neoliberal need to manage and style the self.

Moreover, and important for my reading of the suit in relation to the modern gentleman, is how Neil also weaves in his discussion the notion of ambition. For Neil, as for other bloggers discussed in this section, ambition is often framed as a professional ambition articulated through the suit. Historically, the suit is 'as much a social marker of the times as an aesthetic choice' (Bluteau, 2021, p.73). For the bloggers presenting themselves as modern gentlemen, the suit embodies both. The bloggers operate on highly visual platforms; thus, the manner in which they visually present suits and the connotations curated and associated with the visual create meanings regarding masculinities. The manner in which suit-wearing is presented often indicates links to professionalism – and what is more, an urban professionalism - and in extent class and elitism, or in other words it serves to mark (Kaiser and Green, 2016) the bloggers in a manner heavily restricted to historical gender norms (Butler, 2006). This is articulated explicitly through captions: for instance, Erwin Trinidad (figures 6.5- 6.7) often captions his posts featuring suits with phrases such as 'business look done right' (Trinidad, 2020a; 2020b) and 'back to business' (Trinidad, 2019). Even when he does not promote suits, professionalism is implied, as can be seen in figure 6.8 which includes a sponsored post of a briefcase by the bags and accessories brand Maverick & Co – a brand that caters to the modern professional (<https://maverickandco.co>, 2022). Erwin promotes Maverick & Co by arranging products in a flat-lay manner (a common visual Instagram trope discussed in Chapter Seven) and captions the post with the phrase 'The [...] Manhattan Leather Briefcase is thoughtfully designed for stylish professionals to organize necessities effortlessly' (Trinidad, 2020c). This post exemplifies how, through brand-consumer storytelling Erwin leans in meanings already found via product-branding and incorporates and reworks them into his narrative, placing them within the context of the modern gentleman while they further become infused with ideals about professionalism. Professionalism, however, takes on another layer and becomes an urban professionalism, as all the images discussed above are staged with a city background - presumably London, as Erwin is based in London, and while some images are geotagged as such. Thus, again showcasing how ambivalences and inequalities can still exist and be perpetuated through the suit; the bloggers are mobile, urban and assumingly hold consumer power and fashion know-how, however their self-representations in other categories such as race, ethnicity, age, mental health are multifaceted and actively construct new meanings through those self-representations (Hall, 1991) and re-mark the suit. Hence, again demonstrating how the mutual constitution of subjectivities 'takes place in dynamic, paradoxical and often contradictory ways' (Pringle, 2008, p. 110).



Right: Figure 6.5: Instagram screenshot from *@erwin_trinidad* (2020a). Left: Figure 6.6: Instagram screenshot from *@erwin_trinidad* (2019)



Figure 6.7: Instagram screenshot from *@erwin_trinidad* (2020b)

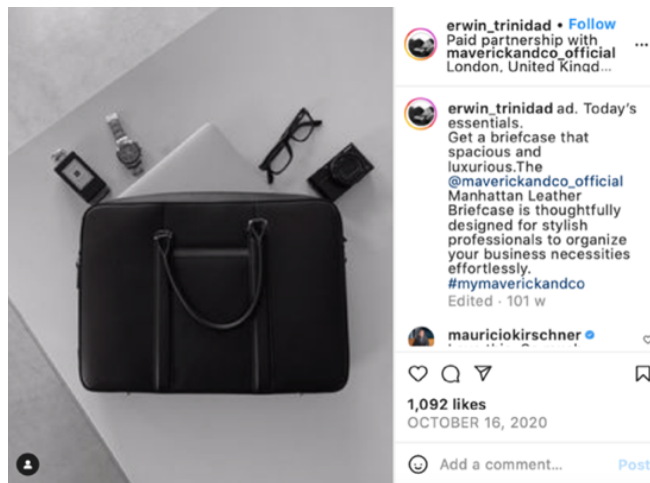


Figure 6.8 Instagram screenshot from *@erwin_trinidad* (2020c)

Apart from Erwin, there are other bloggers who relate suits explicitly to urban professionalism through captions. Indicative of this are some of Gurj Sohanpal's posts. The blogger uses captions such as 'business as usual' (Sohanpal, 2020), as seen in figure 6.9 to accompany a briefcase promotion

from the brand Aspinal of London, styled with a suit and geotagged in the City of London³⁵. More overt, is the instance of Gurj promoting a pair of socks, as shown in figure 6.10, paired with the caption ‘a productive day out in the city’ (Sohanpal, 2021) which relates to notions of a sought-after and achieved neoliberal productivity. Yet again, professionalism can become implicitly weaved into a narrative, as indicated by figure 6.11 where Gurj promotes a laptop situated in an office space (presumably his home office, as the blogger has posted his working space in other instances) noting that it is ‘the perfect companion for my travels and hopping from one meeting to the other around the city’ (Sohanpal, 2019). Similarly, Rashpal, author of the blog *Style and Stylus*, captions his post (seen in figure 6.11) with the text ‘signing out for the week’ (Amrit, 2020) paired with the hashtags #workfromhome and #office. In this case, the hashtag #workfromhome is probably related to Covid-19 and the working-from-home mode imposed over England’s lockdowns. Nevertheless, in relation to the broader image and its stylisation, along with Rashpal’s wider narrative, it still serves to imply a professional masculinity.



Left: Figure 6.9: Instagram screenshot from @gurjsohanpal (2020); Right: Figure 6.10: Instagram screenshot from @gurjsohanpal (2021)

³⁵ The City of London or The City is a borough located in London and has a separate status as county. The area has ties to the corporate sector as banking, finance and various corporations are located there (Britannica, 2022).



gurjsohanpal • Follow
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238 likes

styleandstylus Signing out for the week. Its been dramatic to say the least.

#meandmyeton #workfromhome #etonshirts #office

Left: Figure 6.11: Instagram screenshot from *@gurjsohanpal* (2019); Right: Figure 6.12: Instagram screenshot from *@styleandstylus* (2020)

Similarly, Carl Thompson, author of the eponymous blog, captions his image with the phrase ‘today I mean business’ (Thompson, 2021) (figure 6.13), while Efe writes ‘time for some real business’ (Efeturi, 2019) (figure 6.14). Again, both bloggers are photographed in an urban setting, sporting smart outfits paired with a briefcase for Carl and a bag for Efe, and styled overall in a manner that exudes professionalism. Closely linked to that is the fact that connotations of professionalism are also created through the stylisation of the images, which often feature the bloggers on the move, in an urban setting, sporting a briefcase or seemingly in a hurry, looking at their watch. This is again shown by Ravi’s (also known as Dapper Rav, which is the name of his blog) images (figures 6.15 and 6.16), which are also accompanied by the hashtag #mentalhealth, discussed in detail in Chapter Eight.

Finally, this is articulated through the hashtags used by Rashpal, discussed above; or the hashtags #workfashion and #workwearstyle, which are used frequently by Efe; and the hashtag #businessbag, used both by Gurj and Ravi (figures 6.9 and 6.16). Thus, infusing their multifaceted masculinities - the bloggers in this instance come from various ethnic backgrounds, range in age and many have opened up about their mental health struggles and depression (discussed in more detail in Chapter Eight)- with a reworked professionalism adding new layers, meaning, and inevitable, contradictions. As (Kaiser and Green, 2016) argue masculinity ‘is a fragile construction of identity’ (p.172) and is often

defined by what it is not. In this instance, the bloggers actively try to re-mark the suit, and masculinity in extend, by disassociating it from its hegemonic connotations.

Overall, the suit, (and its connotations), has been a multifaceted and often contradictory attire (Breward, 2003). One of the manners in which it has been vigorously framed is through professionalism and corporate masculinity (Edwards, 2011; De Casanova, 2015), which the bloggers seem to reiterate and reconfigure, even when not necessarily sporting a suit (figure 6.11) or presenting a suit (figure 6.10). This is where the power of the suit lies, as by weaving it as an integral part of the modern gentleman's narrative even when omitted it is always present and its meanings are carried on.



Figure 6.13: Instagram screenshot from @carlthompson (2021)



Right: Figure 6.14: Instagram screenshot from @efe.efeturi (2019)

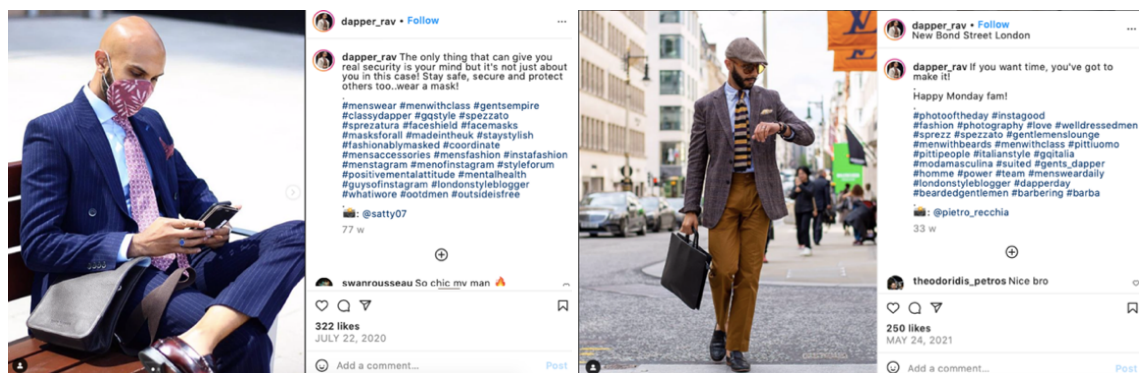


Figure 6.15 (left): Instagram screenshot from *@dapper_rav* (2020). Right: Figure 6.16 (right): Instagram screenshot from *@dapper_rav* (2021).

For Wright (1996) the suit has evolved to epitomise capitalism, representing commerce and professionalism. This reading of the suit, according to Breward (2003), is what distinguishes it from other types of male clothing, as suit-wearing is often infused with ‘connotations and associations of success, maturity and money’ (Breward, 2003, p.60). The suit historically has been a multifaceted article of dress (Breward, 2003) as already noted, but its specific associations with corporate professionalism can be traced to the yuppie of the 1980s. As Bowstead (2018) observes, the 1980s saw changes in consumer attitudes and the consumption of menswear and accessories, specifically relating to a new league of young professional men in the US and the UK working in the finance and corporate service sector, dubbed yuppies. The yuppie was an active consumer who aimed at looking ‘sharp, but most of all he wanted to look professional and successful’ (Bowstead, 2018, p.64). This yuppie suited aesthetic has been labelled as the ‘corporate power look’ (Edwards, 1997, p.42), implying hierarchy and power (Connell, 2005), i.e., marking the wearer with specific and hegemonic connotations. Through the yuppies and through its relation to the corporate culture, the suit has now become consolidated as a professional apparatus through its essential - almost obligatory role - in monetary institutions such as banks, law firms, finance and corporate businesses (Edwards, 2011; De Casanova, 2015). Thus, since the 1980s, the suit, especially the sombre suit, amongst all other significations that it might have, connotes corporate professionalism and can, by extension, be associated with hegemonic masculinity as according to Connell (2012), nowadays ‘the hegemonic masculinities are those of the corporate world’ (p.14).

The suit’s formal and smart masculine connotations indicate a hierarchical aspect of sway over the ‘lesser-dressed’ (Bluteau, 2021, p.68). In the case of corporate masculinities, the lesser-dressed, i.e., the non-suited, are those outside the corporate environment. Nevertheless, this hierarchical positioning is not always exact. According to Breward (2003), ‘the suit makes men look like

executives, even when they aren't in any such position' (p.63). Hence, the power of the suit is in what it signifies. For instance, the bloggers, through the suit, try to evoke aspects of this corporate masculinity, but they are largely outside of the corporate world. Through their role as digital content creators, they primarily assume the creative position of blogging and freelance creative labour. In addition to being outside of a corporate frame, the bloggers actively try to refute traits associated with hegemonic masculinities and associate with traits such as vulnerability and compassion, meaning that the corporate look they communicate assumes a reworked aspect. The suit woven into the narratives of the bloggers presenting as modern gentlemen situated along with their layered and multifaceted gendered subjectivities considering race, ethnicity, age and able-bodiedness comes in stark contrast with hegemonic corporate masculinities (Connell 2012). Moreover, the bloggers do not use the suit as a tool of masculine power to signify classical masculine corporate ideals (Barry and Weiner, 2017), rather, as the bloggers assume the position of neoliberal creative entrepreneurs, the suit still reflects the professional, but as iterated through the creative entrepreneurial aspect of life(style) blogging.

The suit, akin to masculinities, is not, of course, masculine in an essentialist sense (Beward, 2003). Yet historically, when worn, it assumes connotations 'strongly associated with masculinity' (Beward, 2003, p.59), with the power to both mark, un-mark and re-mark it. The bloggers wear and promote suits mainly through brand affiliations, again showcasing the co-construction of masculinities through its associations with other cultural process relating to the market and media (Rinallo, 2007). However, the bloggers' use of brands is different from merely 'the use of brands as identity markers' (Marwick, 2013b, p.311); as self-branding aims to create an end product, the bloggers 'define themselves both through brands and as brands' (Marwick, 2013b, p.311). This circles back to the neoliberal framework of managing the self as a brand which creates connotations for notions of professionalism and entrepreneurialism that extend to digital masculinities. The business masculinity the suit implies communicates a 'having-made-it-ness' (Beward, 2003, p.59); in other words, it indicates the neoliberal self-made man. As ideals about the suit 'are culturally constructed' (Bluteau, 2022, p.68), the corporate man or the self-made entrepreneur that has been linked to hegemonic power-hungry contexts (Connell, 2012) becomes repudiated from the bloggers, who are essentially platformized creative workers (Glatt, 2021, p.1). Thus, the suit, with its associations with the corporate world and corporate masculinity, become reconfigured as the bloggers assume the position of creative entrepreneurialism and tread closer to the Andersonian framework.

Overall, neoliberalism has been broadly linked to cut-throat competition, with Dardot and Laval noting that 'neoliberal man is competitive man, wholly immersed in global competition' (2014, p.256). Harvey (2005) also places competition in the heat of neoliberal ideologies, while Mirowski (2013) contends that within neoliberalism, 'competition is the primary virtue, and solidarity a sign of weakness' (2013, p.92). Discourses, such as these, have highly gendered connotations and resemble discourses of hegemonic masculinities. However, as the suit is placed within the narratives of the modern gentlemen who adopt elements from IMT, ideals around entrepreneurship are redefined and come closer to notions of creative entrepreneurship. This is evident through textual instances, such as the ambition Neil mentions in his post or words used in captions and hashtags, and through visual elements, such as the stylisation images, as I discussed above. Considering the nature of life(style) blogging, which involves a neoliberal mode of work encompassing self-enterprise and self-branding the bloggers become actively associated with entrepreneurship (Duffy and Pruchniewska, 2017), but entrepreneurship has been framed as a dominant malestream activity (Ahl, 2012) and entrepreneurial representations have been coded as fundamentally masculine and power-hungry (Bourne, 2010; Bruni, Gherardi and Poggio, 2004a, 2004b; De Bruin et al., 2006).

Ahl and Marlow (2012, p.544) argue that 'the defining characteristics of the entrepreneur are also those which define masculinity'. Consequently, entrepreneurship as linked to notions of the neoliberal self-made man (Catano, 2001; Dunkan, 2014, Gill, 2013) or, more specifically the heroic self-made man (Bem, 1993) by default incorporates ideals of corporate masculinities and hence can be positioned in the framework of hegemonic or orthodox masculinity. Cornwall (2016), picking up this notion, talks about a neoliberal masculinity that stems from the emphasis on self-making and self-management, and by extension self-optimisation, and that ultimately frames the neoliberal self as an entrepreneurial self. This framework encompasses the bloggers as they both brand themselves and often manage themselves as brands (De Veirman, et al., 2017). However, Cornwall (2016) also notes that the neoliberal context can open up opportunities and infuse masculinities with 'new ways of relating and being' (p.1). As old ideals around masculinities erode, Cornwall (2016) argues, new constructions of masculinity have the possibility to evolve. Thus, through the figure of the modern gentleman, the concept of the self-made entrepreneur becomes actively reworked and amongst all the other intersecting subjectivities of the bloggers' masculinities assumes the creative entrepreneur in the context of life(style) blogging.

The gentleman has also been associated with notions of entrepreneurship by Berberich (2007). However, her discussion sits outside the neoliberal framework that the bloggers operate, as her

analysis features examples of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Berberich contends that ideals surrounding the gentleman tend to involve development. As such, the gentleman contains a degree of self-actualisation and self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a). Cicolini (2003), placing the gentleman in the twenty-first century, contends that the gentleman has lost his connotations of an elite cultural figure and now represents an aristocracy of talent- which can again be potentially exclusionary for some individuals and groups, thus showcasing how holding power and inequalities are fluid but can also be subverted. As discussed above, one can become a gentleman through personal effort, the same way a self-made man builds a career or a business. Therefore, the personal effort required to assume the figure of the gentleman, apart from becoming or living the life, can also mirror the personal effort of entrepreneurship, especially when placed in the context of the bloggers' self-representations and again considering the contemporary neoliberal schema in which they are placed. As such, the modern gentleman constructed by the bloggers who exemplify the ideal neoliberal entrepreneurial citizens (Marwick, 2013), becomes a process or 'a reflexive project that needs to be self-regulated and self-governed' (Grénman, et al., 2019, p.464).

Moreover, as I have showcased throughout this chapter, the bloggers actively disassociate the figure of the modern gentleman from hegemonic and orthodox traits. Taylor (2015) has observed that contemporary creative workers' aspirations, like the ambitions that Neil mentions, or the aspirations implied by the bloggers' broader practice, which necessitates effort and time, are not wholly consistent with a corporate masculine figure who pursues entrepreneurial activities with ruthless selfishness. Similarly, even though the bloggers often ingrain the figure of the suited modern gentleman with a business masculinity, they also infuse their narratives with traits related to IMT, while many actively work to destigmatise men's mental health, as discussed in Chapter Eight. Finally, Taylor (2015) has noted that participation in entrepreneurship can also be carried out as an almost therapeutic, personal creative project - something that applies to some of the bloggers in my study, again elaborated on Chapter Eight. Consequently, the bloggers untether connotations of suited entrepreneurial masculinities with power-hungry corporate masculinities centred on greed and assertion of power (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

Concluding thoughts

The bloggers' narratives are infused and ultimately co-constructed through associations with brands and products. As Yúdice (2004) argues, increased participation of consumers in the production of culture, with self-branding being an epitome of that, generates new concepts, ideas and images, with the figure of the modern gentleman being an exemplar. Through the intricate relationship between personal narratives, self-branding and consumption, the figure of the modern gentleman is created.

The bloggers who present themselves as such draw on the gentleman's ambiguous and fluid aspect and infuse it with their own meanings, turning an abstract concept into a liveable ideal. Thus, the gentleman becomes reconfigured and reworked, taking on particular meanings through the bloggers' digital masculinities.

The bloggers work within consumer culture, often drawing from and elaborating on pre-existing reconfigurations of the gentleman - a figure highly remediated through media and brands. This presents a point of cultural mediation (Thumin, 2012), further indicating that the strong presence of commercial brands in the shaping of self-brands showcases the fact that those self-representations are not simply 'created within an endlessly open cultural script'; rather, they need to adhere to premises that make sense 'within a cultural and economic recognizable and predetermined set of images, texts, beliefs, and values' (Banet-Weiser 2012, p.66). In this case, the bloggers infuse the modern gentleman with traits and characteristics closely associated with the IMT context, such as vulnerability, empathy and openness, which, according to Anderson (2009), indicate a softening of masculinities.

The reconfigured modern gentleman is elementally linked to consumption; however, it is also produced through the affordances of the platforms the bloggers use. The use of hashtags in the context of Instagram is an indicative example, as the bloggers situate themselves along with the concept of the modern gentleman, while concomitantly, the figure of the modern gentleman becomes networked and consolidated. As algorithms synthesise and act on our behalf (Kitchin and Dodge, 2011), not only through the hashtags discussed above but also by communicating the modern gentleman through social media more broadly, they curate and manage visibility through self-representations of masculinities and the figure of the modern gentleman becomes a networked social reality (Cheney-Lipold, 2011). Consequently, the figure of the modern gentleman as an extension of digital masculinities also becomes bound by imagined affordances and its construction acts as a site of self-regulation.

Finally, through the figure of the modern gentleman, ideals about entrepreneurship and masculinity are also reconfigured. The bloggers primarily weave narratives that are closely associated with the Andersonian framework. As such, the connections that can be drawn between the modern gentleman and entrepreneurialism, which are constructed through visual and textual instances but also through the practice of blogging itself, also serve to consolidate digital masculinities that represent aspects of IMT. More specifically, the suit as a historical element associated with the

gentleman and an attire largely promoted by the bloggers provides an indicative instance for the reworkings of concepts surrounding entrepreneurship. The suit's meaning is contextual, depending upon its interaction with the individual underneath it and the way it is worn (Edwards, 2011). For the bloggers, the manner in which the suit is presented more often than not carries associations with professionalism. However, placed within their broader narrative and considering the genre of life(style) blogging, this professionalism is closely related to a mode of creative entrepreneurship. Within this context, the suit and its meanings serve to rework the suited entrepreneur that has so far been primarily related to hegemonic power-hungry corporate masculinities (Connell, 2012). Consequently, the figure of the modern gentleman through the bloggers' self-representations can provide a shared conceptual map (Du Gay, 1997) and point to an instance where the repertoires of masculinities become expanded (Anderson, 2017) - a notion discussed in the following chapter and linked to visual aesthetic communication.

Chapter Seven. My life, styled: visual aesthetic communication

May 3

My Life, Styled | ARKET

ARKET is like a modern day market - one where I can get a great overshirt, cosy blanket, delicious Danish and the perfect gift all in one visit.



Figure 7.1: Screenshots from *Shaunyness* (2020)

Life(style) blogging is a highly visual practice that, in my study, exists within spaces geared towards image-sharing. Thus, creating and sharing images³⁶ takes on a substantial part of the bloggers' networked presence. Much like brands that rely heavily on visual communication (both generally in terms of advertising, packaging and website and store design but also in relation to social media) to engage with customers (Kusumasondjaja, 2019), the bloggers, who often treat themselves as brands, place significant importance on the images they create and share, as visual content is one of the main assets the blogger sell (Michaelsen et al., 2022). Simultaneously, images play an active role in self-branding, along with other elements such as text, which exists in many forms, from long-form diary-like entries to captions and hashtags. Of course, each platform the bloggers use has different

³⁶ I would further add that with the rise of video-based platforms such as Tik-Tok this pertains to videos as well, with video components such as moving images, sounds and music playing an increasingly important role in visual communication. Due to the popularity of Tik-Tok, Instagram introduced Reels in August 2020 (Worb, 2020) - an affordance that allows for short videos and offers various in-app editing tools.

imagined affordances and technical particularities when it comes to image-sharing, as content creation is platform contingent (Poell, et al., 2022). For instance, Instagram allows only square dimensions for posts and provides in-built editing filters, while in the past few years, the platform has nudged users towards creating and sharing videos, whereas websites allow more flexibility as they are highly customisable and have no particular technical restrictions for image-sharing, nor text limitations. Visual communication spans the broader networked presence of the bloggers and is inextricably linked to the bloggers' narratives, as through images, meaning relating to digital masculinities is created and communicated - as was the case for the suit, discussed in the previous chapter. Visual communication then, ultimately serves to expand the repertoires of masculinities (Anderson, 2017).

In this chapter, I focus on visual aesthetic communication as it pertains to the broader networked presence of the bloggers. As this chapter will show, the images the bloggers create and share, apart from playing an active part in their self-branding, belong to the sphere of the algorithmic strategic imaginary, a point where again the bloggers' narratives become regulated or "styled". In this chapter, I also explore how, through visual aesthetic communication, the notion of the Insta-worthy is expanded. As algorithms often route 'what we are seeing' (Willson, 2017, p.146) by being 'the definers that do the defining' (Napoli, 2014, p.352), under-represented intersections of masculinities can be given algorithmic and sociocultural visibility. Brighenti (2010) argues that visibility, or in other words 'being and being seen' is 'inherently ambiguous, highly dependent upon contexts and complex social, technical and political arrangements' (p.3). Thus, through the bloggers' self-representations, where affordances act as points of institutional mediations, digital masculinities become styled and visible but also, in some cases, regulated, standardised and replicable.

We are part of an industry which trades in aesthetics

Visual communication is an essential aspect of life(style) blogging. As a genre it has been intertwined with a visual mode of communication even before the advent of image-based social media platforms, such as Instagram, especially due to its close relation to the fashion business and field of advertising more generally, for which visual communication has been an essential component (Manovich, 2017). During the early days of lifestyle and personal style blogging in the middle 2000s to early 2010s, technological apparatuses such as smartphones with in-build high-definition cameras and easy-to-use and affordable editing software were not as readily available as they currently are, but bloggers still communicated visually by sharing, for instance, images of themselves and their outfits on their websites or re-posting images from other online sources such as magazines and fashion shows (Findlay, 2017). Karlmond Tang, author of the eponymous blog summarises the necessity for the

bloggers to understand and participate in this highly visual mode of communication, in an interview he gave to the high-end fashion retail website Farfetch, which he posted to this blog: 'we are part of an industry which trades in aesthetic, whether it is clothing or imagery' (Tang, 2017). By this statement, the blogger and fashion stylist refers both to the products he shares, namely clothes and accessories, pointing to the element of remediation from brands and designers, and the imagery he creates in the sense of digital content creation. Karlmond also points to and acknowledges another element inherent to life(style) influencers - their relation to the fashion industry which pre-dates popular social media visual platforms and has also been historically heavily interwoven with visual communication (Barnard, 2013).

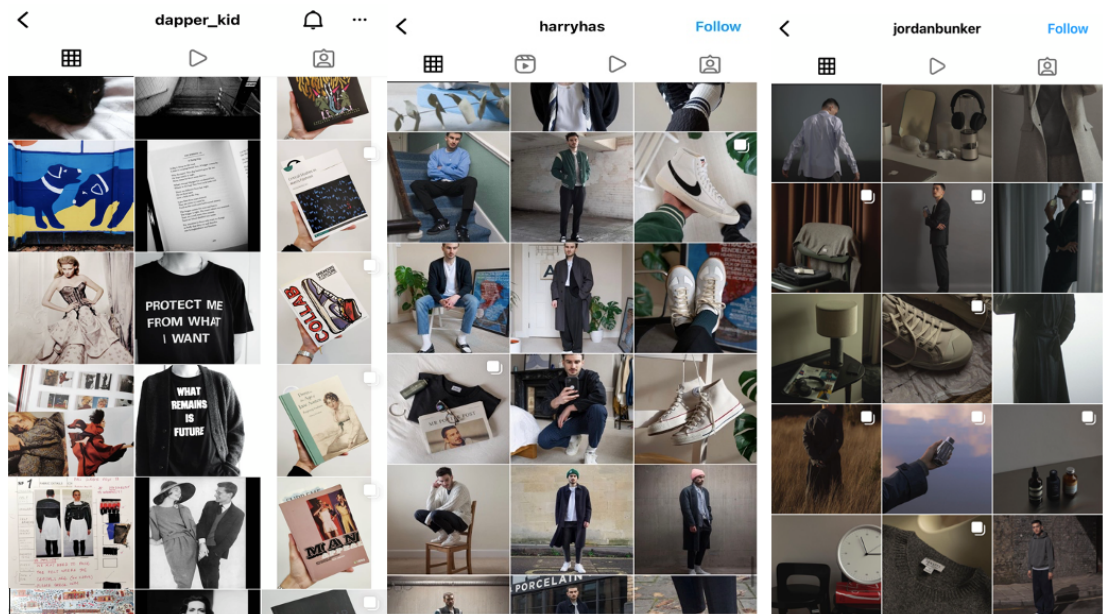
With the advancement of digital communication technologies, such as smartphones, social media platforms with in-built filters and image-editing software applications, communicating visually has become ever-more refined and readily available for a plethora of users. Thus, a mediatization of visual communication exists (Rocamora, 2016) whereby 'practices have adapted to, and been transformed by, the media' (p.509). This pertains to life(style) blogging, where the 'production of beautiful images' (Manovich, 2019, p.3) is a central tenet of content creation and influencer marketing, especially for bloggers with ties to the fashion industry, as Karlmond attested. Even though image-sharing was the norm for style bloggers before the advent of image-based social media platforms, the increased professionalisation of content creation (Michaelsen et al., 2022) has resulted in visual content and imagery being increasingly stylised. At the same time, Instagram is being credited as one of the key factors in broadening, normalising and even making a necessity that users, especially content creators, place significant importance on creating, editing and sharing curated images. When Instagram was launched in 2010, it was promoted as an application for instant and immediate communication (Leaver et al., 2020, p.9). The platform urged users to snap images from their phones of their daily lives and upload them using the in-house filters as editing tools. By removing the need for additional software or technical literacy for image-editing, Instagram encouraged a variety of new 'visual representations of the familiar and the mundane' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.56), which, as I discuss further below, still holds importance. However, soon user feeds started becoming increasingly stylised and polished, and users spent less time on the platform (Leaver et al., 2020, p.26). This led to the introduction of Stories³⁷, which the platform promotes as a space for instant and less curated, more mundane content.

³⁷ Instagram Stories were introduced as a response to instant video-sharing app Snapchat. Snapchat was launched in 2011 and by 2016 was Instagram's biggest competitor (Leaver et al., 2020, p.25). Snapchat is an image-sharing app for instant photo-sharing where images are ephemeral and disappearing after viewing.

Drawing from user practices, Instagram's sociotechnical characteristics, i.e., affordances, and the visual communication norms set forth by the platform itself through in-house filters, the notion of a social media visual aesthetic communication has been articulated (Caldeira, 2016; Manovich, 2017; Serafinelli, 2018; Leaver et al., 2020). In this sense, aesthetic refers to the images and overall visual outcomes in terms of colours, lighting, compositional arrangements, use of filters, and the overall stylistic choices regarding the visual, such as curating a coherent Instagram profile grid. Indicatively, figures 7.2 - 7.4 depict the Instagram profiles of three bloggers in my study who curate a coherent profile grid. Syed Abbas from the blog Dapper Kid arranges his feed compositionally so that images of him holding a book always appear on the right. In comparison, Harry Young from the blog Harry Has and Jordan Bunker, author of the eponymous website, curate their profile grids in terms of colours and lighting and editing, themed in a manner that creates a coherent visual stylistic tone or mood.

In this sense, the term aesthetic is also used by Instagram users themselves, especially content creators, to signify the 'look and feel of [a] feed' (Danao, n.d.). Influencer agencies' blogs and image-editing websites often provide how-to guides and advice on achieving the most current and trendy Instagram aesthetic, which is often linked explicitly to self-branding³⁸. Aiming for coherency on Instagram's profile grid is a common practice for many bloggers in my study and has become a common normalised visual practice for influencers on Instagram. Curating a profile grid as such, is particular to Instagram because of the imagined affordances of the platform, both in terms of being in trend and a somewhat established practice for various content creators and because of the technical characteristics of the platform, such as square images, three images in a row and endless scrolling, that help to create and maintain this coherency. Nevertheless, the bloggers in my study operate on various networked platforms and often share the same images across them; thus, visual aesthetic communication has come to permeate the genre of life(style) blogging more broadly and is not necessarily tied to Instagram, even though it is highly influenced by the imagined affordances and user practices of the platform.

³⁸ Some indicative articles: 'How to Create a Unique Instagram Aesthetic that Fits Your Brand' (Fontein, 2019); 'How to Establish an Instagram Aesthetic and the Brands Doing It Right' (Brayve Digital, 2019); 'Where is the Instagram Aesthetic Headed in 2022?' (Warren, 2022); 'How to Create an Instagram Aesthetic for Your Brand: A Step-By-Step-Guide' (Danao, 2022); 'How to Create an Instagram Aesthetic That Stands Out?' (Geyser, 2022b).



Left: Figure 7.2: Instagram screenshot from *@dapper_kid* (2022). Middle: Figure 7.3: Instagram screenshot from *@harry_has* (2022). Right: Figure 7.4: Instagram screenshot from *@jordanbunker* (2022)

One of the first scholars to discuss visual aesthetic communication in relation to Instagram was new media and digital cultures researcher Lev Manovich (2017). Manovich was not focused on influencers or self-branding per se; instead, he explored users of Instagram more broadly, arguing that the strength and appeal of the platform lie in the opportunities for visual communication Instagram affords. Manovich argues that Instagram has become synonymous with visual aesthetic communication. Aesthetic communication in this instance means the increasing reliance and importance that users place on strategic visual choices, such as colour palettes, compositions, editing and the use of filters. Manovich contends that changes in smartphones, the accessible and easy manner of editing software and Instagram's affordances, namely the provision of ready-to-use filters, have contributed to the propagation of visual aesthetic communication, not only on Instagram but on social media more generally³⁹. This has also resulted in the establishment of various visual tropes - such as the coherent profile grid discussed above, with others including flat lays, visual maximalism or pastel palettes as theme colours, and the VSCO aesthetic⁴⁰ - that span both techniques and

³⁹ Popular social media such as Instagram, Snapchat, Tik-Tok and YouTube are primarily visual-based, and expectations for visual content creation are constantly increasing. However, in the past few years an opposite trend has been observed where social media based strictly on audio, namely Clubhouse, Discord and Spotify Greenroom, have seen a rise in popularity, with articles claiming that the future of social media is audio (Baggs, 2021; Basu, 2021; Ram, 2021; Pardes, 2020). None of these, however, are used by the bloggers in my study at the moment to the best of my knowledge.

⁴⁰ The VSCO aesthetic has been primarily linked to young women. VSCO girls have been characterised as a style subculture primarily influenced by the VSCO photo editing app, an app that 'lets you create and apply filters to your photos, so your Instagram feels cohesive' (Gomez and Stiegman, 2020). Similarly, the VSCO boy has also

content. Techniques refer to elements such as editing of colour, e.g., Jordan Bunker (figure 7.2), who curates a dark colour aesthetic with sharp geometries. Content refers to the elements included in the image, such as brand and object selfies (Sung et al., 2017), e.g., the Nike and All-Star shoes on Harry's profile (figure 7.2) that can be readily identifiable without tags or captions or flat lays referring to images of objects arranged usually on a flat surface and photographed from above or from a side angle (Manovich, 2019) which Syed, Harry and Jordan all have in their grids.

Even though Manovich acknowledges the strategic and purposeful editing and curation of images and links that to the strategic aspects of visual communication undertaken, for example, in brand advertising and branding that pre-date Instagram, the author does not explicitly consider self-branding in relation to influencers and visual aesthetic communication. Rather, Manovich talks about designed or styled images that are 'edited to have a distinct *stylized look*' (2017, p.67, italics in original) and can create visual coherency. Manovich has also coined the term Instagramism, which 'refers to the aesthetic strategies employed in many Instagram images' (Manovich, 2020, p.193) and can be linked to self-branding in the sense of the strategic creation of self-representations. This also aligns with Thumin's reading, where she notes that 'in instances of self-representation there must still (always) be choices about *which* aspects of self to represent and *how* to represent them' (2012, p.199, italics in original). Consequently, visual aesthetic communication relates to strategies of representation and visualisation. Nevertheless, the term Instagramism implies that aesthetic visual communication is explicitly tied to Instagram and its affordances, which misses the often-networked character of life(style) blogging.

Leaver et al. (2020) also extensively discuss visual aesthetic communication as stemming from and being closely tied to Instagram, but they locate it within the broader social media visual communication. The authors point to the emphasis that an increasing number of users place on aesthetic visual communication, which they call 'Instagram aesthetics' (p.39). Like Manovich, they define aesthetics as the strategic visual communication that includes specific tropes and manners of creating content; in other words, carefully considering colours, compositions, lighting and styling. However, unlike Manovich, the authors discuss in more detail visual aesthetic communication in relation to self-branding and influencers. They note that the popularity and broad use of the platform by influencers have contributed to normalising the importance of visual aesthetics in the strategic

gained Instagram traction (Voir Fashion, 2021). The VSCO aesthetic pertains both to stylisation via dress and through visual aesthetic communication and the hashtags used.

visual communication of influencer marketing, which has also migrated to advertising and marketing more generally, these now often emulate Instagram visual trends. Accordingly, this has resulted in a somewhat 'visual normalisation' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.40), where both brands and the networked public expect that the visual content shared by influencers is curated, carefully thought out and follows - or stirs new - visual trends (Hund, 2017).

According to Leaver et al. (2020), the increasing importance of the strategic creation and curation of images on Instagram, in other words Instagram aesthetics, has contributed to the creation and perpetuation of visual tropes and clichés, such as muted pastel palettes, washed-out backgrounds, flat lays and food porn (p.72). Nevertheless, not all Instagram users prioritise aesthetic communication, nor does a single Instagram aesthetic exist (Leaver et al., 2020). Overall, visual tropes serve to 'bring connotations and visual associations, transpositions of qualities, transferences and substitutions of meaning that make activity on social networks richer and more meaningful' (Cara, 2019, p.336). For instance, in my study, even though some tropes and similarities between image-editing and compositions - especially in relation to skincare, as I discuss below - exist, there is not a specific colour palette or lighting style pertaining to the whole genre of life(style) blogging. Nevertheless, Instagram, as a place of visual storytelling, houses 'a sequence of images that could tell a singular and significant story' (Cara, 2019, p.349); thus, the visual aesthetic communication of the bloggers creates and signifies meaning in relation to self-narration, self-branding, and, hence, the digital masculinities communicated.

The algorithmic strategic imaginary

Instagram is not the first platform to exclusively house visual content, nor is the strategic creation of images unique to this platform. One of the first exclusively visual-based platforms was Flickr, which launched in 2004⁴¹. Because of the strictly image-based nature of Flickr, Leaver et al. (2020) argue that, similarly to Instagram, one of the main reasons that users follow accounts is because of visual aesthetics. Flickr was one of the first platforms studied for its visual aesthetic communication. Acknowledging Flickr's algorithmic architecture that, much like Instagram and YouTube, is responsible for algorithmically sorting and suggesting content similar to what users engage with, Van Dijck (2011) demonstrated how communities formed around particular aesthetics, genres and photographic styles. Van Dijck explored Flickr, considering affordances and user norms and practices, and identified that digital photo-sharing leads to collective perspectives and experiences; users consciously form groups around shared visual aesthetics - something that can be argued for the figure

⁴¹Flickr, now owned by Yahoo, operated through a website for over a decade before the mobile application was launched in 2015. On the website, much like the app later, users can upload images and follow other users.

of the modern gentleman. This figure is highly constructed and given meaning by the visual, as discussed in the previous chapter, and many bloggers presenting as such seem to prescribe to visual coherency and the creation of polished content. As depicted in figures 7.5 - 7.7, this pertains both to content, i.e., suits and classic menswear and accessories, and stylisation, i.e., curated images and curated feeds.



Figure 7.5: Instagram screenshot from @efe.efeturi (2022)

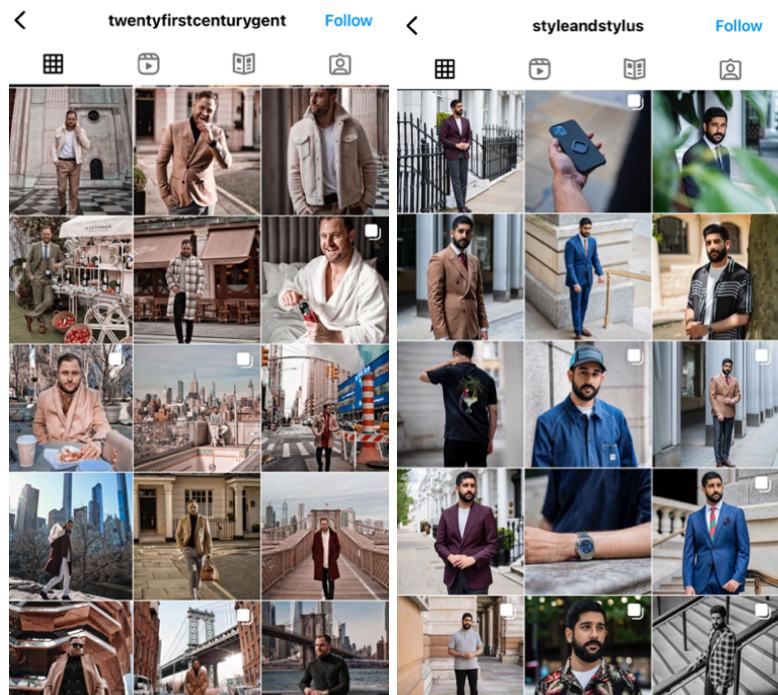


Figure 7.6 (left): Instagram screenshot from *@twentyfirstcenturygent* (2022). Figure 7.7 (right): Instagram screenshot from *@styleandstylus* (2022)

However, some of the most crucial differences between Instagram and other visual-based platforms, such as Flickr, Tumblr or Pinterest⁴², lie in Instagram's approach to the production of content and its affordances (Leaver et al., 2020). Firstly, Instagram is inundated with consumer culture; the platform offers various branded content tools that allow users to tag brands, display when content is sponsored or add (AD) to indicate sponsored content or affiliations, while users can now shop without leaving the platform. Thus, Instagram's affordances of consumption serve to differentiate the platform and explicitly tie user norms and practices to consumption, especially when the context is influencer marketing - something directly influencing visual communication. Secondly, unlike Flickr, Tumblr or Pinterest, Instagram propels users to produce, create and post their own content. The platform houses an assortment of in-house editing tools and filters that have played an instrumental role in normalising the editing of images in a manner that the other platforms have not (Leaver et al., 2020).

Simultaneously, Instagram's imagined affordances have played an instrumental role in the normalising of the editing of images (Caldeira et al., 2021). This happened because Instagram, from its launch, had in-built filters allowing users to easily edit any image they snapped. Scholars argue that Instagram's affordance of in-house filters that all users have access to has eventually contributed to the platform being perceived as the key platform for visual aesthetic communication (Caldeira, 2018; Leaver et al., 2020; Manovich, 2017). Nevertheless, nowadays, users, (especially influencers), who rely on the production of quality images usually prefer specialised software for image-editing rather than Instagram's in-built filters. This is due to imagined affordances and occurs especially for Instagram posts as they are displayed on the users' profiles. On the contrary, images and videos shared on Stories tend to have a more candid (or staged-as-candid) character and the use of in-house filters and other options, such as GIFs and text add-ons that Instagram provides, is more prominent. Stories are promoted by the platform as a space to post mundane and everyday instances (Leaver et al., 2020) and are ephemeral, displayed only for twenty-four hours - at the time of writing - unless users choose to feature them on their profile more permanently. Finally, the recently added Reels that can contain videos and videos made by collating static images are also highly stylised, and already

⁴² These are all visual-based platforms, but have fewer ties to consumption than Instagram, due to both user practices and affordances.

visual tropes and clichés - or Reels trends - have arisen⁴³. Thus, the imagined affordances that influence visual communication can vary even within the same app, but overall, the affordances of consumption and the need for curated content predominantly permeate Instagram.

Caldeira et al. (2020b) discuss the 'Instagrammable popularity' (p.3) that influencers can achieve through their visual aesthetic communication. Consequently, visual aesthetic communication can be further linked to the like economy (Gerlitz and Helmond, 2013) and the quest for algorithmic visibility. Serafinelli (2018) argues that from a marketing perspective, it is reasonable for users to have a coherent visual aesthetic (p.175). Like Flickr, users on Instagram often follow influencers for the visual content they create; thus, networked publics can develop 'expectations of seeing certain content' (Serafinelli, 2018, p.175). For instance, it can be argued that Toni Tran, author of the blog *Fashitect*, both attracts and retains followers through the specific maximalist and colourful visual style of content he creates, which has come to envelop his self-brand (depicted by figure 7.8), while Mikko Puttonen author of the eponymous blog has an aesthetic highly resembling fashion editorials with a soft focus and pastel undertones (as seen in figure 7.9).

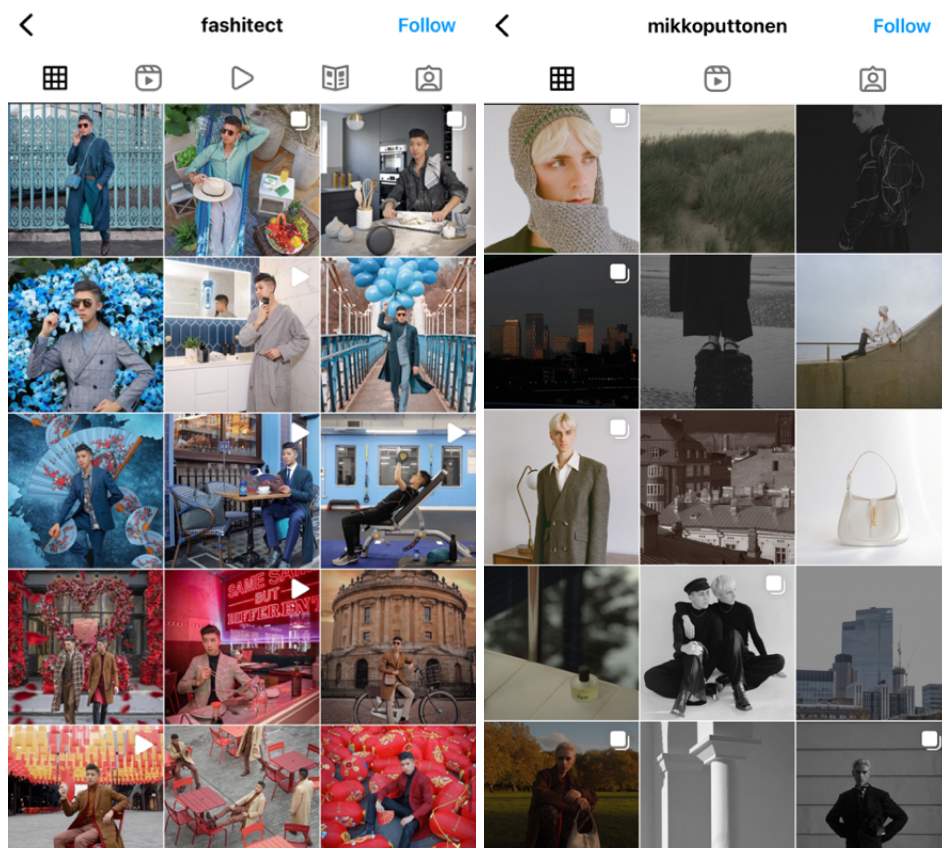


Figure 7.8 (left): Instagram screenshot from *@fashitect* (2022) Figure 7.9 (right): Instagram screenshot from *@mikkoputtonen* (2022)

⁴³ Indicative are articles pointing to Reels aesthetics: see Demekou, 2022; McLachlan, 2022b.

Of course, visual aesthetic coherency is not pertinent solely to Instagram. Glatt and Banet-Weiser (2021), discussing YouTube, note that vloggers are ‘incentivised to adopt certain norms and trends if they wish to garner likes, views, and subscribers’ (p.40). Therefore, attention to visual aesthetic content creation relating to self-branding is linked more broadly to the quest for algorithmic visibility and metrics (Cotter, 2019) throughout various platforms. As the platforms the bloggers use operate under a quantifiable popularity (Van Dijck and Poell, 2013), having a particular visual style can be beneficial. The calculated curation of the visual can lead to positive feedback, audience engagement and likes; thus, it is a subject of strategic consideration (Tiidenberg 2018a, p.52–53). Therefore, the images the bloggers post on their networked platforms become part of the strategic imaginary (Schroeder, 2013), as do all the images shared so far in this chapter. The strategic imaginary refers to ‘images intended to persuade, promote, or otherwise perform strategic intentions’ (Schroeder, 2013, n.p.). In the case of the bloggers, the strategic imaginary is inextricably linked with imagined affordances, as Instagram often algorithmically prompts and stimulates visual genres and forms (Leaver et al., 2020, p.65). For instance, carousels⁴⁴ and Reels seem to be currently experiencing an increased algorithmic visibility within Instagram (McLachlan, 2022a; Worb, 2022), prompting users to focus on this type of content. As influencers try to ‘play the visibility game’ (Cotter, 2019, p.899), the visual content they create is often influenced by perceptions of what will lead to higher engagement, as discussed in Chapter Five. Consequently, the strategic imaginary becomes an algorithmic one and, hence, a space of regulation and management. In this space of algorithmic regulation and management that the strategic imaginary occupies, another layer inextricably linked to masculinities, and in extent to gender more broadly, can also be added. Circling back to Butler’s (2006) notion of gender performativity where gender is placed under various regulatory practices (p.23) the affordances of social media, such as the algorithms, hashtags and user practices explored throughout the empirical chapters and approached through their power to shape the construction and communication of masculinities can also be viewed as powerful shaper of gender and all the intersectional elements this entails.

Hashtags also form part of the algorithmic strategic imaginary. As discussed in Chapter Six, hashtags are tools to increase algorithmic visibility (Cotter, 2019) by being searchable and annotative (Leaver et al., 2020). However, hashtags within the practice of the bloggers often actively serve to co-create digital masculinities, as is the case for the figure of the modern gentleman. Nevertheless, the

⁴⁴ Carousels are posts that contain multiple photos or videos. For instance, in Efe’s feed (figure 7.5) the images with the white square on the top right corner indicate a carousel post, while the images with the play symbol on the top right corner indicate a video post or Reel.

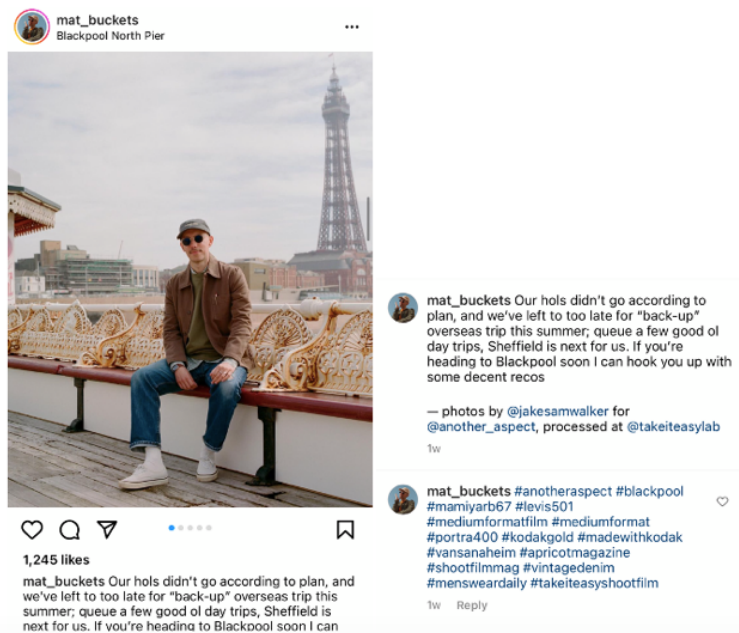
appearance of hashtags on the users' profiles is not always visually appealing (Schreiber, 2017, p.145). Thus, even though their use might be necessary, certain cultural practices around hashtagging are subject to imagined affordances (Screiber, 2017) relating to visual aesthetic communication. For instance, it is common for bloggers to hide their hashtags so that they are not visible on a profile feed. This is done by placing the hashtags further below a caption, as is shown in Efe's post in figure 7.10, or by inserting hashtags in a comment as depicted by Adam's and Mat's posts in figures 7.11 and 7.12. As such, hashtags, besides having an annotative and structural function, also have their own visual aesthetics (Leaver et al., 2020).



Figure 7.10: Instagram screenshots from @efe.efeturi (2022)



Figure 7.11: Instagram screenshot from @malestylisT (2018)



Right: Figure 7.12: Instagram screenshot from @mat_buckets (2022)

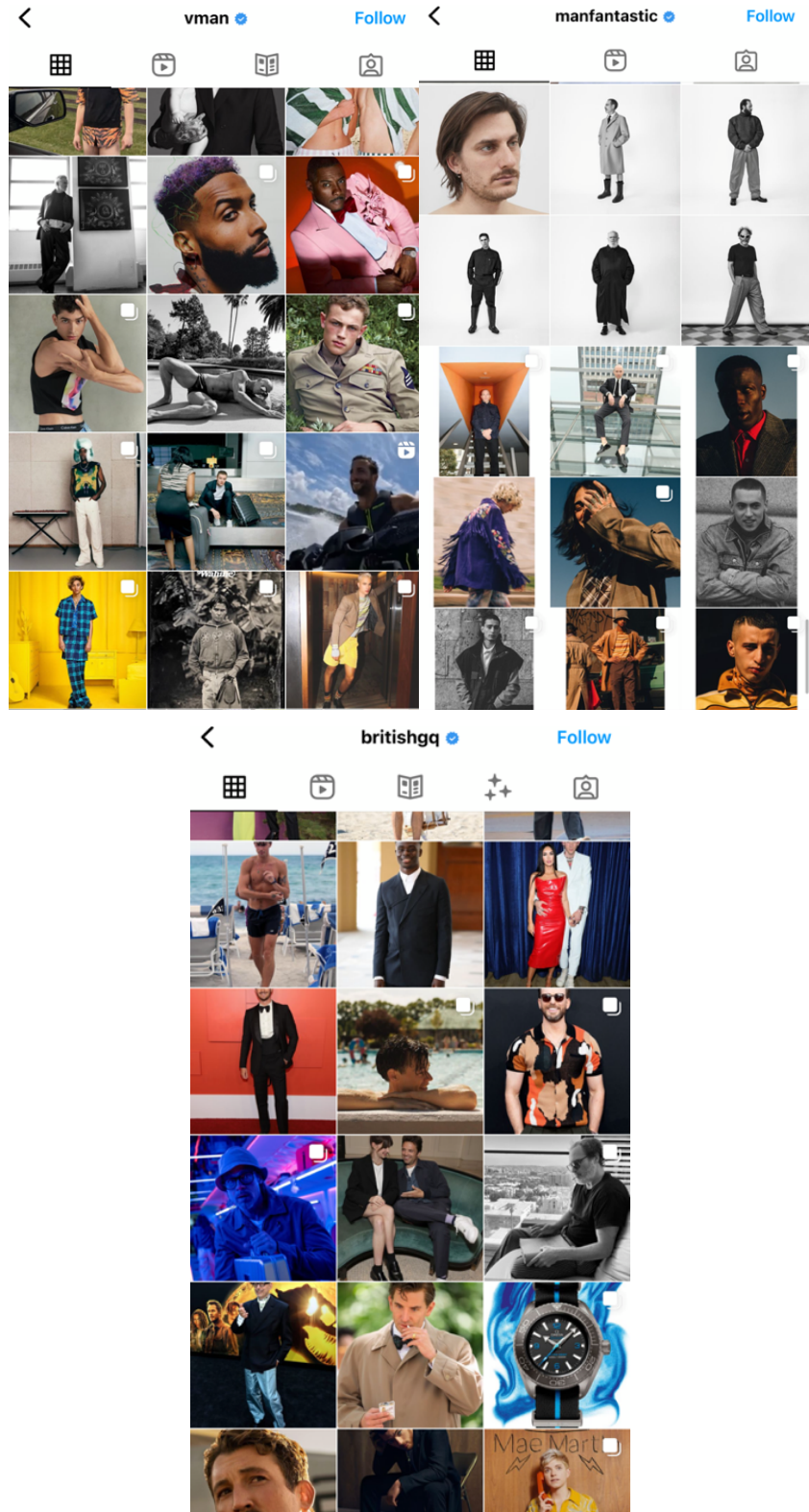
Hashtags also provide their own tropes and visual aesthetics as ‘in some cases, it is the aesthetics *within* the visual rather than (or at least as well as) the aesthetics *of* the visual which makes the trope’ (Leaver et al., 2020, italics in original). The authors use the example of the hashtag #ootd (outfit of the day) to illustrate that images under this hashtag do not necessarily contain similar visual elements, such as a specific colour scheme or composition; rather, under this hashtag, the focus is the users’ outfits. Consequently, some of the most common hashtags the bloggers use, such as #maleblogger #menswearblogger, #lifestyle or #gentleman, #dapperman, #pittiuomo (the last three commonly used by those presenting themselves as modern gentlemen), do not necessarily connote a specific visual convention, e.g., flat lays or object selfies. Rather they indicate elements associated with life(style) blogging and digital masculinities more generally. In extent, they also often delimitate gender, with the use for instance of the words “male” and “menswear” and point to the performativity of specific iterations of gender (Butler, 2006), for example when masculinity is placed in the context of the gentleman or the dapper.

As one of the main practices of influencers is content creation (Michaelsen et al., 2022), both the networked public and the brands affiliating with influencers expect visual curation and even visual specialisation (Leaver et al., 2020), e.g., Toni Tran and his maximalist visual aesthetic, or Mikko Puttonen and his editorial-like visuals or elements also indicated through hashtags. Therefore, hashtags often present ‘less a common aesthetic between images but instead a common marker for

presenting experience' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.71), and in the case of many influencers in my study, that experience is visual aesthetic communication itself.

The algorithmic replicability of masculinities

Due to the various reasons that hashtags are used, e.g., annotative or symbolic, the direct meaning between hashtags and the images they describe is fluid (Rathnayake and Ntalla, 2020). Still, Serafinelli (2018) argues that for Instagram users, the 'shared visual and hashtags can both act as a social connector' (p.66), as, for instance, in the case of the figure of the modern gentleman. However, I would argue that this extends beyond Instagram. As the images the bloggers share are often posted throughout the various networked platforms they use, the shared visual in terms of tropes and clichés, apart from acting as a social connector, has also resulted in a degree of standardisation of visual content due to the quest for algorithmic visibility. The algorithmic strategic imaginary paired with imagined affordances has stipulated a level of replicability of visual elements, both in terms of content and compositions. This standardisation has implications for the digital masculinities communicated through visual content creation. For instance, as already discussed, visual representations of the figure of the modern gentleman are often paired with an assortment of hashtags, while the images are focalised around suits and classical menswear, often centred around themes connoting business and mainly creating a heteronormative visual aesthetic as can be seen from figures 7.13 - 7.15. What is more, this is echoed and remediated (Rocamora, 2012) both in mainstream male lifestyle and style magazines for men - such as British GQ, Esquire UK, Man Fantastic and VMan (figures 7.16 - 18) - that have been found to create heteronormative imagery (Draper, 2014), and in brands with which the bloggers affiliate - with both magazines and brands themselves often following trends pertaining to visual aesthetic communication.

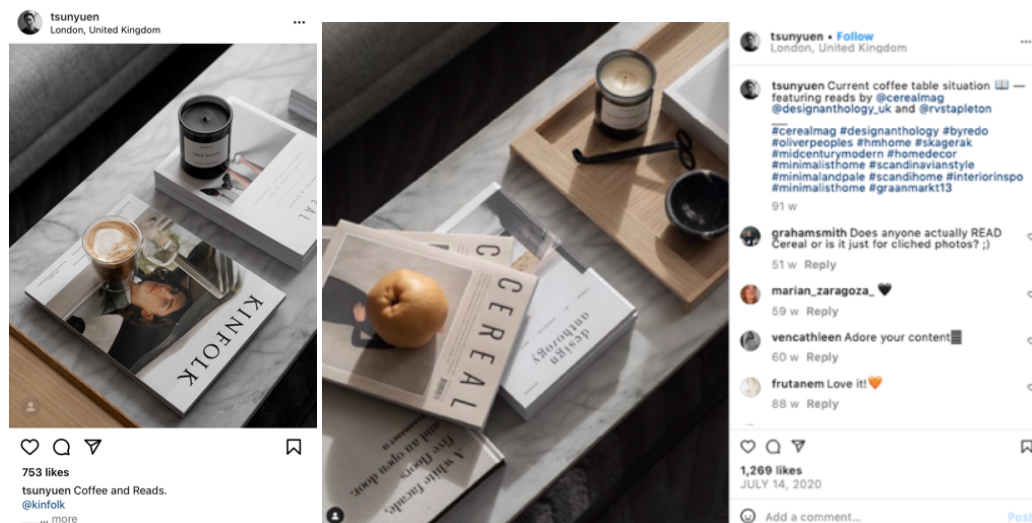


Above left: Figure 7.16: Instagram screenshot from @vman (2022). Above right: Figure 7.17: Instagram screenshot from @manfantastic (2022). Below: Figure 7.18: Instagram screenshot from @britishgq (2022)

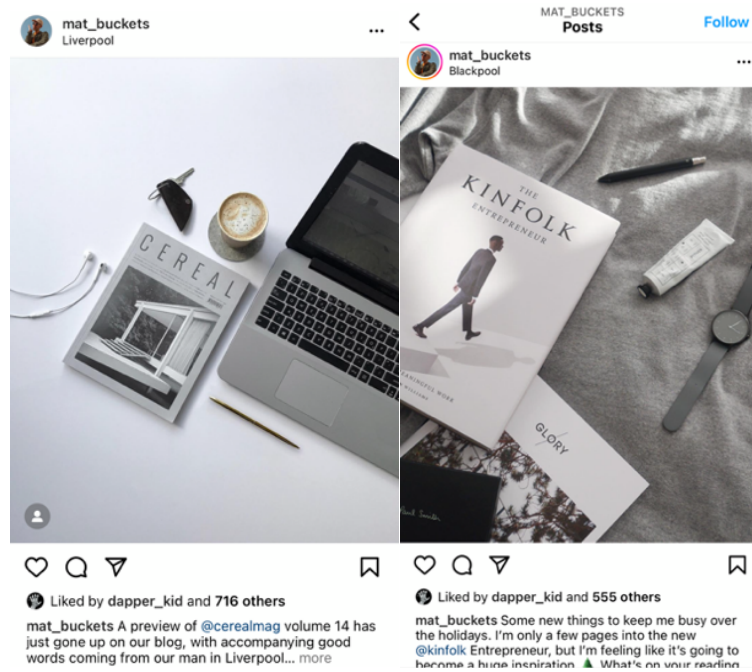
Curation and replicability of both content (e.g., flat lays, object selfies, menswear and lifestyle products due to the genre) and technical elements (e.g., colour, lighting, coherent grid) are easy to create and duplicate. Zamora (2018) notes that 'visual literacy comes from users looking and following other accounts that use the same interface, camera, tools and filters, easing complex operations' (p.523). This is further facilitated by editing software and mobile phone apps, such as Adobe Photoshop, Canva, Photo Editor, and Picsart, which are accessible and easy to use. Through this type of software, users can create and save pre-settings to automatically manipulate images for coherent colour compositions. Apps (such as Later, Planoly and Plann) also help users pre-plan their posts and orchestrate their profile grids. Moreover, it is not overly hard to copy other users' compositions or colours and lighting settings as there exist webpages (such as pixelpeer.io) where users can upload images and discover the editing settings. Finally, influencers often sell some of their editing pre-settings so that users can copy them exactly, which is another means of influencer monetisation (Lorenz, 2018). Overall, replicability becomes a matter of seeking engagement, likes and comments (Zamora, 2018) causing 'an almost infinite reiteration of pictures' (Zamora, 2018, p.525) and leading to genre homogenisation and often a replicability of digital masculinities.

Caldeira et al. (2021) discusses the 'Instagrammable conventions' (p.1084) or, in other words, the standardised and replicable instances that are 'partially constructed and reified by the type of content shared by popular Instagram users, among them influencers' (p.1084). This type of replicability, guided by imagined affordances and the algorithmic strategic imaginary, can also lead to algorithmic standardisation and a visual mimesis of digital masculinities, as is often the case for the figure of the modern gentleman and representations relating to skincare, discussed further below. This has resulted into certain discrepancies within my study. For instance, even though bloggers presenting themselves as modern gentlemen exhibit a softening of masculinity (Anderson, 2009), as discussed in Chapter Six, their images often adhere to a heteronormative aesthetic. This can be explained by the quest for algorithmic visibility, as algorithmic governance substantially regulates visual consumption and visual production (Napoli, 2014). Thus, due to the quest for algorithmic visibility, digital masculinities often become visually imitated, leading to similar reiterations. As Arielli (2018, p.78) argues, algorithms are largely responsible for standardising visual aesthetic communication through the rapid circulation of styles and trends. Thus, as Instagram's algorithms 'co-govern or co-determine what can be found' (Just and Latzer, 2017, p.247) online, digital masculinities are also governed by the platform's architecture becoming tied to affordances which can partly explain how this type of imagery has been appropriated by the bloggers and become ingrained within genre conventions and how gender is both performed and regulated algorithmically.

Replicability and standardisation might have been widely extended through Instagram (Caldeira, 2018; Zamora, 2018); nevertheless, they have been, and often still are, prevalent on websites and other content shared throughout the bloggers' networked channels. Moreover, well-established visual conventions, such as flat lays, object selfies, staged compositions of objects featuring the hands or feet of the photographer, or minimal aesthetics (Caldeira et al., 2020, p.8), are often remediated, adopted from and found outside of the sphere of Instagram. One example of this is Kinfolk magazine. Throughout my research, Kinfolk and similar publications such as Cereal have been used both as an inspiration that the bloggers draw on to create their visual aesthetics but also as props or object selfies (Sung et al., 2017) that the bloggers include in their compositions, as figures 7.19 - 7.26 and the opening image of this chapter demonstrate (see Appendix B for more examples). The images below contain Instagram and blog posts where the visual aesthetic of Kinfolk is emulated, and the publication is used as props in posts that promote other sponsored products but not the publications. More specifically, in figures 7.19 and 7.20, Tsun Yuen from the eponymous blog promotes the menswear brand Sunspel on the left image, while there is no apparent promoted content on the right image. In figures 7.21 - 7.22 and 7.23 posts from Matthew Buckets and Harry Young, the sponsored product(s), if any, are not clearly indicated, while Harry accompanies the post with the caption 'keeping things simple and minimal' (Young, 2018), indicating the minimal visual aesthetic he emulates throughout his blogging. Figure 7.24 is taken from Anthony Lee's Instagram with the same post existing in this eponymous blog and the sponsored product is a Huawei mobile phone, whereas, in figures 7.25 and 7.26, taken from Anson Low's website, The Visionist, the sponsored products are a stationery brand (Low, 2016a) and Galet loafers (Low, 2016b).



Lect: Figure 7.19: Instagram screenshot from @tsunyuuen (2019); Right: Figure 7.20: Instagram screenshot from @tsunyuuen (2020)



Left: Figure 7.21: Instagram screenshot from @mat_buckets (2017a). Right: Figure 7.22: Instagram screenshot from @mat_buckets (2017b)



Left: Figure 7.23: Instagram screenshot from @harry_has (2018); Right: Figure 7.24: Instagram screenshot from @anthnylee (2019)

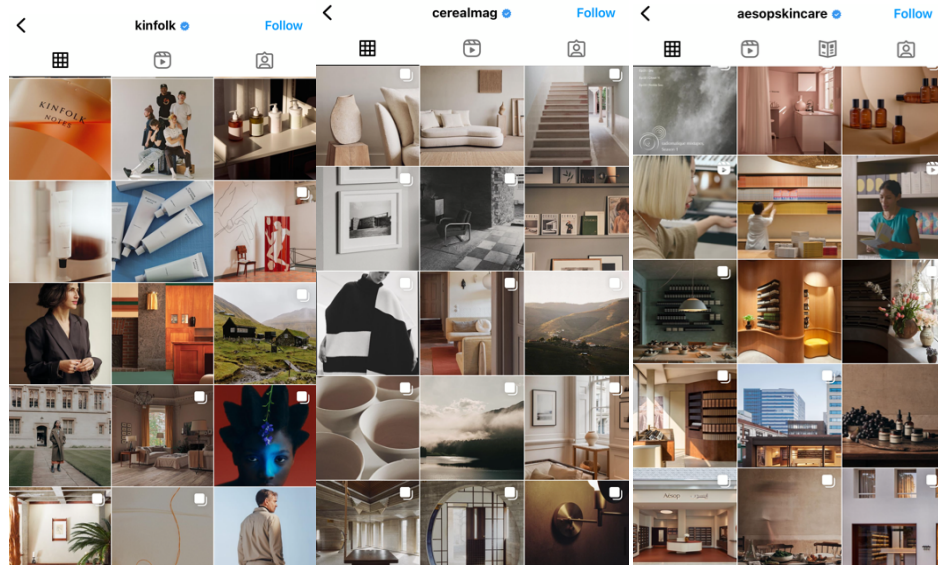


Left: Figure 7.25: Screenshot from the website *thevisionist.co.uk* (2016a). Right: Figure 7.26: Screenshots from the website *thevisionist.co.uk* (2016b)

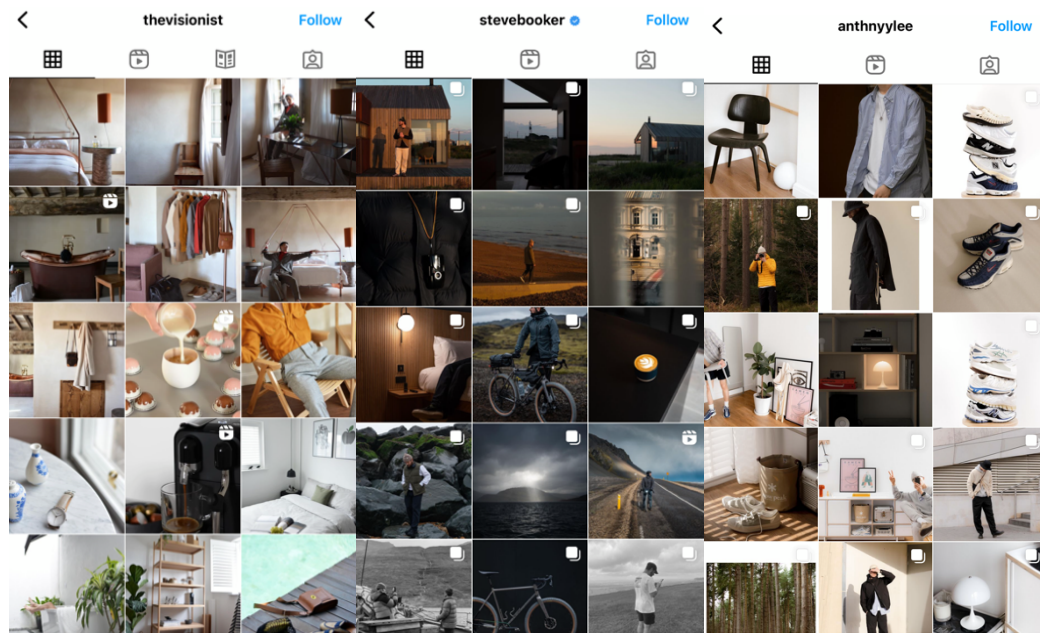
Discerning between sponsored and unsponsored content is often challenging, as bloggers do not always clearly indicate when a post is sponsored and do not always uphold the rapidly changing legal standards for influencer marketing and advertising (Michaelsen et al., 2022). Nevertheless, *Kinfolk* is hardly framed as a sponsored item; rather, it is used to give a certain aesthetic or mood and feel to visual content (Manovich, 2017). *Kinfolk* was launched as an independent - indie - lifestyle magazine in 2011 and has become one of the most influential periodicals of the previous decade, setting an aspirational visual aesthetic template (Scheiding, 2020). The publication adheres to a minimal and clear visual aesthetic, which has inspired various other magazines sporting similar visual styles, such as *Cereal*, *The Weekender*, and to some extent, *Mr Porter*. This is not uncommon, as visual mimesis predates and exists outside of social media and plays an active part in the creation of genres (Lüders et al., 2010).

Kinfolk promotes a lifestyle of minimalism and slow living, focusing on interior design, food, travel and fashion. The magazine's visuals, both in the printed publication and through its social media channels, conjure 'moods and atmospheres, which are permeated by commodities while they have an advertisement culture that privileges reduced forms, natural materials, and a neutral, harmonious style' (Scheiding, 2020, p.48). *Kinfolk* is known for its minimalist visual mode, washed-out and pastel colour palettes and curated layouts of carefully arranged products, either in still lives or featuring close-ups of hands showing items. *Kinfolk*'s templatability and easy-to-mimic style (Leaver et al., 2020, p.205) have resulted in visual trends trickling down to other magazines, to brands (especially skincare and beauty brands such as *Aesop* and *Byredo*) and, of course, to bloggers - as can be seen

from figures 7.27 - 7.29 and 7.30 - 7.32 which juxtapose screenshots from the feeds of publications and bloggers from my study showcasing a high degree of similarity. As such, the visual forms and layouts that Kinfolk popularised have now become Instagram conventions (Leaver et al., 2020).



Above left: Figure 7.27: Instagram screenshot from *@kinfolk*. Above right: Figure 7.28: Instagram screenshot *@cerealmag*. Below: Figure 7.29: Instagram screenshot *@aesopskincare* (2022)



Above left: Figure 7.30: Instagram screenshot from *@thevisionist* (2022). Above right: Figure 7.31: Instagram screenshot *@stevebooker* (2022). Below: Figure 7.32: Instagram screenshot *@anthnyylee* (2022)

Kinfolk has been characterised as a taste regime (Bean et al., 2018) whereby visual aesthetics and consumption are curated and given a shared meaning that is being produced by the publication and

reproduced, or remediated, by other publications, brands and content creators. Moreover, Kinfolk has been deemed the main culprit for the growing demand for Instagrammable places and settings (Bean et al., 2018). Nevertheless, apart from the visual layouts and tropes that Kinfolk has popularised, Kinfolk, Cereal and other similar publications as material objects are also 'Insta-friendly' themselves and, as evident by figures 7.16 - 7.23 (and appendix B), as they provide the ideal background of an 'Instagrammable setting' (Bean et al., 2018, p.90). However, as one user comments on Tsun Yuen's post (figure 7.17), 'does actually anyone ever READ Cereal or is it just for cliched photos :)' (Smith, 2020). This showcases how mainstream and normalised this visual aesthetic has become for influencers. In my study, this visual aesthetic has been broadly adopted by bloggers, echoed both in the visuals and hashtags, as hashtags such as #minimalism, #minimalstyle, #cerealmag, and #kinfolk are commonly featured in posts with a Kinfolk-inspired visual aesthetic.

Consequently, the bloggers emulating this Kinfolk-inspired aesthetic communicate meanings through the visuals they share (Adami and Jewitt, 2016), drawing on Kinfolk in a manner that resembles brand-consumer storytelling to build upon and imbue their own narratives, thus, implicating the digital masculinities they communicate. Kinfolk promotes consumption framed under a minimal Scandinavian-inspired and mindful lifestyle in the sense of slow living with an appreciation of the mundane and homemade (Bean et al., 2018). This can lend masculinities a particular significance, especially relating to domesticity and domestic settings, as the bloggers overwhelmingly place Kinfolk as a prop and curate this aesthetic in domestic spaces, such as their living rooms and bedrooms. This visual aesthetic provides an expanded repertoire (Anderson, 2017) of domestic masculinities that contrasts domestic masculinity as a male hegemonic 'sphere inside the house' (Kimmel, 1987, p.262).

Through the bloggers, the interiors of their homes become highly stylised and publicly shared. The domestic masculinities of the bloggers elicited from this Kinfolk-inspired aesthetic serve to expand on and make visible 'the private space of the home [that] allows men to negotiate alternative masculinities' (Gorman-Murray, 2008, p.369) such as softer and caring masculinities, further discussed in Chapter Eight. This type of visual aesthetic serves to instil masculinities with a reading of domesticity that contrasts the domestic space as a hegemonic male sphere that represents 'islands of unstained masculinity and purified pockets of virility' (Kimmel, 1996, p.262). Domestic settings have been commonly associated with notions such as the mancave, something that, as Moisio and Beruchashvili (2016) note, has been largely constructed within popular culture through films, TV and men's magazines and that represents 'spaces around the home such as basements, workshops, or game rooms' (p.656). The bloggers, however, construct a different version of male domesticity; one

that, placed within their broader narratives, adopts elements of the Andersonian framework and, hence, advances meanings associated with masculinities while simultaneously depicting how imagined affordances act as structural elements and regulatory points. Therefore, as digital media instruct users on 'how to compose or retouch a photography by constantly referring to examples from others' (Zamora, 2018, p.523), digital masculinities as they relate to domesticity become, at least to some degree, algorithmically standardised and replicable, due to imagined affordances.

Getting it done: work-life as a visually curated lifestyle

The bloggers in my study, apart from stylising and using their homes and private spaces as backgrounds for content creation, also stylise and curate the branded self-at-work. As 'platformized creative workers' (Glatt, 2021, p.1), the bloggers operate within a culture infused with neoliberal ideals where the private life becomes blurred with work and the act of blogging itself often becomes a matter of visual aesthetic communication as the bloggers curate and share content created around workspaces or featuring themselves at-work. In other words, bloggers often stylise the practice of blogging itself. This is exemplified by Jordan Bunker in his post titled 'Freelance so far' (Bunker, 2018a) (figure 7.33). In this post, Jordan promotes a café, which he links to the broader cultural ideal of the café as being a place for creative freelance work (Liegl, 2014), presented through Jordan's own freelance practice. The post's introduction reads, 'each freelance career is different, and today I want to share with you my experience so far in this ever-changing industry of blogging and social media'. In a manner reminiscent of diary-keeping that Jordan overall preserves on his website, he discusses his freelancing efforts, offers thoughts and opinions on his blogging and career more generally, and shares advice on time management for fellow freelancers. The post is accompanied by images adhering to Jordan's preferred manner of visual aesthetics, which is darker tones and sharp geometries created through light. The sponsored content, that is the café, is tied as a space to the post's content, i.e., freelancing, as, in recent years, cafés have become places where work, especially freelance work, is being carried out. Henriksen and Tjora (2018) talk about 'café workers' for whom the café has become the office. Thus, Jordan seems to be making a strategic decision to link the promotion of a café to a personal diaristic-like discussion about his work life and career.

Freelance so far

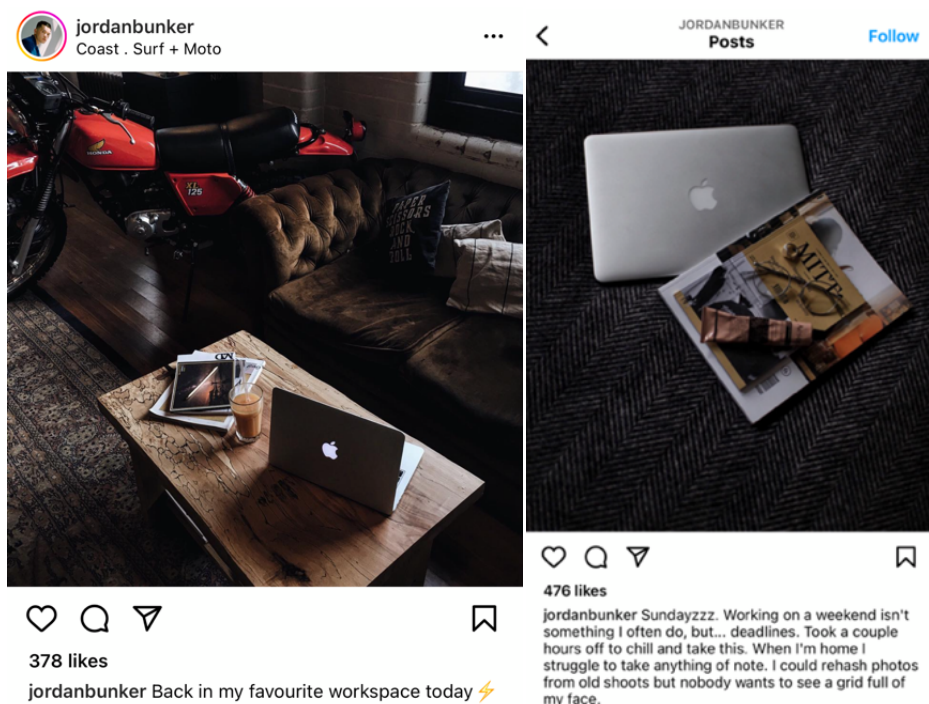
Each freelance career is different and today I want to share with you my experience so far in this ever-changing industry of blogging and social media.



Figure 7.33: Screenshots from *Jordan Bunker* (2018)

The promotion of the café through Jordan's visual content is highly stylised. Yet, through this sponsorship and the visual elements accompanying it becoming paired with Jordan's thoughts on freelancing more generally and his own practice more specifically, freelance work itself also becomes stylised. This stylisation of work also frequently occurs through Jordan's Instagram. For instance, figure 7.34 contains a curated (work) space paired with a MacBook with the caption 'Back in my favourite workspace today' (Bunker, 2017a). It can be said then that overall, the stylisation of the mobile workspace for digital creative work serves to glamourise the 'collapse of the boundaries between work and play' and idealise 'the temporary and precarious jobs, long hours' solidifying the 'passionate attachment to the work and to the identity of creative labourer' (Gill and Pratt, 2008, p.15).

Similarly, figures 7.35 - 7.38 depict various curated flat lays, one of Jordan's favourite visual tropes, which include a MacBook and an assortment of other 'Instagrammable' items following Jordan's minimal aesthetic, such as a pair of reading glasses, a pair of headphones, a watch, and an Aesop hand cream. Some of the captions from those posts directly relate to work and read: 'Sundayzzz. Working on a weekend is not something I often do but... deadlines....' (Figure 7.35); 'Sunday has been spent working on my new website' (Figure 7.36) while simultaneously referring to visual tropes used, i.e., flat lay and dark colour theme, 'shape, shadows and a strict colour theme on the desk' (Figure 7.37), 'days at home mean flat lays [...] you're probably sick to death of this setup' (Figure 7.38). Consequently, all these posts connote, and thus stylise, freelance work, which pertains to the neoliberal framework within which the bloggers operate. This stylisation and the fact that bloggers often resort to work itself to create content further points to the encroachment of neoliberal values, as discussed in Chapter Five, into everyday life and further blur the boundaries between work and leisure (Banet-Weiser, 2012). Yet, in this case this happens through a strategic and algorithmic visually aesthetic mode of communication.



Left: Figure 7.34: Instagram screenshot from @jordanbunker (2017a). Right: Figure 7.35: Instagram screenshot from @jordanbunker (2017b)

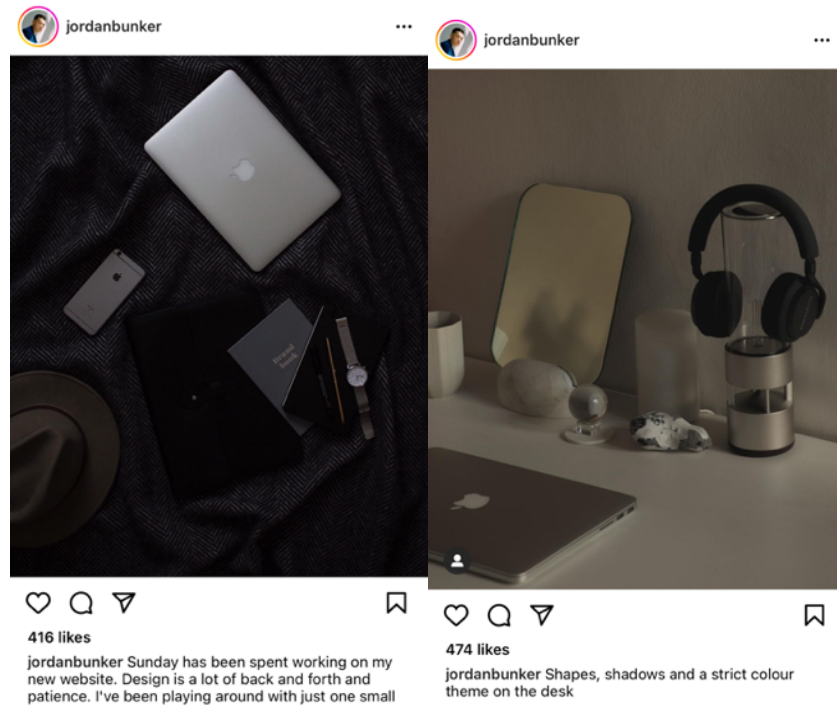
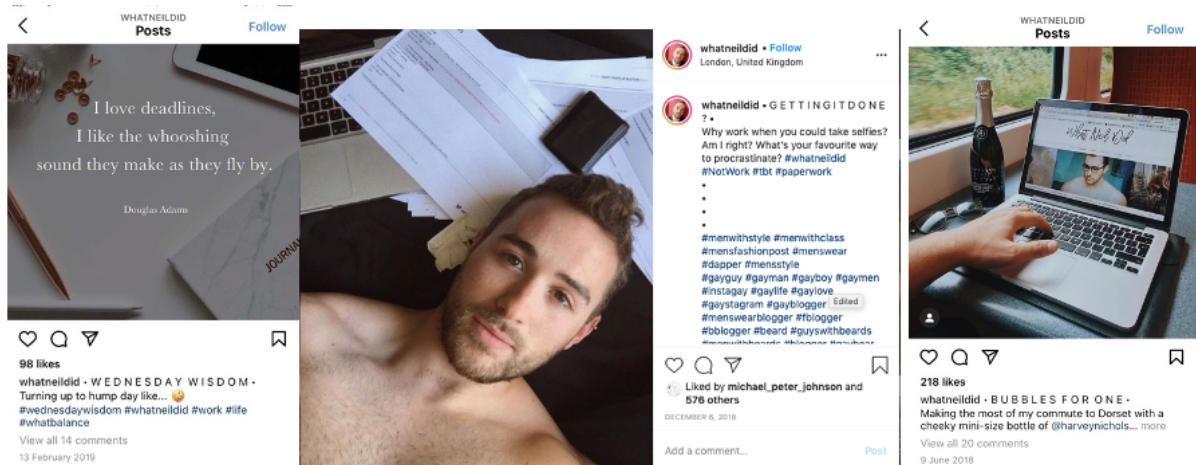


Figure 7.36: Instagram screenshot from @jordanbunker (2017c). Right: Figure 7.37: Instagram screenshot from @jordanbunker (2020)



Figure 7.38: Instagram screenshot from @jordanbunker (2017e)

Similar content is found in other blogs in my study. For instance, figures 7.39 - 7.41 depict various Instagram posts from Neil Thornton. The images are accompanied by captions that read: ‘I like deadlines, I like the whooshing sound they make when they fly by’ and ‘Wednesday Wisdom. Turning up to hump day⁴⁵ like [...]’ (Figure 7.39); ‘getting it done’ (Figure 7.40); ‘making the most of my commute’ (Figure 7.41). Like Jordan, Neil’s posts serve to stylise work and place it within the bloggers’ aesthetic context, making it primarily a neoliberal one where work permeates all aspect of daily life. Ibrahim (2015, p.46) notes that mundane images of daily life, including work life, infiltrate and commodify the personal, making a perfect instance for content creation. Posts such as these illustrate how infiltrated the neoliberal principles are to the bloggers, as self-brands become visually tied to the neoliberal realm by glamorising work (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017). Through the visual aesthetic curation of the branded self-at-work, digital masculinities further become tethered to neoliberal elements such as creative entrepreneurship, discussed in Chapter Six. Nevertheless, this is another instance where entrepreneurship becomes detached from the hegemonic corporate context (Connell, 2012) and is situated closer to an Andersonian one by being stylised and fully immersed in the bloggers’ narratives.



Left: Figure 7.39: Instagram screenshot from @whatneildid (2019). Middle (1): Figure 7.40: Instagram screenshot from @whatneildid (2018a). Right: Figure 7.41: Instagram screenshot from @whatneildid (2018b)

Skincare essentials: the beauty shelf

Another aspect of the bloggers’ communication that is highly stylised and tends to follow popular Instagrammable visual tropes and clichés (Leaver et al., 2020, p.72) is the promotion of skincare products. Most of the bloggers in my study feature skincare and makeup products in varying degrees,

⁴⁵ Wednesday is regarded as hump day in popular culture as it is the middle point of the working week and the term has become a focus of various online memes and inspirational quotes (Dictionary.com, 2018).

something not uncommon as this sector enjoys an upwards market trajectory in the UK, thus presenting fruitful opportunities for collaborations. From 2015 to 2017, the men's grooming and cosmetics market in the UK saw an increase of over £100 million; in 2021, it was valued at £73.802 million (Statista, 2022a), while the market is on an upwards trajectory globally (Business Wire, 2021). Simultaneously, various new cosmetics and makeup brands catering to men have been launched, while established high-end brands such as Tom Ford, Marc Jacobs and Chanel have also branched into skincare and makeup lines for men. As companies' budgets for influencer marketing increase, especially for Instagram (Clapp, 2021), the skincare and cosmetics sectors are profitable ones for influencers (Forbes, 2019). This can partly explain the increasing prevalence of skincare and cosmetic products in the influencers' content in my study.

The bloggers usually present skincare products in a highly stylised manner, with carefully arranged layouts, flat lays and object selfies, placing the products in their homes while often using publications such as Kinfolk and Cereal as props, as figures 7.42 and 7.43 depict. Evidently, from the images, Robbie (author of the blog Middle Aged Gentleman) and Michael Lyns (from the blog MKLYNS) have carefully arranged skincare products in a flat lay mode, and both include Cereal and Kinfolk as Instagrammable props, while Michael alludes to the packaging of the product accompanying his post with the caption 'I'm a big fan of their [Nuori skincare] packaging' (Figure, 7.43). This echoes Karlmond's argument that bloggers operate in an industry that trades in aesthetics, including both the content they create and the design and aesthetics of the products they choose to present. As is the case for other sectors, skincare brands try to be Instagrammable through their packaging and often curate both the design of the products and their physical stores to provide an 'Instagrammable experience' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.72). Thus, an aesthetic vortex is being created and iterated both by brands and by the influencers who use those brands to promote their own self-brands (Caliandro and Anselmi 2021, p.2). This can explain the use of the specific publications, which are non-sponsored content but are used for symbolic and visually aesthetic communicational purposes.

My Skincare Essentials 2019

written by Robbie | June 23, 2019



Left: Figure 7.42: Screenshot from *Middle aged Man* (2019); Right: Figure 7.43: Instagram screenshot @mklyns (2020)

Manovich (2020) argues that in contemporary social media society, the ‘production of beautiful images, interfaces, objects and experiences, is central to economic and social functioning’ (p.3). A similar concept has been previously articulated by Featherstone (1991), who has talked about an aestheticisation of everyday life. Featherstone refers to a perceived blurring of the boundaries between high art/popular culture, articulated through the market where commodities are taking on an increasingly symbolic aspect. In the case of the bloggers, this is exemplified through skincare and cosmetics brands that, following the cultural zeitgeist of visual aesthetic communication, are placing increasing importance on the packaging and design of their products so that they can be as Instagrammable as possible (Campbell, et al., 2022). This exemplifies how mediatisation, or in other words, ‘the idea that media have become increasingly central to the shaping and doing of institutions and agents, to their practices and experiences’ (Rocamora, 2017, p.507) becomes merged with the algorithmic strategic imaginary and actively shapes the design of commodities.

Commonly featured brands amongst the bloggers in my study, such as Aesop, Baxter of California, Lab Series, Monroe London, Murdock London, The Inkey List and Tom Ford, are all embracing a minimal appearance in packaging, using clean lines and adopting a desaturated, plain look which can be easily arranged and styled to be photographed. Van Rompay et al. (2012) argue that product appearance and design become significant factors that influence consumer perceptions. This is something echoed by the bloggers, who, when discussing skincare products, apart from the use and ingredients of the products, predominantly reflect on the design and packaging, remarking how visually pleasing a product will look displayed on their shelves. Indicative of this is Luke Sam Sowden,

author of the eponymous blog, who frequently remarks on products and includes the caption: ‘looked beautiful sat on my Beauty Shelves’ (e.g., Sowden, 2021b, 2021c, 2020). Similarly, Michael Lyns writes in a review on Filmore Skincare: ‘packaging wise these guys do it right, the simple and clean design means both products fit in really well on my shelf’ (Lyns, 2017), while Carl Thompson observes regarding Ruffians Barbers’ skincare series that ‘their professional grade product range is expertly formulated and the packaging will look great on your shelves’ (Thompson, 2020a). Likewise, Jordan Bunker, (who frequently uses the hashtag #bestofpackaging on his Instagram when reviewing various skincare and cosmetic products for his website) contemplates on a post titled ‘Grooming for guys’ that accompanied by the image shown in figure 8.44:

So what do I value in a grooming brand? I think it comes down to making a positive impact on my appearance, being long lasting and on an aesthetic note, consider its packaging as much as its ingredients (Bunker, 2018b).



Figure 7.44: Screenshot from *Jordan Bunker* (2018)

Similarly, Robin (author of the blog *Man For Himself*) who focuses in his blog on skincare writes for the anti-ageing line of the brand Lab Series:

Lab Series has given us a masterclass in packaging design. Sleek, durable and reassuringly weighty, the packaging is the perfect match to the luxury of the product inside [...] I quite often have my skin products stored away on my shelf, but these two beauties have taken pride of place in my bathroom (James, 2017a).

Like Jordan's, Robin's review is accompanied by images pertaining to common visual tropes such as flat lays and close-ups of hands and a selfie, as shown in figures 7.45 and 7.46. Nevertheless, Robin seems to consider the imagined affordances of each platform, taking a platform-sensitive approach in the sharing of the visuals. Even though Robin stays within well-established clichés for the overall production of the visuals, he chooses to communicate specific images to his networked channels. On his website, Robin features product selfies; in his Instagram, he features a selfie and a caption directing the audience to his website and YouTube channel, which contain a more detailed video-review of the product. Thus, Robin follows each platform's imagined affordances but still communicates a consistent networked branded self, situated within the contemporary visual aesthetic vortex iterated by the brands, bloggers and imagined affordance.



Figure 7.45: Screenshots from *Man For Himself* (2017)



Figure 7.46: Instagram screenshot from *@manforhimself* (2017)

Consequently, the quest for algorithmic visibility creates again a degree of standardisation and replicability of digital masculinities, this time in relation to skincare. Alexander (2003) suggests that there is an association between the products that men consume and ideas about masculinities. Historically, skincare for men has been advertised for about a century (Tungate, 2011); however, like the fashion industry, the skincare market has been staunchly dichotomised and marketed within the male/female consumer binary. As Hall (2015) notes, men's interest in image enhancement through

grooming and the use of various products can be traced back to the Georgian era and probably even earlier (p.19). However, neoliberal ideologies on body and image management (Gill et al., 2005) and, more recently, the rise of social media that are saturated with selfies, have partly contributed to the growth of the skincare market and individuals seeking better-looking skin (Hall, 2015). Thus, as Gough (2018) argues, in contemporary culture, where self-presentation is increasingly valued, men turn to skincare to enhance their appearance. Nevertheless, as bloggers approach skincare through a neoliberal lens, where caring for one's appearance is equated to caring for oneself (Gill, 2021), skincare can also be positioned within the framework of neoliberal self-government (Gill et al., 2005), acting as another point of regulation and self-management.

Prior to the rise of social media and of the broad promotion of skincare by male influencers, the figure of the metrosexual was linked to the use of skincare products. The metrosexual arose in the public discourse during the 1990s and early 2000s and referred to primarily urban men who pursued groomed looks and freely used cosmetics (Hall, 2015). Hall (2015) has noted that metrosexuality seems to be partly in line with the Andersonian framework of a softening of masculinity (p.151). However, I concur with Winch and Hakim (2016), who state that metrosexuality is a dated concept. The term has not been used by the bloggers or brands in my study and does not properly portray the practice of the bloggers and the discourse within which they situate the promotion and use of skincare. Many bloggers in my study have discussed the use of skincare and makeup by men, trying to untether the subject from its historically feminised connotations (Hall, 2015, p.viii). Of course, this sector can be especially profitable for the bloggers, as skincare and beauty brands are increasing their spending on influencer marketing.

Nevertheless, this does not diminish the fact that influencers explicitly try to disassociate a perceived cultural stigma of men publicly using skincare (Hall, 2015), and thus, expanding the repertoire of masculinities (Anderson, 2017) both visually and conceptually. Carl Thompson, collaborating with menswear and lifestyle website MR Porter promoting skincare, writes:

caring for your skin is no longer a taboo subject for men and with the men's grooming sector growing rapidly, we now have an incredible number of product choices available to us which can be quite daunting (Thompson, 2020b).

Similarly, Robin James writes:

The landscape of men's style and grooming has changed. It's no longer a taboo subject [...] It's an exciting time to be a man. You have so many options and the opportunity to truly define who you want to be and how you want others to see you. Looking after yourself and caring about your appearance (James, 2016a).

Of course, the association of skincare and men through the framework of stigma or framed as a taboo practice is context-specific. For instance, in the context of urban centres such as London and in fashion circles, men wearing makeup and using skincare might not be coded as a stigmatised practice. Nevertheless, there are still contexts and spaces where destigmatisation is not the case. Yet, the bloggers, by publicly discussing this issue and framing it as a non-taboo subject, even though it still might as well be in various instances, place their discourse and, by extension, digital masculinities within IMT's diminished homophobia framework, as makeup and skincare have historically had feminised connotations (Hall, 2015, p.viii).

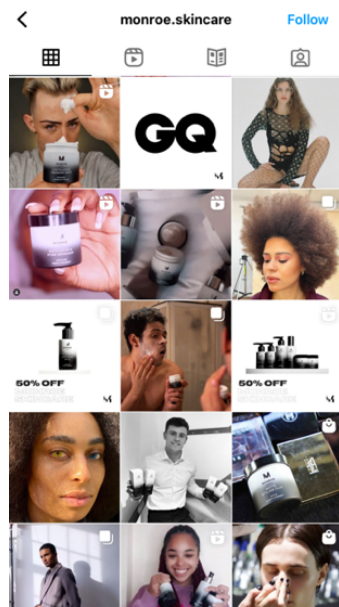
This is further exemplified by Carl Thompson's sponsorship from the skincare brand Monroe London (figure 7.43). The blogger, acting as an ambassador of the brand, recurrently promotes a variety of their products. Monroe is a brand offering minimalist Instagrammable products and has a clean visual aesthetic on its social media channels and website. The brand is positioned as an inclusive brand. On its website, it is stated that Monroe is a 'shareable, democratic, inclusive, diverse' brand (<https://monroeskin.com>, 2022), something reflected in the imagery the brand shares on social media and the broader adoption of the hashtag #ForEveryone to describe the brand's ethics. As depicted in figures 7.47 - 7.49, the brand has adopted a clean minimal packaging design and sports an Instagrammable aesthetic that exists within the broader remediation of brands and publications, as is evident from the repost of British GQ that featured Monroe on their social media. The brand also has a 'Monroe Muses' section on their website that features personal stories of individuals (Monroe Skincare, 2022). In one of his website posts for the brand, Carl writes:

Shareable, democratic, inclusive, diverse, simplified skincare is what their website suggests. What I understand from that is that the brand Monroe London is a men's grooming company that is inclusive for all people and every skin colour (Thompson, 2021).

By actively associating himself with a skincare company positioned as diverse and creating a narrative of inclusiveness, Carl, through the concept of brand-consumer storytelling also diffuses these narratives in his own brand, thus affixing inclusive meanings to his masculinity. This is similarly articulated by Graig Hammond’s feature of the brand Huckle The Barber London, where the blogger frames Huckle as ‘a brand who creates products for the modern man and is inclusive of all kinds of modern masculinity’ (Hammond, 2018).



Figure 7.47: Screenshot from *Carl Thompson* (2021)



MONROE MUSES
52 MONROE MUSES WANTED TO SHARE THEIR STORY



Left: Figure 7.48: Instagram screenshot from *@monroe.skincare* (2022); Right: Figure 7.49: Screenshot from *monroeskincares.com* (2022)

Following a global trend, the UK skincare market exhibits a turn towards inclusivity. In the past few years, there has been a growing direction toward fluid representations of gender and other categories such as a variety in age and skins (e.g., the inclusion of less photoshopped models and diverse skin tones and types (CBInsights, 2021) while also softening or inclusive representations of masculinities. In recent years, brands such as Gillette, Nivea and Lynx (Mulcahy, 2019) have released advertisements that try to broaden and reimagine what contemporary masculinity is. The brands

actively oppose hegemonic or orthodox ideals by creating storytelling around displays of emotionality and featuring diverse representations such as a trans man. Similarly, smaller UK-based brands such as Barry M, Horace, Huckle The Barber London and Monroe London, which have collaborated with the bloggers in my study, frame their ethos as inclusive, with progressive attitudes to masculinities – while keeping with the current visual aesthetic communication through the design of their products and social media channels. This can be placed within a broader cultural shift that Hickey-Moody (2019) has observed where brands through their advertisements, call men to ‘speak back to toxic gender performances, to be the change they want to see in the world’ (p.2).

Concomitantly, UK-based consulting agencies and trend forecasting reports have reported on this direction that the skincare and beauty sector is taking. A report from the Future Laboratory (2018) advises that there is:

A new kind of male beauty consumer who is not wedded to traditional masculine ideals is emerging, in our Men's Beauty Market, necessitating the need for brands detoxify masculinity, and how they can diversify the narrative around what it means to be a man in 2018 and beyond (The Future Laboratory, 2018).

Likewise, WGSN’s (2019) report describes new masculinity and radical inclusivity as key elements to appease next-generation cosmetic consumers. A report from Cosmetic Business (2020) notes an ‘evolving masculinity’, while HypeBeast observes that ‘as old societal norms are discarded, more men are taking care of their skin and nails than ever before’ (Hype Beast, 2020). Finally, and most recently, Sign Salad (2022) reports on soft masculinity in the beauty industry, with brands taking an approach of ‘soft vulnerability’ while ‘tackling taboos’. Hence, through this interconnected, networked space of brands and influencers, meanings associated with masculinities become in flux. Through the communication of skincare, masculinities become stylised, and their repertoires expand, wherein progressive/inclusive aspects can ‘co-create a culture’ within this extended discursive space of lifestyle blogging to ‘contest the privileging of orthodox masculinity’ (Anderson, 2009, p.111).

Consequently, within this zeitgeist, brands are attempting to ‘change instances in which toxic masculinity is polluting social formations, and causing physical, emotional and psychological harm to boys, men and women’ (Hickey-Moody 2019, p.2). As ambassadors and promoters of brands, bloggers work within this context, remediating messages that are often already found in advertising. For instance, John, the author of the blog The Everyday Man and a blogger presenting himself as

modern gentleman, discusses his ambassadorship for the men's grooming brand LYNX. LYNX collaborated with CALM and designed a campaign called #BiggerIssues that tried to draw attention to male suicide and redefine contemporary views about masculinity (<https://www.tmwunlimited.com/project/bigger-issues>, 2022). John, as an ambassador for this campaign, writes on his website:

Masculinity doesn't come with a determined list of things that you should or shouldn't like. For some reason though, there is a huge amount of pressure for guys feel pressure to conform to these gender stereotypes. Recently I've been working with LYNX as an ambassador, and as part of their #BiggerIssues campaign with CALM they have asked me to share my thoughts on this topic (John, 2017).

John notes how hegemonic traits and stereotypes continue to put pressure on the ways that masculinities are created and communicated. The blogger posits that men still find it hard to talk about their feelings and stresses that this needs to be addressed by both brands and the bloggers as ambassadors. In the same post, John iterates that it should be normalised for men to openly talk about their feelings and worries, noting that

stereotypes will always take a very long time to dispel, but by talking about this stuff, we are at least at the beginning of the road to knocking them on the head (John, 2017).

As this post is in association with CALM, it makes sense that the blogger addresses feelings and openness, as CALM is a mental health organisation for men. However, as I discuss in more detail in Chapter Eight, CALM frequently partners with influencers and brands from the fashion and skincare sector, illustrating how the openness and softening of masculinity are often placed within and communicated through the market. Nevertheless, this does not diminish the fact that bloggers - such as John, by presenting such posts weave their narratives through an Andersonian context. In this case, by becoming an ambassador, featuring this campaign and, to some extent, publicly taking a stance and presenting his view about masculinities (contrasting emotional stoicism and negating openness as weakness, elements associated with hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005)), John communicates a softer iteration of masculinity that ultimately becomes part of his self-brand.

Something more masculine would help: the ambivalence of the beauty shelf

Of course, not all the skincare brands the bloggers promote advocate progression and inclusivity, nor do all the products have an Instagrammable aesthetic; nevertheless, the bloggers try to stylise and

curate the products in a manner that becomes Instagrammable. The skincare sector is still heavily gendered via the market positioning of products that mostly follow the male/female dichotomy of the market. So even products that contain similar ingredients are marketed differently for men and women (Oblong, 2012). It has been established that packaging and design are aesthetically important for the bloggers, yet in my study bloggers often remarked on how masculine some products look. This is exemplified by Robin's review of the brand Barry M's nail care and polish line targeted at men. Robin has a section on his website titled 'Men's Make Up' where he reviews men's makeup and nail lines. In a post titled 'Just painting my nails/Barry M' which is accompanied by the images show in figure 7.50, Robin comments on the new Barry M line:

UK cosmetics company *Barry M* have just launched their new range of nail care and they're targeting us men [...] **I wanted to try each colour on a different hand** [...] My nails just look a little bit glossier and have a more even colouring [...] It is, however, obvious that **Barry M** are really just testing us guys and haven't fully committed to the male grooming market [...] Like I always say with hair products, no one sees the packaging when you're wearing it, but I think a nod towards something more masculine would help with Barry M's foray into the 'new world' [...] Loads of us would be happy to buy these as they are, but it always helps to have something a little more, "well, it's in a matte black container and has '**For Men**' written on it (James, 2016b).



Figure 7.50: Screenshots from *Man For Himself* (2016)

Robin opines that Barry M is not yet entirely committed to the men's market. The blogger attributes that predominantly to the packaging of the products, which are marketed towards men but are designed very similarly to the products that the brand markets to women (as seen in figures 7.51 and 7.52) which juxtapose the male and female nail polish lines of the brand. Contrarily, when Robin reviews Chanel's male nail care from the line Boy De Chanel, he comments that the series 'provides a great offering for guys looking to delve into the world of makeup' while complimenting the 'sleek

and dark-hued next-level packaging’ (James, 2018) (figure 7.53). Consequently, even though Robin heavily promotes the use of skincare and makeup by men and constantly reviews makeup and nail products - skincare is, after all, his niche - he often ‘genders’ products and evaluates commodities based on how masculine he perceives they look.



Left: Figure 7.51: Screenshot from *Man For Himself* (2016). Right: Figure 7.52: Instagram screenshot from @barrymcosmetics featuring products from their main nail collection (2021)



Figure 7.53: Screenshot from *Man For Himself* (2018)

Product design and colour can signify gender cues and activate gender-specific associations (e.g., Hess and Melnyk, 2016; Lieven et al., 2015; Van Tilburg et al., 2015). Other bloggers in my research who frequently promote skincare and makeup were also found to make similar judgements to Robin. Neil Thornton, who frequently remarks on his website on brands promoting progressive and inclusive attitudes to masculinities and is an avid proponent of destigmatising male mental health (discussed in Chapter Eight) writes in a review of a grooming travel kit by Bamford Grooming:

I hate to admit it, but I'm such a packaging lover. I'm not just about how good the contents inside are, I want what it comes in to look amazing too. Luckily, Bamford Grooming Department ticks all the boxes. The masculine, sporty dark housing of their skincare range look effortlessly cool on your bathroom shelf. It's a range you're proud to put on display over the more mass-produced commercial products covered in confusing, hybrid terminology (Thorton, 2015b).

Neil accompanies the post with flat lay images of the products, as shown in figure 7.54. Recalling Luke's approach, Neil remarks how the packaging and the products can be displayed on his bathroom shelf. The blogger commends the design and aesthetic of the products, but also remarks on the perceived masculine connotations they have based on their design. As design and packaging are becoming increasingly important, partaking in the visual aesthetic communication of social media, gender cues are also being constructed and perpetuated. Granted, the skincare market primarily becomes dichotomised in gender categories through marketing and promotional efforts market (Scanlon, 2000). Nonetheless, as Petersson McIntyre (2013) argues, brands also actively produce gender by adopting elements such as colour and design that culturally, however arbitrarily, signify a belonging to the male domain or female domain (Van Leeuwen, 2005). Moreover, Van Tilburg et al. (2015) found that products coded as masculine by consumers primarily contained angular shapes and darker colours, largely affirming the blogger's statements and showcasing how digital masculinities contain a multitude of connotations and nuances.



Figure 7.54: Screenshot from *What Neil Did* (2020)

Similarly, Anson Law has confessed to paying 'a lot of attention to the design of all the products' that he uses, as 'the design is equally as important as the function' (Low, 2016). In reviewing the Body Groomer by Braun, the blogger writes, 'the new range from Braun has definitely achieved it with its

versatile function and the masculine aesthetic' (Low, 2016). The blogger does not define exactly what he deems as a masculine aesthetic, but, of course, accompanies the post with visuals pertaining to common aesthetic tropes, as shown in images 7.55 and 7.56, where Anson has created a selfie and a flat lay in a marble background⁴⁶. Petersson McIntyre (2018) argues that the design of consumer goods creates notions about masculinities as 'cultural gender norms are not only reflected but also constructed by objects' (p.338). Anson and the other bloggers in my study, whose work is inextricably tethered to consumer culture and visual culture, constantly create and negotiate meanings around digital masculinities through their practice. Those often include ambivalences; the bloggers present the use of skincare and makeup as a practice that should be considered normalised while often remarking on skincare brands that exhort an inclusive image promoting progressive versions of masculinities. Concomitantly, the bloggers stylise skincare products, usually placing them in a domestic setting, thus making connections between domesticity and masculinities, as discussed above, but also frequently remark on the perceived masculinity of the design. Nevertheless, coding a product as masculine does not take away from the Andersonian framework that is woven throughout the bloggers' narratives; rather, it showcases the ambivalences and nuances that exist as masculinity is, ultimately, a socially constructed category.



Left: Figure 7.55: Screenshot from *The Visionist* (2016); Right: Figure 7.56: Instagram screenshot of @thevisionist (2016)

Curating the mundane and Insta-worthy masculinities

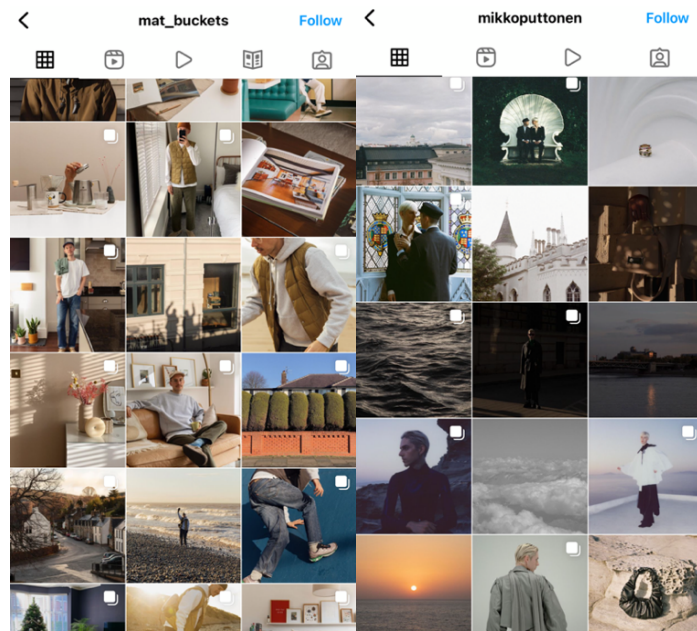
Visual aesthetic communication, as with life(style) blogging more broadly, is not limited to sponsored content or affiliations with brands. The bloggers stylise and share various quotidian instances, which

⁴⁶ Marble backgrounds and marble props were a visual trend during this time and persisted for a few years. Reports about marble as a visual trend were prevalent in 2017; indicative is the post from famous popular culture website Repeller titled 'Has anyone else noticed this ALL over Instagram?' referring to the prevalence of marble-like designs on Instagram (Young, 2011). Reports on this trend have continued well until 2021; indicative is the post by visual trend reports and graphic design e-shop Creative Market, titled 'Design trend alert: Marble everything' (Busche, 2021).

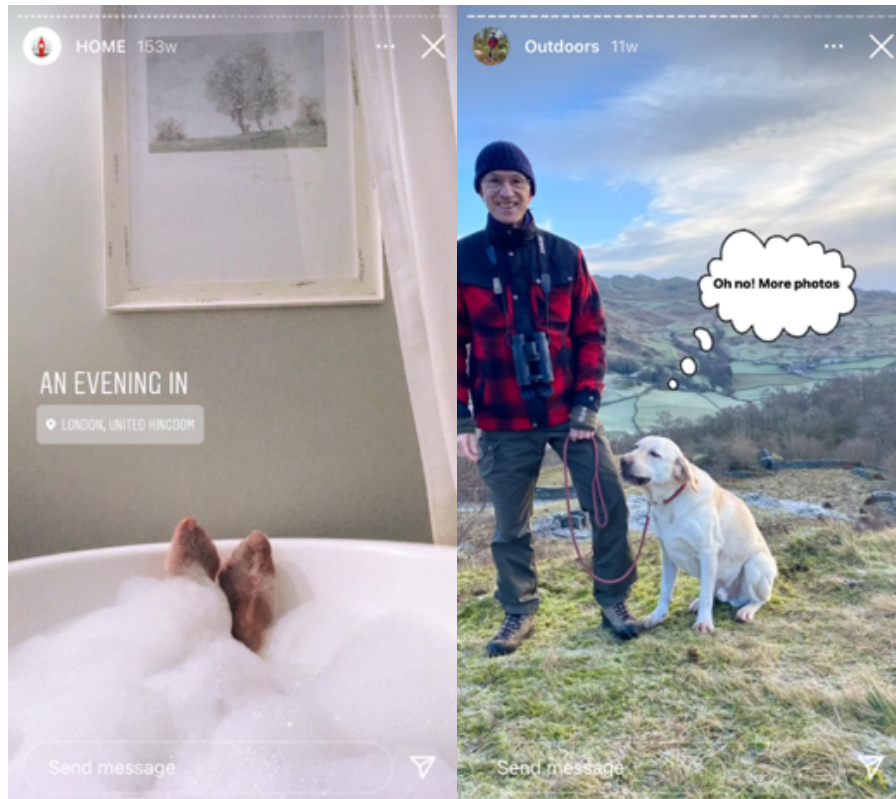
they post on their social media, namely on Instagram. As Manovich (2020, p.210) has noted, reflecting on visual aesthetic communication:

Does every photo showing a hand holding a pretty cappuccino cup promote it? Of course not. But does it contribute to establishing or maintaining the author’s personal “brand,” even if this author never sells or promotes anything? Of course, yes.

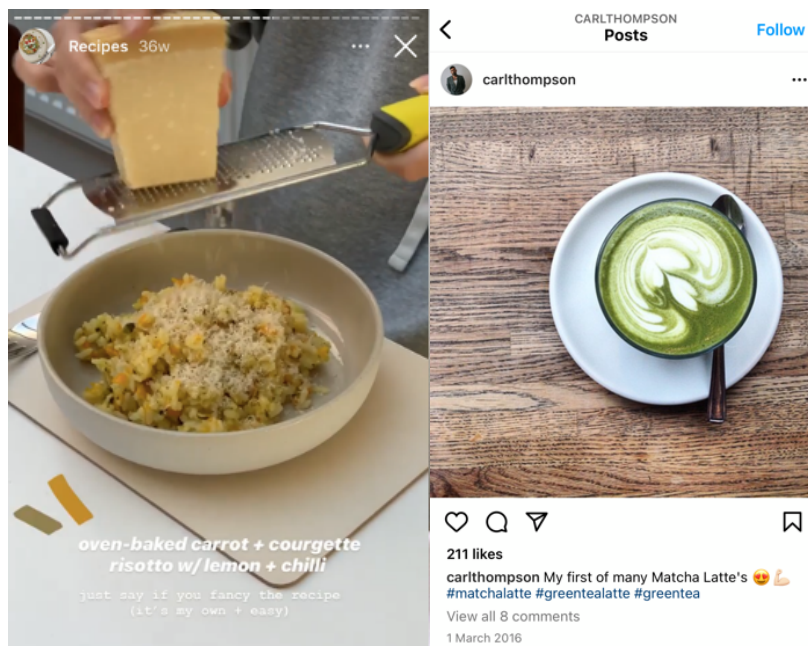
By sharing mundane instances, the bloggers give the audience glimpses of the backstage; their personal lives that play an active role in their strategic imaginary by communicating relatability and solidifying the bloggers’ self-brands (Abidin, 2016). As figures 7.57 and 7.58 (which feature images by Matthew Buckets and Miko Puttonen) exemplify, bloggers frequently share images on their Instagram feeds of unsponsored content such as interior spaces and urban scenery (e.g., Matthew) or images of landscapes and nature (e.g., Miko) that fit with and actively construct the bloggers’ visual aesthetics. Again, this is highly directed by imagined affordances. For instance, currently, Stories - and less so the main Instagram feed - serve as the main space to share mundane and quick snaps of daily life, as figures 7.59 - 7.62 show. Having a bath, hiking, cooking, going for a coffee and various other everyday instances become ideal moments for content creation.



Left: Figure 7.57 Instagram screenshot from @mat_buckets (2022). Right: Figure 7.58: Instagram screenshot from @mikkoputtonen (2022)



Left: Figure 7.59: Instagram screenshot from @cyrilibrahim (2019). Right: Figure 7.60: Instagram screenshot from @davidevans (2020)



Left: Figure 7.61: Instagram screenshot from @mat_buckets (2020). Right: Figure 7.62: Instagram screenshot from @carlthompson (2016)

Instagram promotes Stories as the main space for 'sharing content in the moment, as it happened' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.59). Thus, it can be assumed that due to the imagined affordances of life(style)

blogging, this space is the main site of candid or staged-as-candid photos of the minutiae and quotidian. Nonetheless, sharing the quotidian should not be thought of as something explicitly tied with Stories, but should also be located within the genre where (as I discussed in the introduction) lifestyle, personal style blogging and their predecessor online diaries were primarily based on reflexive personal narratives. Thus, even though images were not the focal point as they are now due to technical constraints, those spaces still acted as realms of personal creativity where individuals discussed everyday life and mundane instances (Burgess, 2007). Still, bloggers in my study refer to their websites as visual diaries; indicatively Matthew Buckets, in his 'About' page on his website notes that he started his blog in 2008 with the intention of sharing inspiring images, but soon his blog 'grew, and is now more of a visual diary' (Buckets, 2022). However, even when bloggers do not explicitly refer to their practice as a visual diary, it can be said that they indeed create a visual diary, as weaving their narrative through images is an essential part of their blogging. Throughout the years the early webpages evolved into blogs and the everyday became established as a part of creativity and cultural production in the form of narrative digital storytelling (Burgess, 2007).

Even before the advent of platformization, Van Dijck (2008) noted that 'the tendency to fuse photography with daily experience and communication is part of a broader cultural transformation that involves individualization and intensification of experience' (p.62). However, platformization and imagined affordances have contributed so that:

Banal imaging marks the validity of the everyday through images, where images provide a means to journal one's experiences [...] turning these [experiences] into moments which can be shared and reflected upon' (Ibrahim, 2015, p.50).

As such, the technological abilities of smartphones and the imagined affordances that pertain to platforms' visual communication have played an essential role in shaping the sharing of the quotidian and expanding the photographable (Bourdieu, 1996 [1965]) or the Insta-worthy, as I discuss further below. This also further indicates how the neoliberal ideals of self-stylisation and self-management encroach on daily life (Duffy and Wissinger, 2017) and blur work with leisure, as the quotidian, in the case of the bloggers, becomes increasingly curated and regulated by imagined affordances.

Snapping and sharing daily instances on Instagram can also be attributed to the quest for algorithmic visibility. As the bloggers try to engage with the platform to potentially gain visibility rewards (Cotter, 2019) daily occurrences provide instances for quick and varied content creation, again pointing to

how neoliberal values, such as the 'datafication' of the bloggers' whole lives (Rocamora, 2022, p.2) permeate their practice. Nonetheless, it should not solely matter where the communication of the mundane is situated within Instagram (i.e., Stories, Reels or main feed) and how it is shared throughout their networked platforms. Zamora (2018) raises a broader issue by noting that as affordances urge users to share and stylise the mundane, they have also incited users into thinking about specific ways to capture society and culture (p.527). Consequently, Instagrammable aesthetics have also become a lens through which to appreciate everyday experience (Caldeira, et al., 2020, p.11); the bloggers' everyday lives become canvases for their aesthetic visual communication wherein sponsored messages can become embedded in their quotidian narratives (Leaver et al., 2020, p.107). For instance, the bloggers use their domestic spaces - such as bathrooms and bedrooms as both spaces of sharing the everyday (when they post images of relaxing baths or cooking) but also often use the same spaces to present products. This is largely a result of Instagram's imagined affordances that have promoted 'any moment' as 'worthy of capturing and sharing' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.43). Therefore, the quotidian becomes an element of the bloggers' visually narrativised self-brands, showcasing how social media, through their affordances, can transform the banal into highly stylised content for the networked public to consume (Ibrahim, 2018).

Caldeira frames this as the 'instagrammable staging of an aestheticized everyday life' (Caldeira, 2020, p.8), which, of course, does not belong solely to Instagram but the broader networked presence of the bloggers. As algorithms are ever-more enmeshed in cultural production (Gillespie, 2014, p.183–184), a visual hyper-representation 'converges towards the current trend of giving to everything a visual justification and representation' (Serafinelli, 2018, p.44); in other words, everything now has the potential to become 'Insta-worthy' (Leaver et al., 2020, p.2). The concept of the Insta-worthy can be linked to Bourdieu's (1996 [1965]) notion of the photographable, which refers to people and objects considered worthy of being photographed. The photographable is socioculturally specific and reflects aesthetic conventions wherein genres, poses and styles are favoured, but also acknowledges a degree of individual variation within specific conventions and tropes. According to Caldeira et al. (2021), the photographable is inescapably political as it carries a judgement of value 'deeming some people and some objects worthy of visibility and overlooking others' (p.1083).

The concept of the photographable is also crucial in highlighting the various shapes and forms that '(co-)constitute masculinity' (Christensen and Jensen 2014, p.85). Images and their connotations are 'never transparent windows on the world'; rather 'they interpret the word; they display it in very particular ways; they represent it' (Rose, 2016, p.2). Hence, the influencers' self-representations can

both advance the cultural meanings associated with masculinities and challenge the dominant modes of representation through media (Hall, 1991). Moreover, the imagery found on social media plays an important role in how the world is experienced while also actively shaping (visual) culture (Tiidenberg and Gomez Cruz, 2015, p.70) and expanding who is granted visibility and even how gender is being performed and normalised (Butler, 2006). The visual hyper-representation urged by the imagined affordances of social media and the algorithmic strategic imaginary has resulted in the expansion of what is being photographed and shared online, which also leads to the repertoires of masculinities (Anderson, 2017) being expanded.

In my study, through the bloggers' self-representations, I encountered images of masculinities that are usually excluded from mainstream fashion and lifestyle media and advertising. In my research there are bloggers who are older, disabled or plus-sized, and bloggers from racialised and discriminated-against groups in the UK - all of them actively weaving their narratives through those intersectional characteristics (for instance, figures 7.63 - 7.66 depict Efe, an older black male; David, an older male; Aftab, a British-Indian male; and Luke a blind, gay, plus-sized male). This points to how the neoliberal and algorithmically driven practice of life(style) blogging shapes and expands the Insta-worthy (Leaver et al., 2020), as through the varied self-representations of the bloggers, digital masculinities become varied and expanded.



Left: Figure 7.63: Instagram screenshot from @efe.efeturi (2021). Right: Figure 7.64: Instagram screenshot from @greyfoxstyle (2021)



Left: Figure 7.65: Instagram screenshot from *@freshandfearless* (2020). Right: Figure 7.66: Instagram screenshot from *@lukesamsowden* (2022)

For instance, Luke Sam Sowden, author of the eponymous blog, is a gay blogger identifying as a #blind and #PlusSized, #MaleBlogger. Those hashtags serve as the first point of introduction for Luke, as they are included in his Instagram profile bio. For Luke, those intersectional characteristics are completely woven into his narrative through images and discussions on his Instagram profile and blog. Through his blogging, Luke offers glimpses of his everyday life as a disabled individual which are merged with sponsored content. Luke’s blog has managed to retain blogging’s diary-keeping history; the blogger has a section titled ‘Confessions of a blind guy’ (figure 7.67); a title that alludes to the personal and confessional element of diaries. This is a space where Luke discusses issues specifically pertaining to his disability. Luke has also been vociferous about technology’s impact on his blogging. The blogger has discussed how, through the affordances of technology, he has been able to maintain a website, capture and edit images and use Instagram (Sowden, 2021a; Sowden, 2019; Sowden, 2017). Luke’s acknowledgement of and reliance on technology and social media affordances illustrate the fact that social media create new conditions and generates connections and practices never seen before (Serafinelli, 2018, p.13).

Moreover, through the most common hashtags that Luke uses on Instagram, namely #MensFashionBlogger, #FatDisabledWorthy, #PlusSizeMen, #MaleBodyPositivity, #GayBulge, #GentsBodyConfidence, #blind, #DisabledAndProud he constructs and asserts his intersectional masculinity. Physical disability and body-size form two distinct categories that have been discussed in relation to masculinities (Barry, 2019) and are addressed below, however, in the case of Luke they

can be addressed both separately and as interlinked intersectional categories of his narrative. As discussed in Chapter Six, hashtags play an active role in creating the bloggers' narratives (Yang, 2016) while often also serve as regulatory elements of how gender is performed. Here in the case of Luke, it can be said that through the use of hashtags, the blogger both constructs his body and also actively showcases how the gendered body is co-constituted through the affordances of social media. Luke seemingly answers Butler's (2006, p.12) question of how does 'the body *come into being* in and through the marks of gender?'. Not only that, Luke's narrative and digital self-representations perfectly illustrate how intersectionality, gender and the body can become enmeshed with digital communication and the regulatory forces of affordances.

However, hashtags are not only important for a personal narrative, in this case, Luke's narrative, but they also serve to articulate social identities by creating ad hoc publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015). Thus, Luke, by using hashtags such as these, asserts his masculinity, both personally and through a networked and hyperlinked manner. Moreover, an interesting point is the use of the word 'worthy' in Luke's hashtag. For instance, the hashtag, #FatDisabledWorthy, not only brings two intersectional categories together but can also be linked to the notion of algorithmic and, by extension, social visibility, as the blogger directly links worthiness to the under-represented categories of #Fat and #Disabled men. Even though Luke does not specifically include the word visibility or openly discuss it, the affordance of the hashtag as an element that provides annotative and searchable functions by default implies visibility. Consequently, through his networked self-representations, Luke makes visible and worthy of visibility masculinities that have been socioculturally under-represented and stigmatised, or marginalised according to HMT.

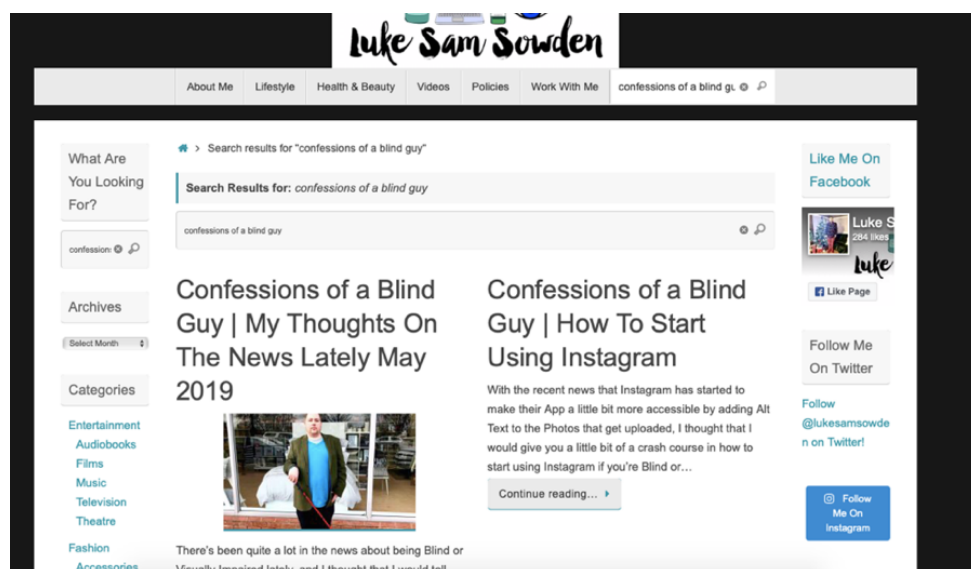


Figure 7.67: Screenshot from *Luke Sam Sowden* (2022)

Focusing on disability, Thompson (2000), studying how disabled artists, through their self-representations, weave self-narratives of disability, argues that those autobiographical narratives are not only personal but form part of the broader social representations of disability. This is in line with scholarship that views disability(ies) as socially constructed, thus, not essentially disempowering (Barry, 2019). Circling back to Thompson's (2000, p.335) artists since disability is culturally fabricated the artists, through their narrativised self-representations, critique the mainstream politics of appearance that overwhelmingly include normative and able-bodied visual representations. Thompson refers specifically to artists and art performances. However, bloggers such as Luke, by creating and sharing their intersectional digital masculinities, also weave personal narratives of disability that become linked to broader disability narratives through affordances and the afforded visibility of social media use.

One way this happens is through hashtags, as discussed above, where Luke's disability narrative becomes both personal and social. Consequently, Luke constructs his intersectional masculinity as a gay, disabled, plus-sized male blogger, expanding 'the cultural repertoire of stories' of disabilities and impairment (Smith and Sparkes, 2008, p.233) while also explicitly claiming visibility and worthiness, or in his words, claiming the digital space of #FatDisabledWorthy.

Disability and body size can be thought as categories that can be approached both separately and as intersecting – the latter is evident in Luke's case. Barry (2019) has expertly brought those categories together in light of masculinities. He argues that one aspect that the categories of fat and disability can be brought together is as embodiments which are constructed as non-normative. Barry recognises the 'tensions of connecting fat and disabled embodiments due to the differences between these experiences' (p.283), however, it is worth drawing here from Barry's arguments as Luke frames his narrative under both of those categories and, as such, merges them. Importantly, Barry focuses on the notion of fabulousness. Fabulousness in this context is approached as a political element that 'claims visibility through the dressed body' (p.282). In the case of Luke this visibility also becomes an Insta-worthy visibility merging with the platform affordances.

Barry's research showed how fat and disabled men use fashion to 'tell a different story', specifically one that 'defies the dominant discourses about fatness, disability and fashion (p.284). Luke showcases exactly that - his narrative is both disruptive in his performance of masculinity (Butler, 2006) but also shows how, apart from Insta-worthy, it also communicates a fabulous masculinity (Barry, 2019). Moreover, this can also be linked to IMT. According to Barry, 'men's fat and disabled

embodiments problematize hegemonic masculinity' (2019, p.283). Consequently, Luke's digital masculinity not only is empowering and pushes the mainstream boundaries but is also in direct contrast to the hegemonic context.

Through Luke it is evident how the context of fabulous masculinities and the Insta-worthy can bring along algorithmic – and sociocultural – visibility. As Gill (2009, p.139) observes, the contemporary visual economy is deeply ableist as well as ageist – the latter might not pertain specifically to Luke but in my study older influencers exist. Gill is focused on women's representations through the broader consumer culture found in advertising and mediated through various media such as TV and magazines. This is also iterated by Tiidenberg (2018b) who offers a more contemporary reading focusing on Instagram. Nevertheless, the same can be said for representations of men within advertising and the fashion industry. Non-normative representations, such as of disabled, diverse in body and older men, are predominantly excluded from fashion imagery, while the broader fashion industry is overwhelmingly limited in body shapes, ages and racial characteristics (Barry, 2014). Concomitantly, mainstream men's fashion and lifestyle magazines primarily depict and frame as hegemonic able, muscular and lean body types (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Of course, there are exceptions, and recent fashion imagery led primarily by inclusive and body-positivity bloggers and influencers (Caruso and Roberts, 2018; Cohen et al., 2019) portrays under-represented individuals and non-normative bodies (Limatius, 2019). Nonetheless, the presentation of men found in the fashion industry and advertising is still overwhelmingly a marketable normative one populated by 'able-bodied, cis, youthful and thin or athletic' representations (Bowstead and Barry, 2019, p.1).

Nonetheless, intersectional layers of masculinities, relating to aspects such as class, age, race and abilities as reflected by Luke, Efe, David and many other bloggers in my study, are claiming the space of the Insta-worthy through their blogging practice. The Insta-worthy then makes visible both culturally and visually all the shades of masculinities (Kenway and Hickey-Mood, 2009) that exist and are interconnected. This can be further linked to the concept of interference (Mellström, 2015). According to Christensen and Jensen (2019) interference is used to further the concepts of intersectionality and likens the various subjectivities, or shades of masculinities (Kenway and Hickey-Mood, 2009) to waves. This better reflects the contemporary digital space the bloggers navigate as the bloggers' masculinities, like the waves, are multifaceted and can have 'higher intensity' in the representation of some subjectivities and instances but can also 'weaken or cancel' others (Christensen and Jensen, 2019, p. 85). For instance, as Moser (2006) has noted in her analysis of

disability, gender and class those categories are not often represented in the same intensity, as is the case with Luke for example, with disability or gender sometimes becoming more relevant.

Focusing specifically on disability, Wedgwood and Wilson (2012) argue that there is an inherent conflict between disability and masculinity, especially hegemonic masculinity, as disability is correlated with being dependent and weak, whereas hegemonic masculinity is related to notions of power and autonomy. Similarly, Almila and Zeilig (2022) argue that old age indicates another aspect that 'challenges hegemonic notions of masculinity' (p.6), while Barry (2019) showed how fat and disable fabulous masculinities challenge and subvert hegemonic norms. As such, disability, body size, old age and any deviation from the perceived hegemonic norm, is by default in opposition to hegemonic masculine ideals, presenting 'other' ways of being or performing masculinity. Disabled, older, plus-sized and all the layers of those otherwise marginalised masculinities, through their physical impairments or other characteristics, are unable to 'live up to the ideals of hegemonic masculinity in terms of physical competence, strength and, potentially, appearance' (Rugoho, 2020, p.487). Consequently, these representations inherently challenge 'the conventions of idealised representations of masculinities' (Bowstead and Barry, 2019, p.1).

Bowstead and Barry (2019), focusing on the fashion sector, argue that representations of previously excluded types of masculinities are 'a radical departure from dominant regimes of meaning making' (p.5). The authors further link this to Instagram, arguing that through the content of influencers, representation has the potential to become more diverse as 'fat men, disabled men, trans men, and old men are claiming their right to be seen, to be desired and to be in style' (p.5). These inclusive representations from influencers, created purposefully or not, can be thought of as strategies of resistance (Bowstead and Barry, 2019, p.5) and thus serve to expand the repertoires of digital masculinities. Even though any non-normative masculinities do not automatically connote a relation to the Andersonian framework, Barrett (2014) argues that it is worth exploring whether those masculinities are invested or not in the tropes of hegemonic masculinity (p.52). In my research, these representations exist in the bloggers' narratives which demonstrate ideals associated with IMT while actively resisting hegemonic iterations, consequently often merging IMT with intersectionality and expanding the repertoires of digital masculinities.

The Insta-worthy does not solely pertain to the self-representations of marginalised- and intersectional - masculinities, such as disabled, fat and older men, but can also include other instances where previously under-represented aspects of masculinities become visible and stylised. This

becomes depicted by Rikesh Chauchan, a musician and influencer who presents as a modern gentleman. Rikesh, as discussed in Chapter Six, is an ambassador of CALM and a vociferous proponent of the destigmatisation of mental health for men. Rikesh openly discusses his struggles with mental health and depression (something that I elaborate on in Chapter Eight), but these discussions are highly stylised and woven into his visual aesthetic communication. Thus, Rikesh actively draws from and stylises highly personal instances that becomes embedded into his narratives. Rikesh has recently become a father, something that the blogger also weaves into his narrative by promoting products relating to babies and styling and promoting aspects of his fatherhood. As figure 7.68 depicts, Rikesh's Instagram profile follows a stylised curated direction where images of sponsored and non-sponsored everyday content are intercepted with carousels and Reels, probably in his quest for algorithmic visibility. Consequently, Rikesh's narrative, which ultimately is an 'Instagrammable' one, interspersed with modern gentleman ideals, his mental health struggles and now his recent fatherhood journey.

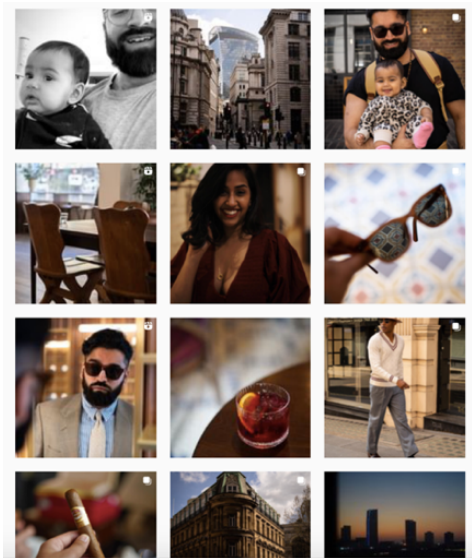


Figure 7.68: Instagram screenshot from *@rkzuk* (2022)

Through Rikesh, fatherhood becomes represented via Insta-worthy and commodified, albeit algorithmically regulated, moments. This is exemplified in figure 7.69, containing a Reel where Rikesh promotes a baby wrap sling from the brand Free Rider. The adoption of Reels by Rikesh, showcases that as an influencer he possibly tries to maximise algorithmic visibility by focusing on Reels and video content. The Reel has the caption 'business as usual' which relates to the figure of the modern gentleman and points to a redefined creative entrepreneurial masculinity, as discussed in Chapter Six, which Rikesh further layers by braiding in his new narrative of fatherhood. Through this Reel, Rikesh does not solely promote the baby wrap sling, but also his own visual aesthetic, digital masculinity and fatherhood narrative. The baby sling is indicated as the sponsored content and Rikesh

features it extensively within this 60-second video, but he places it within a broader context; the video depicts him on a day out, styling himself and choosing his accessories, walking around and snapping photos and having a coffee, yet again blurring work/leisure. This exemplifies how visual aesthetic communication becomes incorporated and an integral part of his practice. The blogger has also coined and uses the hashtag #mensweardad, which accompanies various Reels and posts - not always and necessarily relating to promotion of products for babies or content including his child, who has been featured in his posts since birth. This shows how fatherhood, and Rikesh's new status as a dad, is being incorporated within this narrative, which now often becomes a narrative of fatherhood, but still is linked explicitly to his life(style) activities and menswear and style.

Tiidenberg (2019, p.87) argues that even if not created purposely with political aims, self-representations claim the symbolic privilege of defining who is worthy of being seen online. Through the photographic conventions and aesthetic values that Instagram has helped shape, 'what remains unseen' (Caldeira et al., 2020, p.1073) becomes limited. His new status as a father permeates Rikesh's narrative; a narrative which aligns with the Andersonian context but which also connotes a version of a caring masculinity (Elliott, 2016). Elliott conceptualised caring masculinity, whose features are 'their rejection of domination and their integration of values of care, such as positive emotion, interdependence, and relationality, into masculine identities' (p.241). Elliott argues that caring masculinity is constructed through actual practices of care work. The author brings as examples of care work men's involvement in domestic and childcare work, while he frames as paramount that caring masculinities embrace and value emotions (p.253) while they reject traditional masculine values (p.254). Elliott (2016) concludes that caring masculinities actively refute hegemonic masculinity as characteristics of care, such as the ones mentioned above, are by default antithetical to hegemonic values (p.255). Even though the practice-based element of caring masculinities is difficult to assess in the case of Rikesh and the bloggers more generally, the way Rikesh frames and communicates fatherhood still partly aligns with Elliott's framework. Recent studies have shown how 'digitised constructions of fatherhood' primarily through dad bloggers are 'reconstructing masculinity as caring' (Scheibling, 2018, p.10).

Rikesh's narrative of fatherhood, placed along all the other shades of his masculinity (Kenway and Hickey-Mood, 2009), e.g., his self-representations as a modern gentleman, his ethnicity, his age, his mental health difficulties and so on, again showcase the various dynamic categories that constitute identity and gender (Pringle, 2008) and are constituted in relation to one another. More specifically, fatherhood as 'contextual, gendered, ethnic, and class-based construct is not immune to hegemonic,

dominant societal images of masculinity’ (Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021, p.4). Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky (2021) in their study of fatherhood and intersectionality argue that bringing an intersectional lens in analysing fatherhood, thus talking about multiple fatherhoods better reflects the ‘multiplicity of masculinity, the hybridity of other identities’ (p.5). Hence, representations of fatherhood through dad blogs or influencers like Rikesh can ‘interrupt’ hegemonic or orthodox discourses of masculinities (Friedman, 2016) and ‘challenge common representations of fatherhood in the margins as insufficient and lacking’ (Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky, 2021, p.341). The margins that Strier and Perez-Vaisvidovsky (2021) talk about can include the exclusion and discrimination of minority ethnic, national, or other backgrounds, positions in the workforce, and conflicting gender norms and ideals (p. 342). Thus, this not only showcases how intersectionality, and interference, ‘shape, form, and (co-) constitute masculinity’ (Christensen and Jensen 2014, p.85) but also helps to challenge stereotypical representations of fatherhood. (Hall, 1991)

Consequently, through Rikesh’s blogging, fatherhood, albeit a neoliberal commodified one, becomes visually curated and aesthetically stylised. Concomitantly, Rikesh’s self-representation also serves to frame fatherhood as a masculinity of care and to disassociate hegemonic meanings, thus again showcasing how the bloggers expand the repertoires of masculinities.

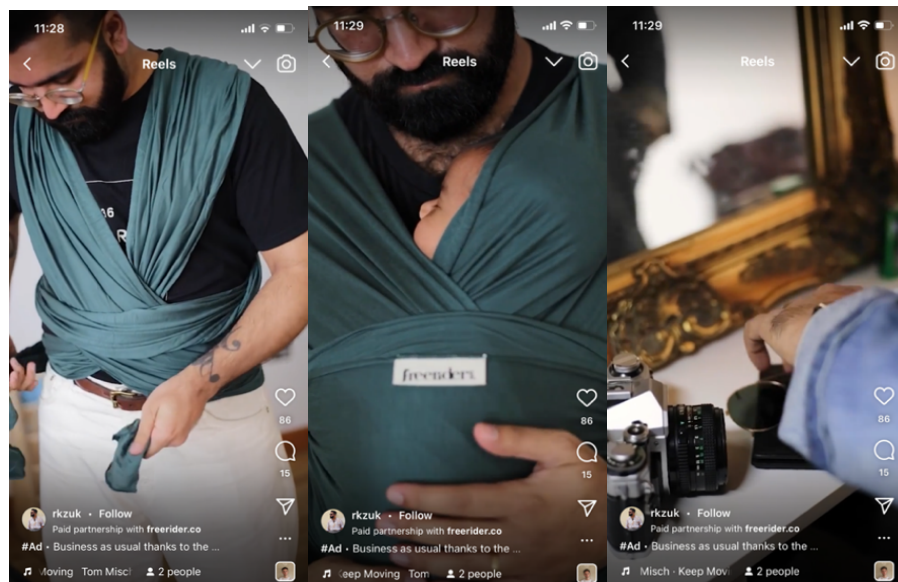




Figure 7.69: Instagram screenshots from the reel from @rkzuk (2022)

As an ambassador of CALM, Rikesh not only discusses his mental health struggles publicly but also actively weaves them into his narrative, as I discuss in detail in Chapter Eight. Since becoming a father, Rikesh’s conversations around mental health are often enmeshed with fatherhood. For instance, in the carousel post depicted in figure 7.70, Rikesh seamlessly blends fashion, fatherhood and mental health by visually styling and merging those concepts. The post is geotagged in Florence and is possibly uploaded or taken during Pitti Uomo, which Rikesh frequently attends. The first image of the carousel is a post showcasing Rikesh’s outfit, which is a suit - a stylistic choice favoured by modern gentlemen - that is also fitting apparel for the Pitti Uomo menswear event. The carousel's second, third, and fourth images include an edited iteration of the same outfit but layered with text. This is probably due to the imagined affordances of Instagram, where such long captions are not available, leading users to find other creative ways to include long-form texts. Moreover, this showcases how the diary-like mode of communication that Rikesh creates for this post, presented through the text that contains his personal thoughts, is not necessarily tied to webpages but, due to the networked character of the genre, has spilt over to other communication channels - something I take up in Chapter Eight.

The text of the second image reads:

I’ve not really had much time to sit back and check with myself until quite recently. A lot of life-changing things happened around the same time, and since that point, I’ve tried to hit the ground running and haven’t stopped [...] trying to be the best father and husband; trying to work as hard as I can knowing that my success as a freelancer is dependent on the effort

I commit; trying to finish music I've been sitting on for months as well as launch a print store which I've been talking about for years; trying to build myself as a brand- whilst feeling horrible about my fluctuating weight [...] to check in with my mental well-being only to realise there's a lot of shit I probably need to delve into.

Here, Rikesh discusses his struggles with his freelance career, his various upcoming projects and fatherhood, which are nevertheless presented in a stylised manner consistent with his broader visual aesthetic. As Whitmer (2015) argues due to the self-reflexive nature of blogging, by writing about themselves, bloggers 'can engage with meanings of what it is to be a gendered subject' (p.6). Whitmer places this in contexts where individuals or their experiences have been marginalised or under-represented, arguing that through blogging those individuals 'can speak out and reach out to others, gaining visibility' (Whitmer, 2015, p.6). However, both fatherhood and mental health in relation to masculinities have been marginal subjects in public discourse. The post is accompanied by the hashtags #anxiety, #mentalhealth, #newdad, #depression, #mentalhealthawareness, and, the recently widely used from the blogger #mensweardad. The hashtags are not hidden, as is common for influencers, which might imply their importance in terms of conveying meaning, apart from being annotative structural elements. Hashtags are means of pursuing algorithmic visibility (Sauter and Bruns, 2015, p.56); however, by placing those hashtags together and not hiding them, Rikesh also creates meaning by bringing together all those intersectional subjects, styling them and making them part of the algorithmic strategic imaginary. Hashtags are 'implicated in algorithmic processes of categorising and visualising information and determining access to such knowledge' (Sauter and Bruns, 2015, p.57). Even though the bloggers in my study do not use hashtags in the intentional sense of hashtag activism (Highfield, 2016; Yang, 2016) but use them in a quest for algorithm visibility, their use can still advance and expand the meanings tied to digital masculinities.

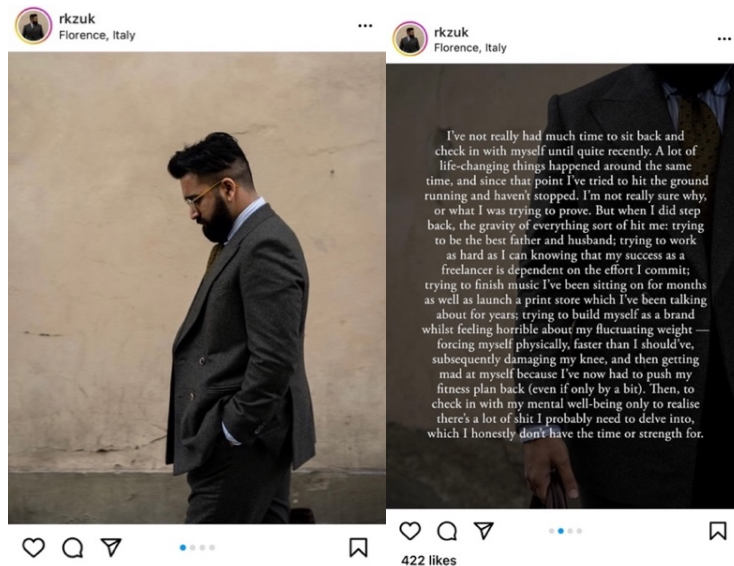


Figure 7.70: Instagram screenshot from the account @rkzuk (2022)

Marginalised groups and lesser-seen aspects of masculinities have historically been made invisible and eliminated from consumer culture and advertising (Kearney et al., 2019, p.548). Notwithstanding, on social media, self-representations ‘can act as an affirmation of visibility’ (Caldeira et al., 2020, p.3). Through their self-representations of masculinities, the bloggers are ‘claiming control over the strategies of representation’ (Caldeira et al., 2021, p.1077) and ‘stare back’ (Thomson, 2000), weaving their intersectional masculinities into their narratives. Tiidenberg (2018a, p.87) argues that through social media decisions on ‘who has the right to be seen’ rest within individual users. This might not always be the case due to algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018); however, this notion of representation resting at the hand of the individual, becomes important for the masculinities that are often marginalised or invisible within the advertising and the fashion industry. Through the Insta-worthy, algorithmic and sociocultural visibility is demanded by the bloggers for usually unseen aspects of masculinities and intersections, such as disability, ageing, fatherhood and mental health. Yet even though the bloggers’ diverse self-representations have the potential to become visible among an enormous, networked public as the bloggers bypass the gatekeepers of traditional media (Tiidenberg, 2018a, p.33–34), self-representations are still subject to algorithmic regulations and processes of mediation (Thumin, 2012). Algorithms have been found to reproduce dominant stereotypes (Postigo, 2016) while oppressing marginalised groups (Noble, 2018), and shadowbanning is a precarious algorithmic aspect of Instagram, as discussed in Chapter Six. However, in the specific context of life(style) blogging, especially on Instagram, visual aesthetic communication has the potential to enhance algorithmic visibility and establish ‘what is worthy of being photographed’ (Caldeira et al., 2021, p.1083) in this particular sociocultural instance.

Concluding thoughts

The bloggers operate on highly visual media that often serve to construct their visual diaries. Moreover, as content creators, what the bloggers primarily sell or promote is their self-brands as constructed through the images and videos they share - or in other words, their visual aesthetic communication. Those narrativised and branded visualisations that make up the bloggers' self-representations exist within and are created through the imagined affordances that pertain to their practice. Evidently, the bloggers often adhere to common visual tropes that arise and exist not only within influencer culture but within social media visual communication more broadly. The imagined affordances and the pervasiveness of algorithms in 'the evolution of trends in the social visual culture' (Arielli, 2018, p.82) have resulted in, at least to some level, digital masculinities becoming standardised and replicable while also actively point to how gender performativity can be linked to platform affordances. Nonetheless, as discussed in this chapter, repertoires of masculinities are still expanded. Overall, the notion of the visual aesthetic communication that has arisen can be located within the genre of life(style) blogging and spotted throughout my study. This is also a point of consolidation between individual practices, life(style) blogging as a genre and market/media remediations, as becomes evident through looking at the publication *Kinfolk* but also the various brands that bloggers promote.

As trends and visual clichés fluctuate, the focus should not be on the specific stylistic choices that the bloggers make at a particular moment in their practice, but rather on how within this context of visual aesthetics, digital masculinities become stylised, layered with meanings, and once again bound and guided by imagined affordances. This becomes evident, for instance, in the communication of skincare and makeup, which serves to expand the repertoires of masculinities, as the bloggers stylise and share products and instances that are inundated with feminised associations, while there exist ambivalences stemming from perceived un/masculine product designs serving to depict the highly constructed nature of masculinities and, in this instance, how notions are tied and expressed through product marketing that often genders commodities.

As imagined affordances play a crucial role in visual aesthetic communication, again this showcases how digital masculinities partly become co-constructed by the affordances and algorithms that pertain to social media and have slipped over to the bloggers' wider networked practice. As such, the digital networked masculinities are influenced by the algorithmic strategic imaginary as 'algorithmic selection shapes the construction of individuals' realities [...] and as a result affects culture, knowledge, norms, and values of societies' (Just and Latzer, 2017, p.228). Nonetheless, the algorithmic strategic imaginary - which is, after all, a neoliberal one - infiltrates moments of daily life

and often blurs work/leisure, something especially prevalent within life(style) blogging, as the genre pertains to the bloggers' whole lives. It becomes evident, then, how quotidian moments are not only being captured and inserted into the sphere of visual aesthetic communication but often provide ideal moments for content creation. Within this context of social media urging users to create and share everyday-life content the photographable (Bourdieu, 1996 [1965]) continues to expand and the notion of the Insta-worthy has arisen (Leaver et al., 2020). This can afford previously under-represented masculinities within the advertising and fashion spheres algorithmic and sociocultural visibility. Some bloggers, as they take charge of their self-representations, construct narratives that place in the forefront their intersectional characteristics. Digital masculinities, however, are largely controlled by algorithms that increasingly become key factors in determining experiences (Arielli, 2018, p.80). Thus, on the one hand the repertoires of masculinities are being algorithmically expanded, but on the other, algorithmic bias (Noble, 2018) and speculations about shadowbanning that might affect influencers' practices often work as points of contention, making the level of expanded individual representations and algorithmic (in)visibility hard to scope.

Chapter Eight. The ups and downs: digital masculinities and narratives of mental health

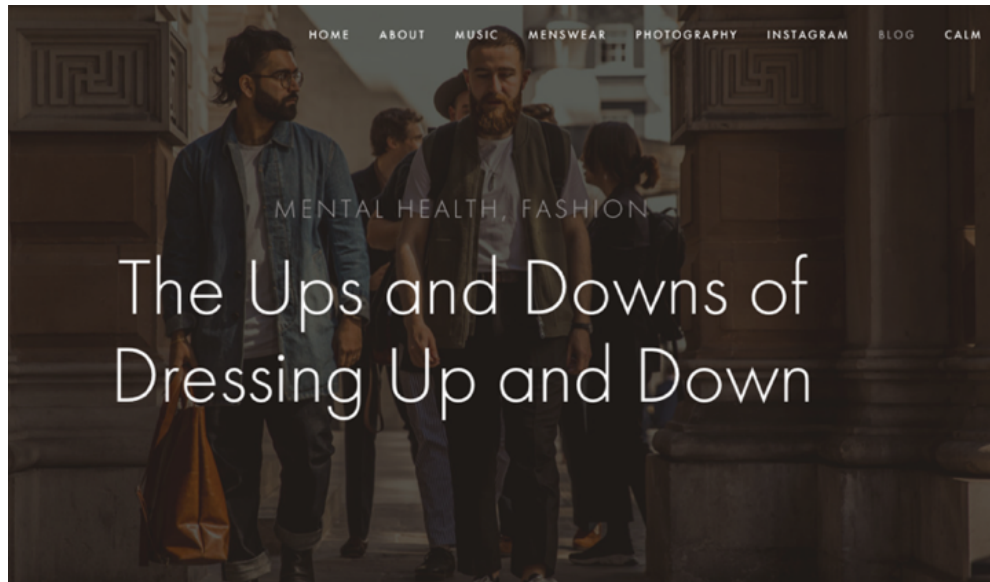


Figure 8.1: Screenshot from RKZUK (2019)

Earlier in January, CALM collaborated with Topman on The Common Room for LFWM's first foray into East London, taking over Labour & Wait and in turn giving the fashion industry a much-needed place of solace.

I've been a part of the fashion industry for around five years professionally. One of the things that initially pulled me into it was the demand of paying attention to detail and always having to look your best. When I dress well, I know I look good because I feel like I can take on the world without breaking a sweat. Subconsciously, I began to realise that it also worked as a coping mechanism on days when I was getting really bad. I delved into it a little further for an online interview, in which I mentioned my struggles with depression and how dressing up helped me, "I'd wake up early (mainly because it would be difficult to get out of bed) and took that extra time to think about what I was wearing and how it all worked together - from the glasses down to the shoes. I initially considered it merely a distraction tactic; something I could focus on. But I realised that dressing well gave me a little (and much needed) confidence boost. I'd walk around and I felt like I was doing something important...It all sounds quite narcissistic, but sometimes that's what's necessary for me to feel a little bit better about myself. And that's perfectly okay."

(Chauchan, 2019)

Individuals have used blogs and their predecessors - personal webpages and online diaries - to reflect on instances and aspects of their personal and professional lives and communicate their daily lives

(Siles, 2012). Because of the intimate and quotidian nature of some of the content, no matter if it is posted on a daily, monthly or even yearly basis, blogs have more broadly been linked to personal diaries or journals (Herring et al., 2005; Serfaty, 2004), while the bloggers' networked practice often resembles a visual diary as illustrated in Chapter Seven. Within this context, the bloggers often curate and stylise 'the highs and lows of everyday life' (Reader, 2020, p.549) and within that context often 'thematise their personal mental health struggles' (Koinig, 2022, p.2). Many of the bloggers in my study were found to not only openly discuss their mental health struggles and intimate feelings but incorporate their anxiety or depression within their narratives. The degree to which the bloggers broach issues relating to mental health varies. Many bloggers have produced a few posts, including posts on their websites or captions and mentions on their Instagram or other channels, that discuss mental health, while others bring up aspects relating to mental health frequently.

Opening up about mental health can be considered an aspect of emotional expression, as the bloggers discuss intimate subjects, interspersing their reflections with their feelings and in-depth thoughts. Public conversations such as these, contrast hegemonic masculinity explicitly, as is discussed in this chapter, but also implicitly. As men are often 'expected to conform to normative, hegemonic or orthodox, expressions of masculinity by curtailing emotional expressions' (White, 2019, p.8), by discussing mental health and being open about their emotions, the bloggers' practice can be read through the context of IMT. Moreover, as de Boise and Hearn (2017) argue historically, in a US-UK context, there has been a diminished public discourse around mental health and masculinities. Hence, through those discussions, digital masculinities are also situated within the context of CPM.

However, it is not only digital masculinities and the meanings associated with those that are implicated in this case, but the manner in which affordances allow for a reflexive mode of communication. Again, imagined affordances become implicated in the way that mental health becomes stylised but also regulated, as ultimately the bloggers seek algorithmic visibility. The affordances of the communicational media the bloggers use and the reflexive manner that historically pertains to the genres of lifestyle and personal style blogging both warrant and constrain the representation of mental health. Nevertheless, as Ridgway (2001, p.3360) argues, individuals dealing with mental health issues can benefit from 'questioning and reformulating' their life stories, something that becomes possible through blogging as it offers a reflexive mode of narrative construction, through which, as discussed below, individuals 'can renew a sense of meaning and possibility' (Ridgway, 2001, p.336).

Blogging to tell my story: mental health and the imagined affordances of blogging

As I have discussed so far, in my research blogging merges and muddles the personal with the professional and the commercial. Jake Spencer, the author of *The Debonair* and a blogger who presents himself as a modern gentleman, launched his blog in 2014 and writes that one of the main reasons he started blogging was because he wanted a space to discuss his views on menswear and suits (Spencer, n.d). Nonetheless, Jake argues that apart from merely serving as a place to address his interest in fashion, the practice of blogging also serves another purpose, which is to tell a story. Jake writes:

Thousands of people benefit personally, professionally and financially by having a blog, it's not just for business, plenty of people simply use a blog or website to maintain a personal journal or tell a story (Spencer, n.d).

From the content that Jake has shared over the years it is evident that he utilises this space to discuss topics that interest him in relation to menswear and men's fashion, form collaborations, host sponsorships and delve into personal matters. This illustrates how blogging can have a multipurpose aspect and partly act as a digital multidiary for some authors - and I argue that it is a multidiary as it involves visual, textual and hypertextual aspects, e.g., hashtags, video and audio, to construct a personal narrative. As Rettberg argues, blogs are 'descendants of the diaries and autobiographies of past centuries' (2014, p.7). As such, blogging can open new possibilities by imbuing technological elements, such as imagined affordances, to self-diarisation, while infixing a networked aspect and merging the autobiographical with self-branding and self-commodification.

Traditional journaling takes many forms, such as recording specific aspects of everyday life or writing down one's thoughts (Dibdin, 2022). Much like traditional journaling, which has a 'well-established therapeutic role' (Baker et al., 2008, p.81), blogging can also contain some of the beneficial properties associated with journaling. Journals can be used as coping tools, allowing individuals to reflect or even lessen emotional distress, as authors can use this space to vent or process painful experiences and emotions (Baker et al., 2008). As bloggers often use their online platforms to vent or reflexively record aspects of their lives and discuss mental health difficulties, blogging can act as a form of digital journaling, providing a medium for individuals to engage in 'cathartic venting and emotional expression' (Baker et al., 2008, p.81). This notion of catharsis through blogging has also been discussed by Nardi et al. (2004), who argue that the format of blogging is both an outlet and a stimulus for processing everyday life and personal issues, with blogs often serving as 'a relief valve' (p.44). This

is epitomised by Mike Douglas. Mike is a lifestyle and mental health blogger and podcaster whose blog, called Open Journal, indicates from its title a connection to journals, at least in the manner Mike perceives them. Mike uses his blog to write long-form personal diary-like posts and seeks to educate his audience about mental health. Mike conceptualises his blog as both a pedagogic space and as a place that helps him cope with his personal struggles, as is noted in the blog's description:

The Open Journal Blogcast, formally Mike's Open Journal hosts a range of mental health and wellbeing content in blog and podcast format. Blog posts are written with personal insights and based on Mike's lived experience of mental health illness (Douglas, n.d).

Mike blogs about his everyday struggles with depression and anxiety and talks about his medication journey. Mental health content is interspersed with content on various other subjects such as menswear and various other products and experiences such as holidays and outings and various other aspects of Mike's personal and professional life. Mike suffers from depression, and as he has stated throughout his posts, his blog often offers him an outlet. In a post specifically discussing the reasons he started blogging, Mike says that in the past, he felt unable to disclose his mental health struggles to his friends and family, so he decided to start a blog; in Mike's own words 'it is because of this inability to talk to others that I started writing my own blog' (Douglas, 2020).

According to Thompson (2008), individuals have kept written diaries to gain self-clarity or to write in words what they cannot say out loud. This becomes partly evident for Mike, who admits that he did not feel comfortable discussing his personal struggles with his friends and family; thus, he opted for a blog that would act as a safe space and digital multidiary. As such, blogging and podcasting provided Mike with a space that he perceived as therapeutic, as he felt able to open up and disclose his struggles and distress. According to Sundar et al. (2007), blogging can be particularly important for individuals dealing with mental health struggles. Due to the public and online nature of blogging it allows for a connection to a larger community of individuals who share similar interests or deal with similar issues. Simultaneously, writing about one's experiences can provide 'self-understanding' (Siles, 2012, p.413). Thus, Mike, by reflecting on and discussing his mental health, at least partly, has created a narrative of mental health in a space that for him is perceived as providing a cathartic mode of communication. However, one of the main differences between journaling and journaling-through-blogging is the nature of the audience (Nagel and Antony, 2009). In the first instance, the audience is a perceived one, as journals are not usually meant to be publicly shared. However, in the case of blogs, the audience is the networked public that forms a 'real and imagined, familiar and

unknown, on and offline, now and in the future' (Vivienne, 2016, p.12) audience. Thus, for blogging 'the perceived audience can become the actual audience', with many individuals who share their personal experiences publicly not only being aware of the potentially wide reach of their words but also actively intending this (Nagel, 2009, p.42), as seems to be the case for Mike and other bloggers discussed in this chapter.

Syed Abbas is another blogger whose struggles with mental health are deeply woven into his blogging. Syed started his blog in May 2008⁴⁷ and subsequently launched a podcast. Syed has been blogging for over a decade, focusing mainly on menswear and personal style but also including books and other lifestyle content while addressing various personal issues such as his chronic health conditions and mental health struggles. As is communicated through his blog, Syed's self-narrative is deeply entwined with the conditions of his mental health and more specifically with his personal style and his relationship with dress, as is discussed further below. Akin to Mike, Syed has stated that one of the reasons he started blogging was that he felt he had no one to talk to both about fashion, which is admittedly his passion, and about his personal struggles, as he admitted in our interview. Syed has also confessed that blogging has sometimes been the only way for him to communicate with the outside world. As the blogger suffers from depression and bouts of anxiety and agoraphobia, he is often confined to his house. In Syed's words 'I was actually house-bound. I wasn't going out and it [blogging] was a way for me to connect with the outside world'. Thus, for Syed blogging offered a personal reflexive space where he could open up about his personal difficulties and write about his love for fashion and personal style.

Blogging has afforded both Syed and Mike (and other bloggers discussed in this chapter) a technologically aided mode of cybersociality that, according to Turkle (1999), can offer new resolutions to problems that individuals might face and help people work through 'significant personal issues' (p.644). Turkle (1999), investigating early personal expressions on the internet, such as the personal home pages, argues that the cyberspace includes two elements: acting out, in which individuals deal with unresolved conflicts; and working through significant personal issues by utilising the affordances of the internet and of the personal home pages, and by extension blogs, to find solutions to problems. It is not the focus of my study to investigate to what extent bloggers find solutions to their issues and work through struggles; however, the imagined affordances that pertain

⁴⁷ Syed's blog is the oldest in my study. To the best of my knowledge, it is also one of the oldest style blogs by a male author in the UK.

to blogging and structure digital masculinities extend to the communication of mental health and, by extension, illustrate correlations of mental health and digital masculinities.

Turkle's reading of cybersociality is advanced by Alaimo and Kallinikos' (2017) notion of a computed, quantitatively defined sociality, whereby on social media 'user interaction, user engagement and community building are defined and shaped by the measures produced by algorithms and affordances' (p.177), illustrating the multifaceted aspect of blogging as a multidial practice and nuancing how they fit into the bloggers' broader presence. For instance, the bloggers still place emphasis on visual aesthetic communication when discussing mental health, and quantifiable metrics still matter. This constitutes discussions on mental health largely inscribed with neoliberal aspects, such as self-regulation and self-management, and with ad-hoc publics created with hashtags (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), as discussed further below. This mode of digital sociality that the authors allude to has evolved and becomes engrained with conversations about mental health; for instance, this is exemplified by how they increasingly take place on YouTube⁴⁸ (Berryman and Kavka, 2017) and Instagram (Koinig, 2022). Through the networked presence of the bloggers, the narrativisation of mental health is not solely tied to the one medium. Much like written accounts on blogs, content from other social media, such as videos through Reels, audio through podcasts and of course imagery, holistically serve as a 'a diary, an autobiography, and a vehicle of communication' (Raun, 2012, p.167) existing through an ecology of social media that promotes the narrativisation and broadcasting of 'all aspects of one's day-to-day (emotional) life' (Berryman and Kavka, 2017, p.88) and infusing networked digital masculinities with new meanings and layers; hence, once again expanding the repertoires of masculinities (Anderson, 2017) and showcasing how different subjectivities such as gender, able-bodiedness, disability and mental health intersectionality 'shape, form, and (co-)constitute masculinity' (Christensen and Jensen 2014, p.85).

Nevertheless, online spaces, especially Instagram, have been found to affect mental health negatively. Instagram has been related to issues with lowering self-esteem (Martinez-Pecino and Garcia Gavilan, 2019; Staniewski and Awruk, 2022), negative body image (Ridgway and Clayton, 2016)

⁴⁸ YouTube hosts a plethora of content by vloggers relating to mental health. The platform hosts specific genres on mental health, such as the so-called 'crying vlogs' and 'anxiety vlogs' (Berryman and Kavka, 2017). 'Crying vlogs' refers to videos whose content involves the 'spontaneous and overly tearful outpourings of emotion' and 'anxiety vlogs' are more pedagogical and involve 'personal accounts of the subject's struggle with social anxiety', discussing ways of coping (Berryman and Kavka, 2017, p.87).

and influencer cyberbullying (Abidin, 2019)⁴⁹. Nonetheless, social media offer instances where their use can be perceived as personally beneficial. Indicative is the case of Harry, author of the blog Harry Has, who in a diary-like long-form post discusses his mental health state and depression during a difficult time of his life, focusing on how he coped. Harry writes:

About three years ago, I was living and working in Bristol when I was made redundant from the job I thought I would stay in for the rest of my life. I was miserable there, but it was an income with a career path to making a healthy living for myself [...] I worked really hard and I was completely committed to the job, but I was miserable. Because I was so unhappy [...] I got myself in to an absolute mess and I was depressed...I used my Instagram account to apply for roles [...]I was completely lost and didn't know where to go in life. Instagram was the one thing that gave me something to focus on, when I was out of work and probably kept me sane (Young, 2018).

Harry argues that his involvement with blogging partly helped him to cope with depression. The blogger contends that focusing on Instagram and learning how to blog, edit, communicate and monetise his practice kept him busy and provided a purpose:

Now because of the platform [Instagram] I earn money from it. Have a job from it and have found something I am so passionate about. I have learnt how to use a camera, edit photos, use the Adobe Creative Suite, communicate with brands, build websites as well as other skills in various areas associated with marketing. Since learning more about marketing, I have become completely obsessed with it and I absolutely love it [...] All of these skills I learnt because of Instagram (Young, 2018).

Consequently, Harry's involvement with blogging through Instagram, and through his website (as Harry has a multiplatform presence) - or in other words his entrepreneurial activities relating to creativity and blogging - have helped him 'renew a sense of meaning and possibility' by reinventing his narrative (Ridgway, 2001, p.336). This new focus evidently alleviated Harry's sense of despair, as learning new skills and finding a new entrepreneurial purpose are framed as significant in overcoming this difficult time. Therefore, Harry's instance indicates another aspect where blogging can be

⁴⁹ In response to the negative effects of social media on mental health, the concept of 'digital detox' arose which acknowledges the need for individuals to take breaks from social media and resist pressures that might be imposed onto them by social media use (Syvertsen, 2020).

conceived as a personally beneficial practice. In Harry's case, it is the affordances themselves that allowed this mode of creative entrepreneurship that the blogger formulates as beneficial. Entrepreneurship has already been discussed in relation to potential beneficial aspects. Taylor (2015), for instance, argues that self-enterprising individuals can carry out 'an almost therapeutic, personal creative project' (p.182). Framing entrepreneurship as therapeutic is in line with the neoliberal individualised framework of self-management and self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a), where individuals are tasked with taking charge of their well-being (Illouz, 2008). Consequently, entrepreneurship can be further implicated with digital masculinities. In the creative context of blogging, entrepreneurship moves away from hegemonic associations of power-hungry corporate masculinities (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) and becomes related with masculinities under the Andersonian context, with mental health being openly discussed.

It is apparent, then, how digital spaces can offer opportunities for the communication of digital masculinities that actively bring forth discussions on mental health, helping to reduce the associated stigma (Koinig, 2022). As is evident from Mike's, Syed's and Harry's cases, digital creativity, either through communicating or through an entrepreneurial process of discovery, becomes merged with narratives of mental health, where blogs and social media are simultaneously 'creative, expressive' modes of communication while 'holding potentially therapeutic' elements (Tan, 2008, p.144). Granted social media might entail various negative aspects, however, the various narrative expressions that blogging allows, as Nardi et al. (2004) have argued, that are skewed towards sharing personal histories and details (or in other words the imagined affordances of life(style) blogging) sway individuals into using online spaces to tell stories of their lives that have the potential to - at least to some degree - function as an act of 'catharsis' (p.44) and expand the repertoires of digital masculinities.

Lads, we need to talk: digital masculinities and mental health

Serfaty (2004) argues that observing and writing down one's 'innermost feelings on the internet' can result in 'increasing vulnerability' and give existence to 'an interiority that might otherwise be left untapped' (p.125). In my study this notion of showcasing vulnerability in this manner becomes implicated with digital masculinities and serves to contrast hegemonic and orthodox frameworks. By weaving narratives of mental health, the bloggers explicitly tie mental health to masculinities, publicly showcasing vulnerability; something that further grounds digital masculinities in the Andersonian context. Indicative is a post by Sam Squire, author of the blog I Am Sam Squire, titled 'Lads, We Need to Talk'. In this post Sam invites men to openly talk, writing:

Lads, we need to talk... when it comes to talking about how we feel, we're pretty crap... However, talking about things can make such a difference. Depression in men has been a hot topic lately and it's so good to see it being talked about (Squire, 2017).

Sam's post directly refers to men, making an explicit link between talking about depression and a positive change in men's life. Sam's post is closely aligned with notions that Lomas develops under CPM theory, which refers specifically to masculinities in relation to health and mental health. A key tenet is that men 'have the potential to find more constructive ways of doing masculinity' (Lomas, 2013, p.167). Lomas (2013) argues that hegemonic or orthodox ideals about masculinities can be detrimental to men's health, as traits associated with hegemonic masculinities, e.g., rationality, bravery, stoicism and hardness (White, 2019, p.7), have resulted in the stigmatisation of mental health struggles. Thus, men are reluctant to open up and seek professional help, as that would mean admission of vulnerability and portrayal of weakness. Consequently, Lomas (2013) argues that men often find it hard to talk about their mental health troubles, and health issues more generally, and to seek professional help.

Lomas' studies (2013; 2016) are based in a UK context and posit that a more positive version of masculinity can be personally enacted that will be conducive to mental health and well-being. By positive, Lomas refers to the acts that men can undertake to 'effect positive changes in their lives' (p.182), such as seeking professional help for health and mental health issues, meditating and opening up about their struggles, publicly or to friends and family. Although Lomas considers sociocultural issues surrounding masculinities and the context of hegemonic masculinities, which has been linked to the stigmatisation of mental health, the framing of CPM places the onus on the individual to enact a more positive masculinity. Even though not discussed by Lomas, CPM becomes firmly placed in a neoliberal context, where the individualised subject needs to take charge of his mental health and well-being with mental health becoming another area for self-management and ultimately self-improvement. Moreover, CPM, as many studies on masculinities (Christensen and Jensen, 2014) does not take an intersectional lens, as such it does not link other subjectivities such as race, age and class to a great extent to masculinities. Nevertheless, CPM emphasises positive modes of masculinities that ultimately depart from hegemonic and orthodox iterations.

Like Sam, Iwan Carrington, the author of the blog Mr Carrington and a blogger who presents himself as a modern gentleman, notes that it is essential for individuals to be open about their mental health experiences while people should also listen and look out for the well-being of others. In a post titled

'Marathon training & why I'm running for C.A.L.M' (Carrington, 2017), the blogger discusses his struggles with depression and anxiety and talks about how he decided to take up exercise in an attempt, amongst other things, to address his difficulties. This, of course, points to CPM, which stipulates addressing health issues and trying to create positive change. Moreover, this post connects to IMT, as it is framed through a context of empathy and mutual support. Iwan writes that he decided to partake in the marathon organised by CALM to address male suicide prevention. Iwan spends some time discussing the organisation and contends that 'more and more male bloggers [are] also talking about their own experiences which can be a huge comfort for those experiencing similar things'. The blogger then moves on to praise the male blogging community on social media for the support they provide to each other, noting 'personally I've found the male blogging community (and blogging community in general) on social media a hugely supportive bunch of kind people who can learn from each other's experiences'. The last remark indicates an aspect of digital spaces and the digital sociality within those (Alaimo and Kallinikos, 2017) where it is not uncommon for social media users to feel emotional support through online 'communities in which they can be heard' (Berryman and Kavka, 2018, p.96).

What is also evident in this post is the remediation of content, as Iwan points to media instances, such as Prince Harry's discussion about his mental health struggles (Rodriguez, 2017), where men's mental health is addressed. In the UK context, in the past few years attention to men and mental health has been raised, with famous sportsmen and male celebrities openly discussing their struggles⁵⁰ in popular media, and with brands also jumping in and creating discourses around mental health and progressive masculinities - for instance, LYNX's #BiggerIssues campaign in collaboration with CALM, discussed in Chapter Seven. Consequently, the public sharing of the bloggers' mental health states or struggles and their appeal for men to open up can be placed in line with the wider 'it's good to talk' (Illouz, 2008, p.20) context. Illouz argues that when individuals share significant personal issues privately or publicly, as Iwan, Mike and many others do through their blogging, they can make better sense of their experiences, while the act of sharing itself can provide guidance in uncertainty.

⁵⁰ Examples include singer Craig David partaking in an NHS mental health campaign launched in early 2022 (NHS England, 2022); former football star David Beckham, who has openly discussed his struggles with OCD or obsessive-compulsive disorder (Blackett, 2020); and Prince Harry, who has talked about dealing with grief (Rodriguez, 2017). Other examples include the Movember campaign for male suicide prevention (uk.movember.com), and CALM - Campaign Against Living Miserably (thecalmzone.net), which has organised many campaigns and collaborations with UK brands and popular UK media.

However, like CPM, Illouz's arguments are situated within the neoliberal context of individualised self-help and self-realisation through being open and proactively seeking professional help, which implies self-management. Evidently, the bloggers' digital masculinities even when placed in the context of mental health are still firmly situated within the neoliberal context of self-regulation and self-management. Nevertheless, the fact that Illouz's arguments are steeped in neoliberal ideals should not take away from the personal benefits that individuals might perceive themselves as gaining. Similarly, neither should it diminish the importance of the conversations that tie mental health to masculinities framed through empathy, openness and vulnerability, which serve to disrupt sociocultural ideas of hegemonic masculinities that formulate men as stoic (hooks, 2004; Gorski, 2010), and emotionally restrained (Coates, 2003; Reeser and Gottzén, 2018).

On a similar note to Sam and Iwan, Adam Walker writes in a post celebrating World Mental Health Day, titled '5 things to remember on #WorldMentalHealthDay':

World Mental Health Day is a chance for everyone to foster a conversation that promotes positive change, in both attitudes and support, for those who suffer from mental health issues as well as bring the issue to the forefront of society's mind [...] Your emotions, their emotions, anyone's emotions are completely valid and it is understanding and sharing them that allows us to support each other (Walker, 2017).

Adam might not be focused on men, but still, he places emphasis on positive change, analogous to CPM, and appeals for empathy and emotional openness. Apart from this post, Adam, who presents himself as a modern gentleman, has had various conversations in his blog about mental health, activism and feminism as discussed in Chapter Six. From the early days of his activity, the blogger has placed his blog in a context of support and empathy. As he writes in one of his earliest posts, titled 'Redefining masculinity: Men for feminism & HeforShe', 'although blogging is seen by many as an inflation of the writer's ego, sometimes it can help spread a positive message' (Walker, 2014). This is something that Adam is seemingly doing through discussions such as the one above, but also by considering, more broadly, how he reconfigures the figure of the modern gentleman. Adam's blogging, akin to other bloggers discussed in this chapter, ultimately serves to challenge the stereotype of the unemotional man framed by HMT (Galasinski, 2004). This perceived lack of men externalising their emotions has been discussed extensively by Galasinski, who, focusing on a UK context, argues that there are no inherent or essentialist qualities that make men less emotional, as gender is a social construct. Instead, Galasinski notes, men lack in disclosing or creating self-

representations that include their emotions or their views on mental health, due to sociocultural circumstances and the associated stigma.

Akin to Galasinski, Pease (2012) has argued that within studies of masculinities there is a tendency to assume that men subdue emotional expressions, with Connell (2000) even remarking about an emotional illiteracy of men. However, as Pease notes, the focus should be on articulations of masculinities through aspects such as vulnerability and through instances where depictions of emotions exist - such as the blogs in my study - instead of merely assuming an all-encompassing figure of an unemotional man. The bloggers in my study create spaces, such as the communities of male bloggers that Iwan mentions, and relate to ad-hoc publics, where displays of mental health struggles and emotional difficulties are becoming frequent and acceptable (de Boise, 2015). This further points to the concept of intersectionality and expands CPM as the bloggers in my study – and their publics it can be argued- present and bring together various aspects relating to class, age, race/ethnicity, disability and so forth. Therefore, the bloggers both instil layers and nuances to discussions on mental health while actively showcasing the intersecting patterns and potential subversion of structures of power, i.e., hegemonic structures, by being positioned and positioning themselves simultaneously (Christensen and Jensen, 2019) in multiple categories.

Moreover, this also aligns with Gough's (2018) findings; exploring digital masculinities in the US and UK, Gough concluded that men open up in spaces where they feel safe to do so, with the digital ecology providing various opportunities for that. Therefore, the bloggers actively participate in and co-create digital spaces where opportunities for self-expressions exist that might be otherwise hard to encounter in non-digital spaces (Hall et al., 2012); something that points to the implications of imagined affordances. Consequently, as Galasinski writes, 'there is no unemotional or emotional masculinity. If anything, there are locally negotiated masculine identities in which men construct themselves in a particular way' (2004, p.18). Therefore, the particular manners in which bloggers construct their self-representations act as the situated masculinities that Galasinski refers to, where masculinities are framed 'in terms of emotionality' (Galasinski, 2004, p.27), further tethering digital masculinities to the Andersonian context.

Boys get sad too: algorithmic narratives of depression

One aspect of mental health discussed by the bloggers that becomes explicitly linked to masculinities is depression, or (as many frame it) male depression. This was alluded to by Sam Squire above but is discussed in more detail by Ben Heath. Ben has been open about his struggles with depression while

creating a highly gendered narrative of depression. Indicatively, in a post titled 'Overcoming Depression', Ben writes:

I think I finally have found a way to talk about male depression and my own experience of it [...] Some days, however, are a hell of a lot worse than others. Depression is actually a subject that I have raised with close friends and so I am lucky in the respect that it is not so much of a taboo issue and I can actually talk frankly about feeling VERY down at times (Heath, 2017).

Ben presents himself as a modern gentleman, and (similarly to Rikesh Chauchan discussed in Chapter Seven) has recently become a father. Adhering to visual aesthetic communication, the blogger presents his narrative in a curated manner while including and styling aspects of his recent fatherhood, as depicted in figure 8.2. Thus, the gendered iteration of depression, or male depression, becomes interwoven with other aspects of Ben's life, such as fatherhood, whiteness, class, showcasing how intersectional layers co-exist and nuance the expanded repertoire of masculinity, while simultaneously the blogger's narrative is further placed within a caring and inclusive masculinity.



Figure 8.2: Instagram screenshot from @twentyfirstcenturygent

Similarly, Rikesh Chauchan also creates a highly gendered narrative of depression. The blogger presents himself as a modern gentleman and interweaves his struggles with depression thoroughly in his narrative. As discussed in Chapter Six, Rikesh is an ambassador of CALM, and mental health is woven into most of his posts, which serve to explicitly untether depression from weakness; thus, actively negating the context of hegemonic masculinities. Rikesh has written a post discussing depression and suicide titled 'Controlling the Narrative: What Purpose Does Depression Have?'. The title of the blog is indicative of how ingrained narratives of mental health, and depression more specifically, are within Rikesh's narrative. The blogger implies that individuals can take control of their narratives (of depression) and reframe them. As an ambassador of CALM, the blogger is a proponent of seeking professional mental health support, in other words showcases Elliott's (2015) CM principles, but frames this through a self-reflexive and self-regulated (i.e., neoliberal) narrative. Rikesh writes:

vulnerability is a hard pill to swallow. Being a man, it's hell. I have always considered myself quite open with my feelings [...] 84 men take their lives in the UK every day. Eighty-four. That's just over two thousand five hundred men per month. Just under eleven thousand per year (Chauchan, 2018).

The statistics Rikesh quotes are not followed by a source; therefore, their validity cannot be proven. However, it seems that his source is CALM, as much information relating to mental health stems from the organisation's website. Nevertheless, the number of male suicides in the UK is higher than the number of female suicides (ONS, 2021). Men's high suicide rates have been linked to a lack of opening up (Cleary, 2012; Canetto and Cleary, 2012) and of seeking professional mental health support (Lomas, 2013). Similarly to depictions of emotions, de Boise and Hearn (2017) locate the underreporting of depression and other mental health issues to socioculturally gendered perceptions of masculinity. Under a hegemonic or orthodox framework, depression can be interpreted as a sign of failure (Courtenay, 2000; Emslie et al., 2006) and thus as a sign of weakness (Seidler, 1997, Seidler et al., 2016). Courtenay (2000) argues that demands for emotional control and the denial of vulnerability are important parts of hegemonic masculinity, noting that the 'denial of depression is one of the means men use to demonstrate masculinities and to avoid assignment to a lower-status position relative to women and other men' (p.1397). Courtenay might not elaborate more on what modes of masculinities are demonstrated; however, it is evident that this statement has hegemonic undertones, as hegemonic masculinities are linked to notions of competence and achievement,

requiring men to be tough and self-reliant. As a result, men are often 'curtailing emotional expressions' (White, 2019, p.8) to assimilate to normative, hegemonic or orthodox expressions.

Concomitantly, depression is often accompanied by feelings of powerlessness and lack of control, often leaving people feeling weak and vulnerable (Emslie et al., 2015, p.2247). Thus, vulnerability can be 'a hard pill to swallow', as Rikesh writes. The blogger admittedly has been 'quite open with his feelings', embracing vulnerability and, in the context of blogging more specifically, trying to prompt conversations that he deems valuable in destigmatising masculinities from vulnerability and weakness. Rikesh refers to the hardship induced on men by socioculturally prescribed ideals of hegemonic masculinities which often come with unattainable goals. Addis (2008, p.159), linking hegemonic masculinity and depression, notes that men often 'struggle to meet unattainable and contradictory standards of masculinity'. Consequently, as a mental health ambassador who 'wanted to use [his] voice to get people talking, more, and more openly, about mental health' (Chauchan, 2017), Rikesh's statement actively refutes hegemonic masculinities by adopting CPM and IMT values and constructing his digital masculinity of a modern gentleman who shows vulnerability and openness, hence also further reconfiguring the figure of the modern gentleman.

Another element relating to digital masculinities that signifies the gendered aspect of mental health and refutes hegemonic and orthodox expressions is the discussions of the 'man up' mentality. Jack, from the blog My Take on Life, writes:

Tough it out: From a very young age, boys are taught to be tough [...] Men are less likely to ask for help because we grow up with a sense of toughness' (Adams, 2020)

Like Rikesh, Jack highlights the sociocultural pressures associated with toughness that can have dire consequences for mental health. As hegemonic masculinity represents the 'traditional' idealised form of masculinity that valorises strength and (emotional) control (Kimmel, 2008), refuting the 'man up' narrative opens up new possibilities for the constructions of digital masculinities. In the same post, Jack elaborates:

On the issue of understanding men, we are in a new dawn. Something has happened in society, whereby the shift is slowly going towards men and what it means to be 'manly' [...] Whether it's purely an online phenomenon or not, we are seeing a marked change in the way we approach mental health and responsibilities regarding men. One of the most

intriguing topics surrounds the fact that men are less likely to ask for help when they need it (Adams, 2020).

Consequently, Jack's post highlights the digital spaces, such as blogs and other social media, where masculinities are becoming reconfigured, offering new variations in the 'social construction of masculinities' (Addis, 2008, p.159).

On a similar note, Rikesh, in a post titled 'Boys get sad too' (Chauchan, 2019) also toys with the same concept. This post is in collaboration with the brand Boys Get Sad Too that aims to promote awareness of mental health. In the brand's website it is stated that:

When you wear our clothing, you are opening up the conversation around male mental health by acknowledging that mental illness can affect everyone. It is a reminder that no one is alone in this (<https://boysgetsadtoo.com>, 2022).

Thus, Rikesh works with and reiterates messages already found in consumer culture. Again, through brand-consumer storytelling it becomes evident how Rikesh incorporates elements from brands that are in line with his own brand and reworks them to fit his own narrative. For this post, the blogger writes, 'Boys get angry. Boys get inconsolable. They get self-conscious. They get anxious. They get depressed. They become reserved. They get quiet. They allow themselves to become alienated'. The choice of the word 'boys' brings to mind the cliché of 'boys don't cry', which as Branney and White (2008) note, is an example of 'how a young boy may be denied a masculine identity because he has displayed emotion' (p.260). This points to broader sociocultural issues pertaining to gender and hegemonic expressions of masculinities relating to the 'man up' mentality through the cultural trope of 'boys don't cry'⁵¹, which signifies a gendered stereotype (Goodey, 1997). This trope falls firmly within orthodox and hegemonic masculinity (Shamir and Travis, 2002) as it is 'directly related to a feeling of vulnerability associated with disclosing emotion' (McQueen, 2017, p.12).

This mentality, and expressions such as 'man up', 'toughen up' and 'boys don't cry' also extend to therapeutical settings and create barriers for men seeking help as men 'receive mixed messages

⁵¹ In popular culture, Boys Don't Cry is the name of the 1999 movie about a transgender man dealing with issues around gender identities. However, the phrase 'boys don't cry' has been used in other popular culture instances, e.g., as the title of song (The Cure, (1979); Camila Cabello (2022) and as the title of books (Blackman, 2012; Scarlett, 2021).

around how a man should talk, if at all' (Ferkul, 2019, p.597). According to Ferkul (2019), men in treatment for mental health 'often talk about how they struggle to open up within groups because they were taught at a young age to "man up"' (p.596). This results in coping patterns and the seeking for professional help to be 'constructed and enforced through societal language that takes power away from men to seek emotional support' (p.596). In other words, sociocultural perceptions discourage men from seeking coping mechanisms such as disclosing, going to therapy, meditating or journaling. Overall, such expressions and language create societal barriers, leading to an emotional stoicism that has been described by Messner (1998, p.259-260) as the 'cost of masculinity'. Ultimately, the bloggers, by opening up, asking their audience to open up, and using starkly opposite language to 'man up', such as 'lads, we need to talk', create new spaces of digital vulnerability aligning with the therapeutic culture that posits talking as healing (Brownlie, 2014). But in the context of the bloggers it can also be translated into their broader networked presence through writing, podcasting and communicating visually as healing.

On this note relating to digital masculinities and the networked communication of the bloggers, Rikesh has also touched on another important aspect of blogging in relation to masculinities and mental health. In the post discussed above, Rikesh concludes by noting 'We need to find a way to talk. It doesn't matter what the vehicle of the conversation is. It is just important that the conversation happens' (Rikesh, 2018). This not only is reminiscent of the 'good to talk mentality' (Illouz, 2008), but also frames as an essential vehicle of conversation the digital channels of the bloggers, which are, of course, highly enmeshed with the imagined affordances. Thus, the narratives of depression are ultimately algorithmic narratives of depression. By thematising male depression online, as Koinig (2022) argues about mental health more generally, bloggers increase the visibility and relevance of those discussions. Like the Insta-worthy, visibility refers here both to algorithmic and sociocultural visibility. Again, one way this happens is through the hashtags, such as #mentalhealth, #depression and #maled Depression, that many bloggers use and which make mental illness algorithmically visible on social media (McCosker and Gerrard 2020, p.1902) while simultaneously placing this visibility in direct relation to masculinities and more importantly within a framework that actively refutes hegemonic and orthodox self-representations. McCosker and Gerrard (2021) argue that hashtags associated with mental health 'have to an extent been used to achieve positive forms of visibility' (p.1902). In the case of the bloggers, this serves to destigmatise mental health, creating narratives of depression that untether masculinities from hegemonic or orthodox contexts.

Like ad hoc publics (Bruns and Burgess, 2015), Zappavigna and Martin (2018) have talked about ‘networks of solidarity about depression’ (p.4) that are created by hashtags on Twitter. This can also happen on Instagram, as hashtags on both platforms can enhance ‘social affiliation around values about depression’ (Zappavigna and Martin, 2018, p.4). Those values, via the bloggers become in line with IMT and CPM while algorithmic visibility acts as a vehicle ‘for making social phenomena visible’ (McCosker and Gerrard, 2020, p.1902), or in other words making visible the bloggers’ particular iterations of digital masculinities in relation to mental health. As algorithms ‘construct meanings as much as they are shaped by meanings’ (Roberge and Melançon, 2017, p.308), the regimes of visibility surrounding the algorithmic narratives of male depression and determining who and what will be seen (Bucher, 2012) can potentially grant sociocultural visibility to the narratives of male depression through an algorithmically afforded one. Consequently, as men are more likely than women not to speak up or seek help for mental health issues due to sociocultural stigma associated with men being emotional or appearing weak (Utter et al., 2020), this visibility through networked blogging can alter attitudes and beliefs around mental health, influencing ‘who talks about it, and who cares about it’ (Utter et al., 2020, n.p.).

Dressing up and down: style narratives of mental health

As I discuss throughout my study, life(style) blogging is a highly visual genre and discussions about mental health are, of course, usually accompanied by images. Indicative is the previously-discussed post from Rikesh, ‘Boys get sad too’. Of course, the post is affiliated to a clothing brand, thus images are crucial in communicating the sponsored content. Specifically, Rikesh promotes a sweater with the brand name, as can be seen in figure 8.3. The blogger credits the photographer of the image but also mentions that the photo was taken during London Fashion Week, which along with Pitti Uomo, Rikesh frequently attends. The visual imagery accompanying posts such as these firstly serves to place the communication of mental health within the broader visual aesthetic communication and secondly serves to situate discussions around mental health (and often depression more specifically) in a context of dress and personal style. Linking mental health and dress is not always the case when discussing mental health, but through instances such as Rikesh’s the bloggers actively weave style narratives through mental health, adding again another layer to digital masculinities.



The t-shirt I'm wearing is made by Boys Get Sad Too Studio. 20% of profits made goes to the Campaign Against Living Miserably. Photographed by Lucy Alice B during London Fashion Week.

Figure 8.3: Screenshots from *RKZUK* (2019)

An indicative example is Syed Abbas, who, as already noted, suffers from depression, agoraphobia and a chronic health condition. The blogger believes that what individuals choose to wear forms a crucial aspect of their self-narratives. In a post titled 'Clothing as protection' Syed writes, 'I think that dress is about the narratives we tell ourselves [...] Through these constantly shifting narratives we form and reform our sense of identity through dress' (Abbas, 2018). This indicates that Syed exhibits understanding and reflexivity in the manner he presents dress and the manner he uses dress as an active part of his self-narrative. This further place digital masculinities within the realm of the fairly conscious, mediated representations of selves (Thumin, 2012) that the bloggers construct and communicate. Syed's statement and manner of creating his narrative also aligns with Tulloch's (2010)

concept of style narratives. Tulloch argues that style is not necessarily what is trending or in fashion at a specific time; rather, personal style is the 'agency - in the construction of self through the assemblage of garments, accessories, and beauty regimes' (p.276). Thus, personal style, which manifests through the dressed self, is reflexive, as it is a 'part of a process of self-telling that is to expound an aspect of autobiography of oneself through the clothing choices an individual makes' (p.276).

It is evident then, how Syed's narrative, like the narratives of the other bloggers in my study, is multifaceted. It is simultaneously a style narrative as the blogger implicates and discusses dress, but it is also a mental health narrative, and often becomes a narrative of depression, as the blogger intricately weaves this aspect of his life into his narrative. Thus, Syed and Rikesh construct style narratives of mental health that are inextricably intertwined with other elements that pertain to their self-representations, such as ideals relating to the modern gentleman in the case of Rikesh, and thus class, race/ethnicity, ability and so forth. As digital masculinities, and by extension, narratives are reflexively constructed, instances such as those reflect how the self is a project (Giddens, 1991) reflexively produced through an individual's biography. This is a neoliberal and layered self, as it can be monitored and managed, continuously worked and reflected upon, showcasing the constructed nature of masculinities and the various elements that compose them.

Dress, however, apart from linking aspects of the bloggers' mental health to clothes, was found to take on a meditative aspect. Apart from associations that the bloggers draw between dress and their narratives through brand-consumer storytelling, the act of getting dressed has been framed as a meditative action. This is echoed by Rikesh in this chapter's opening post, where the blogger directly links dressing to his depression. Masuch and Hefferon (2014) note that dress practices can be used to 'negotiate selfhood, befriend the body and manage mood' (p.227). Rikesh illustrates this by arguing that for him dressing often acts as a coping mechanism thinking through what clothes and accessories to wear and putting those on are framed as active elements used in an attempt to influence his mood.

Similarly, for Syed, the act of getting dressed has been even more explicitly described through its meditative qualities. In a post titled 'Stay strong', Syed writes:

There are two times during the day that I come closest to feeling at peace - when I am meditating, and when I get dressed in the morning. Mindful meditation gives me the

opportunity to allow my pain to be, to allow my thoughts to be, and to allow me to experience how I feel right here, right now. Without judgement [...] It allows me to cultivate a sense of self-compassion that I find incredibly important when dealing with depression and suicidal thoughts. I can allow myself to have those dark thoughts and know, however real they may seem, that they are just thoughts. They will come, they will go [...] But each and every morning I get dressed [...] It is for me a mindful process, where I face my feelings [...] I am whole, complete and present, and it is through the act of dressing that I find that awareness (Abbas, 2015).

The post is accompanied by an image, as shown in figure 8.4, where the blogger has styled and photographed his jewellery in a flat lay manner. The image is accompanied by the caption:

the moment I feel a sense of anonymity is not when I take my clothes off to put on a hospital gown, but the moment I then have to take off my jewellery (Abbas, 2015).

This refers to Syed's frequent visits to and stays in the hospital, which the blogger alludes to throughout his blogging practice, which spans more than a decade. This active and often meditative aspect of dressing (and undressing) that Syed and Rikesh point to, echoes the concept of flourishing style crafting (Baron, 2013). This concept retorts that individuals can craft desired stories of themselves and influence their well-being through their clothing and through the act of dressing (p.52). Flourishing style crafting can be used by individuals to generate positive emotions and weave narratives that 'support who we are, who we want to be, and who we are becoming' (Baron, 2013, p.52). In the case of Syed and Rikesh, this becomes further linked to the manner in which they communicate their digital masculinities, which is interlaced with their mental health struggles. As the bloggers reflexively discuss their journeys and often locate dress within them, this presents another area where digital masculinities draw attention and destigmatise mental health in men, and communicate vulnerability - again expanding the repertoires of digital masculinities.



Figure 8.4: Screenshot from *Dapper Kid* (2015)

Overall, the bloggers frame the crafting of their appearances, and by extension the construction of their masculinities, in a highly attentive and reflexive manner, showcasing a minding of their appearances (Kaiser, 2001) that interrogates the relationship between clothing, the dressed self and everyday truths or meanings - in the case related to mental health - that wearers create through appearance management (Kaiser, 2001). The concept of minding appearances refers to the act of dressing and styling the body as a way of thinking through and performing anxieties and ambivalences (Kaiser, 2001). Even though Kaiser did not use this concept in relation to mental health, it can be relevant to the meditative and mindful aspect that Syed and Rikesh frame their dressing through. The concept of minding appearances bridges the notion of dress as a situated bodily practice (Entwistle, 2001) and the streams of consciousness associated to the acts of getting dressed or styling the self. Minding appearances is an embodied way of 'knowing, producing knowledge and experimenting with boundaries' (Kaiser, 2001, p.80). Kaiser has predominantly used this concept to refer to the wearers' intersectional identities, such as gender, race and class; however, she notes that dress as a process or act of managing appearance in everyday life characterises the visible identity constructions through which individuals can articulate social-psychological yearnings (Kaiser, 1997). Those yearnings, Kaiser notes, range from aesthetic to political, but in the case of the bloggers, minding appearances directly becomes related to digital masculinities and their style narratives of mental health, while, in the case of Syed and Rikesh, another narrative (that of a mindful masculinity) is also implied, relating to CPM.

Nonetheless, the bloggers operate within a cultural zeitgeist where meditation, mindfulness and well-being more generally have received much attention in mainstream culture in the UK within the past

few years⁵², enjoying what has been called a popular media hype (Salguero, 2022). This depicts a broader increased awareness of psychological well-being, meditation and mindfulness where, as Mair (2018) observes, discussion and reports of mental health problems are growing as ‘individuals are becoming more aware of their own mental health and are being encouraged to speak up when life becomes stressful and impacts their daily functioning’ (p.22). This focus on mental health can often allude to the neoliberal commercialisation of everything (Rifkin, 2000). As Silva argues (2013), a ‘mood economy’ (18) can be observed in contemporary culture where individuals are encouraged to be in charge of their own well-being. In this context, self-worth is tied to the individuals’ ‘ability to organize their emotions into a narrative of self-transformation’ (Silva, 2013, p.18), or in other words self-optimisation (Bishop, 2018a) and self-improvement (Duffy and Hund, 2015); this time located through mental health management, whether associated to dress or not.

Consequently, meditation and mindfulness, as with discussion around mental health in relation to well-being more generally, are overwhelmingly embedded in the neoliberal context of self-management where the bloggers operate, which puts the ‘onus on individuals to cultivate their own health and happiness in service of greater productivity’ (Smallen, 2019, p.135). Smallen (2019) argues that ‘the mainstream versions of mindfulness and the positive psychology movement are products of the values of neoliberal hegemonic masculinity’ (p.135). Smallen is mainly focused on the corporate sector and the figure of the entrepreneur; however, the bloggers in my study indicate how digital spaces exist that, even though seeped in neoliberal values, redefine entrepreneurship; and in these cases, mindfulness is placed within the Andersonian framework. Moreover, the importance of publicly sharing conversations about meditation, mindfulness or reflection actively display positive digital masculinities in line with Lomas’s (2013) concept. Lomas has extensively discussed meditation and masculinities in relation to CPM. His studies do not focus on dress, but he argues that adopting meditation has been linked to reducing mental health crises or breakdowns in men and has been identified as ‘a possible vehicle for meaning’ (Lomas et al., 2013, p.201). Consequently, the bloggers’ style narratives purport a vulnerable and positive outlook (Lomas, 2013), with dress in this instance being a ‘rich source of positivity’ as ‘clothing could be used to manage well-being’ (Masuch and Hefferon, 2014, p.227).

⁵² Men’s Health UK has published various articles on meditation in the past few years (e.g., Davies, 2022; Men’s Health, 2017) as has GQ UK (e.g., Burton, 2016; Levesley and Taylor, 2022; Myers, 2021 Skipper, 2020).

Comfort blanket(s): foregrounding CPM and IMT through style and mental health narratives

As Syed puts it, 'I think that ultimately [it] is about feeling a sense of security and stability in our dressed identity' (Abbas, 2018). This dressed identity that Syed refers to is, of course, a highly gendered one, as Syed is a menswear style blogger and constructs his digital masculinity through his blogging and associations to menswear. Thus, once again, mental health and more specifically depression refer to a gendered male iteration. Syed has concurrently admitted that he feels 'more comfortable in a darker look' (Abbas, 2019b). Figure 8.5 depicts some of Syed's outfits, which the blogger has snapped and shared in his blog. More explicitly linking this colour preference to his depression episodes, the blogger writes:

I could most certainly see the toll that a major depressive slump had taken on my wardrobe [...] I do find it interesting to see how I can track the general state of my well-being according to the state of my wardrobe at the time, whether it be through compensating with super colourful clothes, or hiding away with oversize black sweats (Abbas, 2019a).

Consequently, within his style narrative of depression, Syed talks about how wearing black specifically relates to his mental health. The blogger shares another personal anecdote in which as he was finishing a counselling session, his therapist asked him whether he was wearing his 'insecurity black' or his 'fashion black'. Reportedly, this comment made Syed reflect and realise that he was wearing insecurity black due to the stage of his depression, at that time (Abbas, 2019a). Reflexive posts such as Syed's, which are reminiscent of intimate diary-like entries that actively construct style narratives of depression again directly link digital masculinities to mental health and aid in actively destigmatising talking about mental health and admitting vulnerability. Thus, it is evident how through the complex interrelation of networked communication, consumption (of clothing in this instance) and visual aesthetic communication (as the communication of personal style is highly stylised), a CPM (Lomas, 2013) is enacted. This digital masculinity is reflexive and involves trying 'to find more constructive ways of doing masculinity' (Lomas, 2013, p.167) by seeking professional help - such as undertaking counselling (as Syed does), meditating or more generally opening up about personal struggles, as the bloggers discussed in this chapter illustrate. Finally, this actively showcases the various shades of masculinities (Kenway and Hickey-Mood, 2009), and how categories, such as race, class, age, able-bodiedness and mental health in the case of Syed might change in their intensity of representation, e.g., interference (Mellström, 2015), but are still comprised of various intersectional constitutions (Christensen and Jensen, 2019).



Figure 8.5: Screenshot from *Dapper Kid* (2019)

Overall, discussions relating to style narratives and mental health are an indicative space where correlations between CPM and IMT can be found. The bloggers often frame those discussions around safety and comfort; in other words, they communicate a softer (Gough, 2018) aspect of digital masculinity, showcasing vulnerability. This is illustrated in Neil Thornton's discussions. The blogger, who presents as a modern gentleman, has been open in his blog about his struggles with mental health issues, body issues and anxiety. In a long post, Neil discusses why he used to favour black clothing. Neil writes:

I always used to wear black. Total black. All black everything. You get the idea. It's only been in the last 3-2 years that it stopped, and now I'm at the point where wearing any more than one piece of black clothing makes me feel odd [...] I'd never really properly associated how much my clothes went with how I was feeling [...] Recently, a friend actually turned round to me and said, "Is everything OK? I noticed you've been wearing a lot of black again recently." I actually laughed at first. But as we continued talking I realised how true it was. Work have been super stressful and with both my mum and granddad being sick in hospital I'd reverted back to darker style (Thornton, 2017).

In a self-reflective diaristic manner, Neil associates wearing black with a stressful period of his life. Again, like Syed, Neil depicts how clothes can elicit emotional responses (Mair, 2018, p.94); however, one other important element in this post is the vulnerability that Neil weaves through his style narrative. Posts such as these are placed within Neil's broader narrative of mental health, which are made up of other posts on the subject. For instance, in a post discussing how he deals with anxiety

attacks, Neil also alludes to undertaking cognitive behavioural therapy⁵³ and meditating as depicted in figure 8.6, which reads ‘you all know I’m a big fan of meditation’ (Thorton, 2018). The blogger frames all those practices as self-love, ultimately structuring this post as ‘reflecting on what self-love means’ to him (Thorton, 2018). Here again, the Andersonian context is put in conversation with Lomas’s CPM, as vulnerability and self-love are framed through the positive actions that Neil undertakes to address his mental health. Simultaneously, this showcases how masculinities intersect with other subjectivities and categories (e.g., Neil represents himself as a Modern Gentleman something that contains intersectional layers and contradictions as discussed in Chapter 6) and in specific configurations, like the bloggers’ narratives of mental health, challenge or even subvert male privilege (Christensen and Jensen, 2014, p.69). As seen throughout this chapter, male privilege here is equated to power of emotional control and stoicism, i.e., HMT, which is actively dismantled by the bloggers’ self-representations, yet contradictions and nuances still remain.

Meditating everyday



You all know I'm a big fan of meditation, and I've also discussed how it can be difficult to keep up. My practice works in ebbs and flows, but for 2019 I aim to solidify it into my everyday. I try to aim for 20 minutes a day, either in one block, or two sessions of 10 minutes, but I often get distracted or overloaded and I don't manage it. so next year, my goal is to simply do it every day. No time limits or expectations. It could be 2 minutes, it could be twenty, but my focus is to make it second nature to think about and incorporate to help me find balance.

Figure 8.6: Screenshot from *What Neil Did* (2018)

Of course, Neil’s posts also feature images, embedding visual aesthetic communication into this aspect of digital masculinities. Indicative is the previous post, in which Neil discusses the use of the colour black in his style narrative of mental health. The post is accompanied by images, with menswear being the sponsored content (figure 8.7). Neil notes that for this photoshoot, he wanted to capture the essence of how he was feeling; as such, he collaborated with a photographer who ‘mapped out the stress, the confusion and angst’ that Neil ‘was carrying around’ (Thorton, 2017). This

⁵³ Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is a form of talking therapy provided by licensed therapists which aims to manage mental health issues such as anxiety and depression (NHS, 2022).

again showcases the connections between the critical positive (CPM) and softer (IMT) aspects of digital masculinities and the imagined affordances of blogging, where communication is highly directed by visual aesthetics and the neoliberal context that the promotional communication of the bloggers is placed under; ultimately, Neil took the opportunity to discuss something personal while promoting both the sponsored content and his own brand.



Figure 8.7: Screenshot from *What Neil Did* (2017)

Similarly, Jordan's style narrative is often framed through a context of comfort and feelings of safety, thus communicating an implied vulnerability. The blogger has discussed his propensity to wear darker colours, especially grey and navy, as he feels they provide him with a sense of comfort. Jordan writes that 'there is a high chance I could be a martyr for navy and grey. They are my safe space, comfort blanket' (Bunker, 2021). The blogger has not framed dressing as a meditative act (as Syed and Rikesh have) and does not discuss mental health issues per se, but discusses feeling stressed and overwhelmed in relation to his freelance career, as elaborated in Chapter Seven. Nevertheless, he displays vulnerability and, to an extent, expanded softer repertoires of masculinities in more subtle ways. For instance, Jordan's use of the word comfort blanket in this case infuses his discussion with a protective aspect, as for him the colours of navy and grey are framed as "negotiating" or "mediating" his inner self in relation to how he feels with the outside world (Attfield, 2000, p.121), which is then mediated through his blogging.

Jordan does not exclude the use of other colours, as can be seen from his outfit images more broadly. Nevertheless, he reflexively notes on his blog that he consciously tries to incorporate navy and grey in his outfits, as this provides him with comfort for reasons which are either not known to him or not

shared on the blog. Jordan has further linked happiness to these colours. In a post featuring a coat by the clothing brand ACNE (figure 8.8), the blogger writes:

I am happy with my grey and navy canvas, but more recently I've become so introverted that I do not veer away from them. I was with friends the other evening telling them about my beige coat dilemma and how it felt a little loud (Bunker, 2021)

Evidently, Jordan frames himself as being introverted and links this to what he wears, confirming how clothing carries 'feelings and trusts, investments, faiths, and formalised fears' (Harvey, 2013, p.19). De Boise (2015) argues that emotional displays relating to masculinities are socioculturally linked to ideas of vulnerability and weakness; thus, expressions of emotionality showcase the constructed nature of masculinities (p.41). De Boise illustrates how context-specific emotional displays are by indicating that men crying at births, gigs, or football matches is normalised, as they offer situations where men are allowed to display emotions. That depicts how 'the display of even supposedly "unmasculine" emotions, in specific settings, becomes socially accepted' (de Boise, 2015, p.41). Consequently, Jordan, and other bloggers in my study, through their networked communication and the narratives they weave, serve to create spaces where digital masculinities actively disassociate openness, vulnerability and emotionality as weakness while also contextualising the points where IMT and CPM meet.



Figure 8.8: Screenshot from *Jordan Bunker* (2021)

Jordan Bunker also frames a sense of ease and comfort as essential in his style narrative. The blogger writes long-form, diary-like, highly personal posts on his website about various subjects; not necessarily about mental health but, for instance, relating to menswear and his style and lifestyle

more broadly, his anxieties and his freelance blogging career (as discussed in Chapter Seven). However, Jordan posts more frequently through Instagram, where he accompanies his posts with shorter but still reflexive small texts and captions. Figures 8.9 and 8.10 contain Instagram screenshots from Jordan's profile which illustrate this. Figure 8.9 shows a carousel post with the caption 'we should always aim to feel connection to the clothes we wear', while, like Rikesh's carousel from the previous chapter (figure 7.65), images are edited to include longer text. The caption from figure 8.8 states:

My aim is to tell some kind of story. With @theofficialselfridges the editorial is about having the confidence to try something new. For me this image sums up sometimes how I feel with my personal style. When you come from a small town it's easy to conform and dressing differently when I was younger felt quite isolating. Now I try to take confidence from it and now worry about standing out.

The second text specifically serves to induce a sense of vulnerability, constructed both visually and textually through dress and through Jordan's visual aesthetic communication in the sense of visual content creation. Those two examples depict instances where Jordan's Instagram posts are infused with shorter but still reflexive texts, showcasing how a multimodal diary is constructed; after all, Jordan notes that one of his aims is to 'tell some kind of story'. This perfectly illustrates how contingent on imaged affordances cultural production is (Poell et al., 2022) and how genres operate by reworking and adapting elements; the diarised mode of blogging has been, in cases, reshaped and is still present, yet is influenced by imagined affordances.



Figure 8.9: Instagram screenshots from the account *@jordanbunker* (2022)



Figure 8.10: Instagram screenshot from the account *@jordanbunker* (2018)

Concluding thoughts

Bloggers in my study, by openly discussing mental health, create narratives that tie masculinities to contexts such as empathy, vulnerability and openness; in other words, they consolidate their digital

masculinities to the Andersonian framework. Expressions of gender and masculinities are situational and fluid; part of an ongoing process. Thus, the digital masculinities the bloggers brand and narrate through their self-representations showcase a progressive renegotiation of the communication of masculinities. Some bloggers create highly personal narratives of mental health or depression more superficially and discuss their struggles in a manner that constitutes life(style) as a type of multidialary. As the bloggers include images, texts, videos and audio as means of narration through the networked aspect of blogging, this consolidates the practice of the bloggers as often attaining a multidialary aspect.

Through discussions surrounding mental health, hegemonic or orthodox ideals are often actively refuted, and bloggers often present more positive aspects of masculinities. This showcases what Lomas has termed CPM, demonstrating how due to hegemonic connotations, such as the admission of mental health struggles being perceived as weakness, men do not talk about or take action to address their health. This concept is ingrained in the neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate, as seeking help rests primarily at the hands of the individual in terms of self-management and self-betterment. What is more, in this chapter I have shown how the bloggers put CPM in conversation with IMT and how the narratives of mental health as they weave into their broader communication are ultimately algorithmic narratives of mental health, nudged by imagined affordances and stirred through algorithms.

Mental health often becomes linked to the dressed self, thus adding another layer to the bloggers' discussions. This brings to the forefront how CPM and IMT can be negotiated through the styling of the self, and also the important position dress often holds for the life(style) bloggers. Serfaty remarks that 'the internet took hold of, adapted or transformed the age-old practice of journal writing' (2004, p.257). Of course, as technologies evolve, the ways in which individuals record and share their lives are also transformed (Rettberg, 2018). Nevertheless, as illustrated in this chapter, no matter the form that diary-keeping assumes, as individuals, 'we don't stop writing' (Rettberg, 2018, p.17). This means that individuals write - or photograph or voice - their personal narratives into being through a reflexive, digital and networked manner as the advancement of digital technologies has transcended the word-based communication of early blogs, thus affording the opportunity for new iterations of digital masculinities to be constructed and communicated.

Chapter Nine. Conclusion

The primary goal of this research has been to explore the ways in which personal life(style) bloggers/influencers construct and communicate their digital masculinities. As they work primarily within digitally networked spaces, my study considered the ways digital masculinities become implicated and influenced, to varying degrees, by the imagined affordances that pertain to the social media and personal websites the bloggers use. By deploying a qualitative methodology, studying the bloggers' digital self-representations (which consist of texts, images and videos) and conducting qualitative semi-structured interviews with select bloggers, I was able to study the personal narratives that the bloggers weave, which ultimately communicate and rework notions around masculinities. To analyse the data, I employed thematic analysis, undertaking coding to tease out themes and patterns. I also applied narrative analysis, which allowed me to consider the individual holistic narratives of each blogger, as well as the broader narratives that arose throughout the main thematic categories while data saturation eventually occurred (Birks and Mills, 2015).

The bloggers' digital masculinities exist within an amalgam of social media affordances and of various elements relating to media, consumer culture and advertising. Approaching the bloggers' digital self-representations - which ultimately serve to formulate their digital masculinities - through Thumin's (2012) conceptualisation allowed me to locate the processes of textual, cultural and institutional mediations that pertain to the bloggers' digital masculinities. Those processes can be located in the mode and content of self-representations - i.e., textual mediation - and to the dialogical relationship that self-representations have to broader elements found within media, advertising, culture and the field of fashion - i.e., cultural mediation-and to the imagined affordances that permeate the algorithmic imaginary the bloggers operate under - i.e., textual mediation. Moreover, by approaching digital self-representations in this way and conceptualising life(style) blogging as a distinct communicative genre, I was able to consider digital masculinities and the narratives the bloggers weave, which often exist within a mutual frame, as the bloggers follow - but also often slightly subvert - the conventions of the genre.

Overview and key findings

The key findings of my study concern the creation and consolidation of digital networked masculinities through various social media platforms and websites, that often serve to expand the 'repertoires' masculinities. First and foremost, my study has sought to address the gap in the academic literature that Light (2013) identified a decade ago, and which still remains an underexplored issue. Light (2013) conceived the notion of networked masculinities to draw attention

to the dialogical relationship that exists between the construction and communication of masculinities online and the other elements that pertain to those instances of construction and communication, namely media affordances. More specifically, Light situated his discussion within and called for research into the personal experiences of men in digital spaces. In my study, situated within the Andersonian framework of IMT, which posits a 'softening' of masculinities (Anderson, 2009), I explore commodified but still highly personal and intersectional narratives. This theoretical frame pairs well with the highly personal mode of communication that the bloggers undertake (Borkowska, 2020) and has allowed me to showcase how the bloggers have often reworked sociocultural ideals about masculinities, merging those with vulnerability and emotional openness and often actively repudiating ideals that pertain to hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2005).

I have showcased how the digital masculinities of the bloggers are implicated in the neoliberal context in which they operate. The bloggers' lives often become 'styled' or, in other words, governed by the imagined affordances that permeate their practice. The bloggers operate within an algorithmic imaginary (Bucher, 2017a), often seeking to maximise their algorithmic visibility. In this sense, the opaque nature of algorithms that constitutes them as 'black boxes' (Pasquale, 2015) often influences, to varying degrees, the (networked) practices of the bloggers. This actively showcases how imagined affordances often act as regulatory mechanisms for the construction and communication of digitally networked masculinities – in other words, how imagined affordances assume the institutional processes in relation to digital self-representations.

I have explored how, within this neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate, they both manage themselves as brands - as neoliberal ideals about self-management become entangled with imagined affordances and often permeate the bloggers' practices – but also use brands to formulate and communicate their masculinities. Through brand-consumer storytelling, the bloggers use brand narratives already existing within advertising, media and culture more generally and rework these already-existing meanings along their personal narratives. Through my research, I was able to identify the figure of the modern gentleman and scope how self-branding and brand-consumer storytelling work to formulate branded iterations of digital masculinities. However, the bloggers who present themselves as modern gentlemen not only construct their narratives through associations with brands but also instil meaning through text - the bloggers often spell out and frame who the modern gentleman is and what it means to them. Ultimately, the figure of the modern gentleman becomes a networked one, constructed individually by the bloggers and consolidated more broadly through social media affordances – for example, through the use of hashtags. The figure of the modern

gentleman, then – as belonging to the algorithmic imaginary – becomes both regulated by imagined affordances, and becomes solidified by them.

The figure of the modern gentleman is also an ideal example of how dress is used to communicate and rework meaning. The suit is framed as a key element for the bloggers who present themselves as modern gentlemen and a key component in the performance of their masculinities (Butler, 2006). The suit is a multifaceted article of clothing; it has a long history and has been imbued with various meanings (Beward, 2003). In this instance, the bloggers associate suit-wearing with meanings relating to IMT. The figure of the modern gentleman becomes reconfigured more broadly by the bloggers who – often in long-form diary-like discussions and how-to guides - directly situate the modern gentleman within the Andersonian framework. Within this context, notions around entrepreneurship are also reconfigured. The bloggers actively detach the suit and by extension, notions surrounding entrepreneurship from the corporate, power-hungry contexts of hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 2012).

Of course, the bloggers operate in a highly visual environment. Social media platforms, such as Instagram, promote visual communication, while consumer culture and advertising - especially relating to fashion - are also highly visual fields. As I have traced throughout my study, the various social media and websites the bloggers use might have diverse particularities and imagined affordances, but as (most of) the bloggers operate in a networked manner, their practices are situated within a broader algorithmic imaginary. This means that the quest for algorithmic visibility (Cotter, 2019) through content-sharing and the creation of ‘beautiful’ images (Manovich, 2019) does not need to be bound by a specific platform, but it should be located throughout the bloggers’ practices – at least when they operate on a networked level.

Nevertheless, as I showcased in my study, the bloggers widely follow the conventions around visual aesthetic communication when it comes to the visual - both through their Instagram and through their websites. This can further implicate other concepts, such as notions around masculinities and domesticity (through the use of Kinfolk as a backdrop and a Kinfolk-inspired aesthetic placing of products in their homes) and notions surrounding masculinities and skincare. This becomes evident through my discussion of skincare. The bloggers seem to place emphasis on the aesthetic qualities of skincare products; they often use clichéd tropes and conventions used by influencers more broadly to ‘style’ and communicate skincare. The bloggers may collaborate with skincare brands because this is a fruitful industry for collaborations; however, by tying the use of skincare to masculinities, they

again rework meanings surrounding masculinities. This happens through the images the bloggers share but also through text that often serves to directly place the bloggers' digital masculinities in the Andersonian context.

Visual aesthetic communication becomes implicated in the various aspects of digital masculinities pertaining to the bloggers' communication; for instance, the neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate becomes visually 'styled', and a source of content creation in itself; everyday life and mundane instances also become implicated in the algorithmic imaginary and become 'styled' and shared. Within this context, the notion of the Insta-worthy arises, implicating both algorithmic and sociocultural visibility. Bloggers who have been - and still largely are - under-represented in mainstream advertising and in the fashion industry can 'claim' their own digital spaces through their self-representations. Thus, under-represented masculinities become, on the one hand, placed within the algorithmic imaginary but, on the other, have the potential to gain broader visibility and rework broader meanings associated with masculinities through the personal narratives of the bloggers.

Another element that arose from my study was the re-conceptualisation of mental health in relation to masculinity. I found many instances where bloggers discussed their struggles with mental health, or discussed health more generally, while some bloggers have actively woven their mental health issues within their narrative. Discussion about mental health - as with most of the elements that pertain to the bloggers discussed - implicate both the visual, the textual and often video/audio. This is an instance where the bloggers often write long-form, diary-like entries and bring to the forefront the concepts of CPM and CM. Mental health is, again, a topic that is actively situated under IMT, with bloggers directly refuting hegemonic associations. Simultaneously, discussions around mental health are placed within the algorithmic imaginary, becoming ensnared with imagined affordances as the bloggers often weave algorithmic narratives of depression (or mental health more generally). Moreover, similarly, to the figure of the modern gentleman, the hashtag often serves as an element that consolidates mental health narratives. Finally, dress, becomes discussed in relation to mental health. Some bloggers continuously implicate dress in their discussion of mental health, while others offer glimpses of how they have used dress as a coping tool or in relation to their mental health issues.

Nonetheless, and more importantly, all the elements discussed and raised throughout my thesis are not stand-alone concepts that serve to place the bloggers within the Andersonian framework and showcase how digital masculinities rework and reconfigure meanings associated with masculinities. The neoliberal context in which the bloggers operate, their self-branding efforts, the visual aesthetic

communication, the figure of the modern gentleman (found in about a third of the data, which reworks suit-wearing and neoliberal creative entrepreneurship) as well as visibility on under-represented masculinities (such as marginalised groups and disability) and various other elements pertaining to masculinities, such as mental health, cannot be separated from one another and from the networked narratives of the bloggers. Of course, not all of those elements pertain to all the bloggers in my study, but they are elements that interconnect at varying degrees - but most importantly they all serve to place the influencers of my study under IMT while locating imagined affordances as structural mechanisms of governance.

Future considerations

Life(style) blogging is a dynamic, ever-changing practice. Personal websites often rise and disappear quickly, while nowadays, there are many influencers - as alluded to throughout my discussion - who are solely based on Instagram. Moreover, self-representations can amount to a plethora of data, which often makes research and analysis cumbersome. For that reason, I deployed narrative analysis - and more specifically, Georgakopoulou's (2015; 2018) principles - to approach the bloggers in my study. However, in the future, a similar study exploring digital masculinities could be considered under a quantitative/qualitative methodology, using specialised techniques for digital research and deploying software to mine bigger data sets - or big data (Elliot et al., 2013). Moreover, the next steps for a study exploring digital masculinities and influencers would be to consider in more detail elements such as class or race and how they intersect with gender.

Digital masculinities are still underexplored (Light, 2013). However, with the continuous rise of social media platforms and content creation becoming ever-more consolidated - an example being the rise of TikTok in the past couple of years - digital masculinities can be explored under various other mediums and manners of construction and communication. Finally, as I discussed in the introduction and as Winch and Hakim (2020) have already noted, neoliberal self-management implicates masculinities in various degrees and modes - but again, it forms an underexplored area. Overall, exploring digital masculinities through the personal perspectives of men, as I have done through personal narratives, can showcase the constructed nature of masculinity - and of gender more broadly - but can also showcase how previously established meanings and notions become reworked and reconfigured in specific digital contexts.

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List of Images

Figure 5.1: Young, H. (2018) *My Life Styled/Mr Porter*. [website]. Available at: <https://www.shaunyness.co.uk/journal/my-life-styled-mr-porter> (Accessed: 10 January 2020).

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Figure 6.1: Efeturi, E. (2021a) @efe.efeturi [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMkIPvGnX8B/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

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- Figure 6.7: Trinidad, E. (2020b) *@erwin_trinidad* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHIjNnOD_d8/ (Accessed: 10 September 2022).
- Figure 6.8: Trinidad, E. (2020b) *@erwin_trinidad* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CGZaw9vDuhG/> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).
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- Figure 6.11: Sohanpal, G. (2019) *@gurjsohanpal* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B5rwg8Xp9_3/ (Accessed: 10 September 2022).
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- Figure 6.13: Thompson, C. (2021) *@carlthompson* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CU9iqBtNMzs/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 11 September 2022).
- Figure 6.14: Efeturi, E. (2019) *@efe.efeturi* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/B1Yvsc4nVmq/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 11 September 2022).
- Figure 6.15: Rav (2020) *@dapper_rav* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CC75gAupxoY/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 11 September 2022).
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Figure 7.2: Abbas, S. (2022) *@dapper_kid* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/dapper_kid/ (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.3: Young, H. (2022) *@harry_has* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/harryhas/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.4: Bunker, J. (2022) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/jordanbunker/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.5: Efeturi, E. (2022) *@efe.efeturi* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/efe.efeturi/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.6: Heath, B. (2022) *@twentyfirstcenturygent* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/twentyfirstcenturygent/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.7: Amrit, R. (2020) *@styleand stylus* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/styleandstylus/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.8: Tran, T. (2022) *@fashitect* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/fashitect/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.9: Puttonen, M. *@mikkoputtonen* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/mikkoputtonen/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.10: Efeturi, E. (2022) *@efe.efeturi* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CbKxDIXgeca/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.11: Walker, A. (2028) *@malestylist* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BjKJM_5nINz/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.12: Buckets, M. (20220) *@mat_buckets* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cgb0cSzD7z7/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.13: Lemont, E. (2022) *@mrthirtysomething* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/mrthirtysomething/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.14: Trinidad, E. (2022) *@erwin_trinidad* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/erwin_trinidad/ (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.15: Ravi (2022) *@dapper_rav* [Instagram]. Available at:

https://www.instagram.com/dapper_rav/ (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.16: VMAN (2022) *@vman* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/vman/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.17: Man Fantastic (2022) *@manfantastic* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/manfantastic/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.18: British GQ (2022) *@britishgq* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/britishgq/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.19: Yuen, T. (2019) *@tsunyuen* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BmqEIDWHIXc/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.20: Yuen, T. (2020) *@tsunyuen* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCn9jcCp-Qq/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.21: Buckets, M. (2017a) *@mat_buckets* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BY6aEWGhRG8/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.22: Buckets, M. (2017b) *@mat_buckets* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BdKtsAfhfub/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.23: Young, H. (2018) *@harry_has* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bq9xUs9gRkx/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.24: Lee, A. (2019) *@anthnyylee* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/B13EYpLnUp_/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.25: Low, A. (2016a) *The Visionist* [website]. Available at: <http://thevisionist.co.uk/hubsch-personal-workspace/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.26: Low, A. (2016b) *The Visionist* [website]. Available at: <http://thevisionist.co.uk/galet-the-french-loafer/> <http://thevisionist.co.uk/galet-the-french-loafer/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.27: Kinfolk (2022) *@kinfolk* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/kinfolk/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.28: Cereal (2022) *@cerealmag* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/cerealmag/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.29: Aesop (2022) *@aesopskincare* (2022) [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/aesopskincare/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.30: Low, A. (2022) *@thevisionist* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/thevisionist/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.31: Booker, S. (2022) *@stevebooker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/stevebooker/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.32: Yuen, T. (2022) *@anthnyylee* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/anthnyylee/> (Accessed: 12 September 2022).

Figure 7.33: Bunker, J. (2018) *Jordan Bunker* [website]. Available at: <https://www.jordanbunker.uk/index/freelance-so-far> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.34: Bunker, J. (2017a) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: www.instagram.com/p/BQn46XTFfzK/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.35: Bunker, J. (2017b) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BWnRoJvjHcW/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.36: Bunker, J. (2017c) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BUFW5t0jTWM/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.37: Bunker, J. (2020) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Clau6vtBvJM/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Right: Figure 7.38: Bunker, J. (2017d) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/BXyQC_GjUQG/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.39: Thorton, N. (2019) *@whatneildid* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Bt0s6xol21U/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.40: Thorton, N. (2018a) *@whatneildid* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BrDhnsllQR/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.41: Thorton, N. (2018b) *@whatneildid* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BjzmcrEg4fa/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.42: Robbie (2019) *My Skincare Essentials 2019* [website]. Available at:

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Figure 7.43: Lyns, M. (2020) *@mklyns* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CEImTWyMn0C/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.44: Bunker, J. (2018) *Grooming for guys* [website]. Available at: <https://www.jordanbunker.uk/index/grooming-for-guys> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.45: James, R. (2017) *Men's anti-aging moisturised Lab Series Maxellence* [website]. Available at: <https://manforhimself.com/problem/ageing-skin/mens-anti-aging-moisturiser-lab-series-maxellence/> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.46: James, R. (2017) *@manforhimself* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPS8yJ6DFG6/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.47: Thompson, C. (2021) *Men's Simplified Skincare'*, *Carl Thompson*, [website]. Available at: <https://www.carlthompson.co.uk/further-reading-blogs/2021/1/30/monroe-london-mens-simplified-skincare> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.48: Monroe Skincare (2022) *@monroe.skincare* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://instagram.com/monroe.skincare?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.49: Monroe Skincare (2022) *Monroe Skincare* [website]. Available at: <https://monroeskinicare.com/pages/monroe-muses> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.50: James, R. (2016) *'Just painting my nails/Barry M'*, *Man For Himself* [website]. Available <https://manforhimself.com/grooming/mens-makeup/new-nail-care-and-colour-for-men-barry-m/> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.51: James, R. (2016) *'Just painting my nails/Barry M'*, *Man For Himself* [website]. Available <https://manforhimself.com/grooming/mens-makeup/new-nail-care-and-colour-for-men-barry-m/> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.52 Barry M (2021) *@barrymcosmetics* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CMpe3T3hoP0/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.53: James, R. (2018) *'Boy De Chanel De Vernis'* *Man For Himself* [website]. Available at: <https://manforhimself.com/products/boy-de-chanel-le-vernisl/> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.54: Thorton, N. (2015) *'Bamford Grooming Department Travel Kit'*, *What Neil Did* [website]. Available at: <https://www.whatneildid.com/2015/10/bamford-grooming-department-travel-kit/> (Accessed: 8 October 2020).

Figure 7.55: Low, A. (2016) 'Braun', *The Visionist*, [website]. Available at: <http://thevisionist.co.uk/?s=Braun+> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

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Figure 7.57: Buckets, M. (2022) *@mat_buckets* [Instagram]. Available at: https://instagram.com/mat_buckets?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.58: Puttonen, M. (2022) *@mikkoputtonen* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://instagram.com/mikkoputtonen?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 7.59: Ibrahim, C. (2019) *@cyrilibrahim* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://instagram.com/cyrilibrahim?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 05 April 2019).

Figure 7.60: Evans, D. (2020) *@greyfoxstyle* [Instagram] Available at: [Instagram]. Available at: (Accessed: 12 March 2020).

Figure 7.61: Buckets, M. (2020) *@mat_buckets* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/s/aGlnaGxpZ2h0OjE3ODcyMDIyNTM5NzYwMDU4?story_media_id=2235897568540705301&igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.62: Thompson, C. (2016) *@carlthompson* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/BCaSo7ixsRa/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.63: Efeturi, E. (2021) *@efe.efeturi* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CWYyf0urjDP/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.64: Evans, D. (2021) *@greyfoxstyle* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CQ3V-8ir47Z/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.65: Pathan, A. (2021) *@freshandfearless* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CHdl08Mg_CP/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.66: Sowden, L. S. (2022) *@lukesamsowden* [Instagram]. Available at: https://www.instagram.com/p/CcPmePoO5_y/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y= (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.67: Sowden, L. S. (2022) *Luke Sam Sowden* [website]. Available at:

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Figure 7.68: Chauchan, R. (2022) *@rkzuk* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://instagram.com/rkzuk?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.69: Chauchan, R. (2022) *@rkzuk* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CWQBgY1gDJS/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 7.70: Chauchan, R. (2022) *@rkzuk* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CZPsrnOrBie/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 8.1: Chauchan, R. (2022) *RKZ* [website]. Available at: <https://rkzuk.com> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 8.2: Heath, B. (2022) *@twentyfirstcenturygent* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://instagram.com/twentyfirstcenturygent?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 8.3: Chauchan, R. (2019) *RKZ* [website]. Available at: <https://rkzuk.com/writing/2019/boysgetsadtoo> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 8.4: S Abbas, S. (2015) *Dapper Kid* [website]. Available at: <https://www.dapperkid.co.uk/blog//2015/09/stay-strong.html> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

Figure 8.5: Abbas, S. (2019) *Dapper Kid* [website]. Available at: <https://www.dapperkid.co.uk/blog//2019/09/og-fashion-blogging-performance-of-self.html> (Accessed: 14 September 2022).

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Figure 8.8: Bunker, J. (2021) *Jordan Bunker*, [website]. Available at: <https://www.jordanbunker.uk/index/well-maybe-i-enjoy-wearing-colour-after-all> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 8.9: Bunker, J. (2022) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/Cbcg7IYguCy/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Figure 8.10: Bunker, J. (2028) *@jordanbunker* [Instagram]. Available at:

https://www.instagram.com/p/Bqo_RG0A5tb/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y%3D (Accessed: 10 September 2022).

Appendices

Appendix A

Website Title	Blogger's Name	Website Dates of Operation (or last post) *	Active and Previous Platforms**	Other Notes
Buckets and Spade	Matthew Buckets	01/03/2008-28/10/ 2021	Instagram Twitter Pinterest (inactive)	Works as digital content creator.
Dapper Kid	Syed Abbas	26/05/2008-07/10/2022	Instagram Twitter Tumblr (inactive) Spotify Podcast (inactive)	
Mikko Puttonen	Mikko Puttonen	02/01/2009-15/08/2019	Instagram Twitter (inactive) Tumblr (inactive)	Currently works as a blogger and fashion photographer.
Jordan Bunker	Jordan Bunker	01/2010-10/07/2022	Instagram Twitter (inactive)	Works as freelance digital creator.
Kings Down Roots	Matt Ridout	02/ 2010- 12/ 2019 (inactive)	Instagram YouTube	Works as a fashion marketing professional. Describes himself as a YouTuber.
Tony Tran	Tony Tran	03/2011-10/2018 (inactive)	Instagram	Currently works as a fashion photographer.

What Neil Did	Neil Thornton	03/2011-12/2019 (inactive)	Instagram	Presented as modern gentleman. Has stopped activities related to blogging.
Gallucks	Joel Mcloughlin	2011-12/2019	Instagram YouTube Twitter Snapchat	Works as full-time influencer.
Cullen Jamie	Jamie Cullen	03/2012-04/2020 (inactive)	Instagram (inactive) Twitter (inactive)	Inactive from all activity
The Gentleman Blogger	Matthew Zorpas	11/2012-17/09/2019	Instagram YouTube Twitter Facebook	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
The Everyday Man	John	24/4/2012-7/10/2022	Instagram Twitter Facebook YouTube (inactive)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Grey Fox Blog	David Evans	2012-30/09/2022	Instagram Twitter Pinterest (inactive)	Retired Lawyer.
Liam Pitts	Liam Pitts	02/12/2012-30/11/2016	Instagram	Works in marketing. Has stopped activities

				related to blogging.
Fresh and Fearless	Aftab Pathan	03/2013-06/2022	Instagram	Works as a full-time influencer.
Quyên Mike	Mike Quyên	01/06/2013-10/2018 (inactive)	Instagram	Currently works as a fashion photographer.
Steven Booker	Steven Booker	09/2013-11/2018 (inactive)	Instagram Twitter (inactive)	Currently works as a photographer and content creator.
Mr Carrington	Iwan Carrington	21/11/2013-27/12/2021	Instagram YouTube Twitter	
Man For Himself	Robin James	2013- 10/2022	Instagram YouTube Facebook Twitter Spotify Podcast	Ful-time influencer.
The Visionist	Anson Low	04/01/2014-04/01/2019	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
I Am Sam Squire	Sam Squire	02/2014-06/2020 (inactive)	Instagram (inactive)	Has stopped activities related to blogging.
Michael 84	Michael Adams	30/03/2014-10/10/2022	Instagram Twitter Pinterest	
The Fashion Samaritan	Luke Ross	26/04/2014-16/06/2022	Instagram Facebook Twitter	

The Male Stylist	Adam Walker	01/05/2014-06/06/2018	Instagram (inactive)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
That Dapper Chap (previously Eldered Grove))	Craig Hammond	01/05/2014- 10/2019 (inactive)	Twitter Instagram (inactive)	Presented himself as a modern gentleman.
Luke Does Life	Luke Catleugh	22/06//2014-02/08/2018	Instagram YouTube	
Joey London	Joey	01/10/2014-10/2019	Instagram	Currently works as professional model and influencer.
Luke San Sowden	Luke San Sowden	10/2014-10/10/2022	Instagram Twitter Facebook	
Carl Thompson	Carl Thompson	11/2014-10/10/2022	Instagram Twitter	Presents as a modern gentleman. Owner of a menswear luxury shirt brand and a jewellery brand.
Twenty First Century Gent	Ben Heath	12/2014-08/2022	Instagram Twitter (inactive)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Singh Gentry	Gurj Sohanpal	02/2015-05/-3/2021	Instagram YouTube (inactive)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman. Ex-banker currently works as a full-time influencer.

Nathan Meets Fashion	Nathan Lewis	01/05/2015-10/2019 (inactive)	Instagram (inactive)	Presented himself as a modern gentleman. Currently works as a photographer and has stopped activities related to blogging.
The Gentleman Select	Pete Gemmel	26/02/2015-31/03/2021	Instagram YouTube (inactive)	Presents himself as modern gentleman.
The Rollinson London	Nathan Rollinson	10/2015-05/12/2021	Instagram	Presents himself as modern gentleman.
Sam Gray	Sam Gray	23/01/2016-04/02/2022	Instagram YouTube	
Karlmond	Karlmond Tang	11/03/2016-09/01/2020	Instagram	Works as a fashion stylist.
RKZUK	Rikesh Chauhan	04/2016	Instagram Twitter Soundcloud and Spotify (uploads his music)	Presents as a modern gentleman. Works as a photographer, musician and content creator.
Mr Thirty Something	Ed Lemont	04/2016-10/2021 (inactive)	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
DF Marin	Daniel Marin	04/2016-10/10/2022	Instagram YouTube Facebook Pinterest	

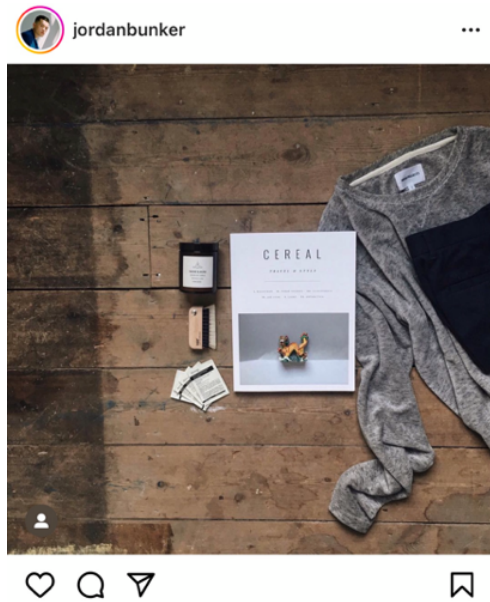
Man About Town	Charlie Irons	01/05/2016-27/04 2021	Instagram YouTube	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
The Bedonair	Jake Spencer	01/5/2016- 2021 (inactive)	Instagram (inactive)	Presented himself as a modern gentleman. Currently works as social media marketer.
Open Journal	Mike Douglas	01/06/2016-10/10/2022	Instagram Spotify Podcast	
The Middle Aged Man	Robbie Grant	2016- 2020 (inactive)	Instagram	Has stopped activities related to blogging.
The Yorkshire Gentleman	Tom	16/07/2016-31/05/2021	Instagram (inactive) Twitter (inactive)	Presented himself as a modern gentleman. Has stopped activities related to blogging.
MKLYNS	Michael	01/11/2016-15/10/2020	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Elef V	Elef Vogiatzis	01/2017-2020	Instagram YouTube	
The Cultured Gentleman	Cyrill Ibrahim	02/2017	Instagram Twitter YouTube Spotify (uploads his music and performances)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman. Works as a classical pianist.
Finnerz	Shaun Findlay	01/04/2017-29/09/2020	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.

David James Seed	David James Seed	05/04/2017-07/01/ 2019	Instagram	Has stopped activities related to blogging.
Shauyness (ex Manimalist)	Shaun Donnelly	01/04/2017-31/07/2022	Instagram Twitter Pinterest	
Curtis Luke	Curtis Roscoe	01/05/2017-2020 (inactive)	Instagram	
Style and Stylus	Rashpal Amrit	09/05/2017-22/12/2020	Instagram Twitter (inactive)	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
My Style Manual	Tony Flynn	08/2017- 2020 (inactive)	Instagram	Presented himself as a modern gentleman.
Jack's Journal	Jack Adams	01/12/2017-2021 (inactive)	Instagram	
Erwin Trinidad	Erwin Mateo Trinidad	06/12/2017-12/02/2018	Instagram Twitter Facebook	Presents himself as a modern gentleman. Works as a nurse and content creator.
DTOC	Benn Bromley	01/04/2018-10/2019 (inactive)	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Gentleman's Diary	Pasquale Karatzetzo	07/04/2018-21/11/2020	Instagram YouTube	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Tsun Yen	Tsun Yen	05/2018-2022	Instagram Twitter Pinterest	
Item Blog	Dan Watson	05/07/2018-2022	Instagram	Currently works as a photographer

				and content creator.
Harry Has	Harry Young	01/09/2018-10/2019	Instagram YouTube	
Efe Efeturi	Efe Efeturi	2019-30/05/2021	Instagram Facebook	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Dapper Rav	Ravi	2019-2020 (inactive)	Instagram	Presents himself as a modern gentleman.
Anthony Lee	Anthony Lee	2020-04/2022	Instagram	Currently works as a photographer and content creator
This is Timothy Timothy	Timothy James	2020-2022	Instagram	
Yele King	Yele	2020-2022	Instagram Twitter Pinterest	

*Days and months are added when known. The first given date is the first known post or marks the year of activity while the last given date marks the latest post at the time of writing. Some bloggers do not include full dates in their posts, some include day/month/year, some month/year and some no month or year but year can be deduced. I list websites as "inactive" if they have been taken down and note their last time I accessed them before being taken down.

** I list platforms as "inactive" if there is no activity for more that a year. I only note Facebook when a blogger is still active as it is a platform that all the bloggers operated in the past, but the majority of them are inactive in this platform.



405 likes
jordanbunker Just a few of my favourite things this weekend. And to all those celebrating Chinese New Year, 新年快樂
View all 23 comments
28 January 2017



mklmys • Follow

mklmys Stepped over to the dark side and picked up a bag of @darkwoodcoffee goodness 🍵🍪

244 w

joaniealie_ 🍪🍪
242 w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

403 likes
FEBRUARY 17, 2018

Add a comment... Post

mklmys • Follow

mklmys Early morning pre golf goodness ☺️

34w

juanimistic Kicking the week in a good way!

34w Reply

— View replies (2)

courtneyhenry more packaging dreams 🍪

34w 1 like Reply

— View replies (1)

olirozea What are the odds of us

Liked by vickyscotts and 556 others

JULY 4, 2020

Add a comment... Post

thevisionist • Follow

thevisionist I'm digging these Giorgio Armani glasses from @davicklow! Reading in style :3 #davicklow

247w

thevisionist @husim thanks 🍪

246w Reply

svennismiss I really like your blog!

246w Reply

thevisionist @minis10 thank you man!

1,036 likes
JUNE 9, 2018

Add a comment... Post

harryhas • Follow
Bournemouth

harryhas I don't own enough knitwear but I am loving it at the moment. 🍪

107w

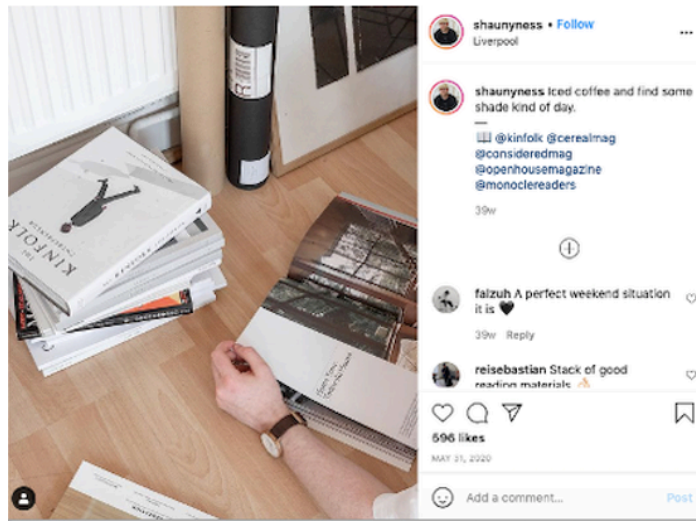
#menswear #menstyle #gentlemans #mensoutfit #menstyle #commonprojects #hm #agrd #fildays #mensfashionpost #outfitoftheday #cps #importerfive #keepsimple #ootdshare #ootdmn #guywithstyle #menswearstyle #mensfashionblog #mensfashionreview #gentlemanstyle #fildayoftheday #outfitgrid #ballow #corealmagazine #otrends #shargrid #fityrids #italianleather #endsoiling

1,324 likes
JANUARY 30, 2018

anthnyylee • Follow

anthnyylee A2! So I've recently upgraded from my very dated iPhone 6 to the new @huaweimobileuk P30 Pro 🍪 Safe to say I'm already loving a lot of the features packed in here, notably the in-screen fingerprint scanner, easy access to my device without scripping on screen space 🍪 The other design features are an OLED display and an absolute beast of a Leica quad camera on the back (will get more into this on my next post and to top it all off, the android software is pretty much fully customizable making it easy for my device to look exactly how I want it 🍪 #huaweiP30Pro #LoveMyHuawei #filday #festivephotography

1,766 views
SEPTEMBER 1, 2018



Images from the Instagram accounts and blogs of Jordan Bunker, Matthew Buckets Michael Lyns, Anson Low, Harry Young and Anthony Lee, Shaun Donnelly and Dan Watson.

The interview consent form was sent during the time the interviews took place with a provisional working title of my PhD:

Interview Consent Form

Project title:

Creation and representation of masculinities through male personal lifestyle bloggers.

- I..... voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.
- I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind.
- I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted.
- I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study.
- I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research.
- I agree to my interview being audio-recorded.
- I understand that all information I provide for this study will be treated confidentially.
- I understand that in any report on the results of this research my identity can remain anonymous if I so chose. This will be done by changing my name and disguising any details of my interview which may reveal my identity or the identity of people I speak about.
- I understand that extracts from my interview may be quoted in the dissertation.
- I understand that a transcript of my interview in which all identifying information has been removed will be retained for two years from the date of the dissertation's exam board.

I understand that under freedom of information legalisation I am entitled to access the information I have provided at any time while it is in storage as specified above.

I understand that I am free to contact any of the people involved in the research to seek further clarification and information.

Signature of research participant

Signature of participant Date

Signature of researcher

Ioanna Karagiorgou

I believe the participant is giving informed consent to participate in this study

Signature of researcher Date