THE NOT-SO-SECRET VICE: MENSWEAR, MASCULINITY AND
CONSUMPTION IN SIX ONLINE COMMUNITIES

NATHANIEL WEINER

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Abstract

Online menswear communities are online discussion forums dedicated to the discussion of men's clothing topics such as raw denim, streetwear, suits and Ivy style. This dissertation reports findings from an online ethnography of six of these communities and fifty in-depth interviews with American, British and Canadian men who participate in them. Because fashion and consumption have historically been gendered as female or gay, the dissertation asks whether the participation of predominantly heterosexual men in these communities is representative of a shift in norms governing masculinity. It also asks what the role of consumption is in shaping the identities of these men.

The researcher found that online menswear communities were organised around the consumption of clothing commodities. Consumption shaped the respondents' experience of both online and offline spaces, while bestowing them with "fashion capital" (Rocamora, 2012) within their communities. Respondents' ties to online menswear communities were not strong or deep enough for them to be considered subcultures, but they nonetheless acted as resources for identities; identities articulated not in terms of group-belonging, but in terms of shared preferences for "craft consumption" (Campbell, 2005). The temporary coming together of men with shared lifestyles online made online menswear communities akin to "neo-tribes" (Maffesoli, 1996).

The researcher also discovered that while the respondents were not embarrassed by their engagement with clothing and shopping, they made a rhetorical distinction between the masculine pursuit of style, and the feminine following of fashion. They upheld fashion's gendering by rejecting it as manipulated and frivolous, contrasting it with style, which was approached as a rational, rule-governed system that one could succeed it at with sufficient practice and study. This was just one among many strategies deployed to avoid fashion's perceived femininity. So, while online menswear community members' openness to enjoying the narcissism and homosocial gaze of menswear communities reflected declining "homohysteria" (Anderson, 2009), the moves they made to masculinise fashion consumption demonstrated the persistence of ideals associated with "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995). This, along with online menswear community members' deployment of the aesthetics of "pastiche hegemony" (Atkinson, 2011), made their masculinity an example of "hybrid masculinity" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Dedication

To the memory of my dear friend Christopher Beck - Wirral lad, Everton fan, music fanatic and sharp dresser who we lost from this world far too soon.

And, to my partner Cara Akass, for moving to Toronto with me and putting up with all the late nights of me tapping away on the computer when we should have been watching telly.

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 "It's Raining Menswear"

"It's raining menswear" – so proclaimed staff writer Joshua Rothman in a *New Yorker* article published in 2015, in which he points to a subtle shift that happened in the early years of this millennium. Men, it seems, are dressing better than they have in years. This is not simply a matter of changing fashions, but something else entirely. Large numbers of men, hitherto uninterested in fashion, are now deeply engaged with something they called "menswear". The driver behind this change is not print media, advertising, nor any other arm of the fashion industry. Rather, the impetus comes from the consumers themselves. In the oft-overused parlance of Silicon Valley, men's fashion has been disrupted. The de-centralised, many-to-many nature of internet discourse has led to a re-distribution in power from retailer to consumer. The online discussion forums that are the subject of Rothman's article have existed for well over a decade, yet this is a rare instance of them being discussed in a widely-read publication. These forums fly under the radar of commentators more interested in the role of fashion blogs and, more recently, Instagram.

Perhaps this is because much of what is discussed in the forums referred to by Rothman could be seen by the outside observer as rather banal, if not boring. These online discussion forums are sites where men go to discuss what they are wearing and buying in such minute detail that the discussions border on tedious. Furthermore, the styles favoured in these forums are not always fashionable. They offer little excitement to observers of fashion, who tend to be more interested in the artistic, youthful and creative aspects of clothing (Buckley & Clark, 2012). Yet as Rothman observes, the impact of these forums can be seen in the drastic improvement in the dressing practices of Anglosphere men that has occurred over the past decade and a half. It is impossible to properly disambiguate the role of forums from that of traditional fashion media, organic changes in style and the increased availability of clothing that has been made

possible by online shopping, but the men I interviewed for this dissertation testified to the key role that menswear forums played in changing the way they dressed. Raw denim, Red Wing Boots, Grenadine ties, cordovan shoes, loop-wheeled sweatshirts, Neapolitan shoulders, German army sneakers and other exotic menswear items discussed online all existed prior to online menswear forums, but owe much of their cult status to those forums.

The enthusiasm with which men discuss clothing online stands in contrast with the notion that men gave up fashion in the Victorian era (Flügel, 1930). As I will explain in the next chapter, there is a pervasive sense that a man is somehow less than a man if he shows a little too much interest in his dressed appearance (Edwards, 2006). The anxieties that fashion causes heterosexual men are summed up humorously in the American essayist Tom Wolfe's 1965 essay, "The Secret Vice":

> At Yale and Harvard, boys think nothing of going over and picking up a copy of *Leer*, *Poke*, *Feel*, *Prod*, *Tickle*, *Hot Whips*, *Modern Mammaries*, and other such magazines, and reading them right out in the open. Sex is not taboo. But when the catalogue comes from Brooks Brothers or J. Press, that's something they whip out only in private. And they can hardly wait. They're in the old room there poring over all that tweedy, thatchy language about "Our Exclusive Shirtings," the "Finest Lairdsmoor Heather Hopsacking," "Clearspun Rocking Druid Worsteds," and searching like detectives for the marginal differences, the shirt with a flap over the breast pocket (J. Press), the shirt with no breast pocket (Brooks), the pants with military pockets, the polo coat with welted seams… (p. 254)

Tom Wolfe is writing about the Ivy Look, a look that is still popular today amongst men who participate in online menswear communities. Even though the passage was written over fifty years ago, it captures wonderfully the tension between the expectation that men should not care about fashion, and the passion with which many men, both gay and straight, approach clothing. It seems that the vice of menswear is not-so-secret anymore. This dissertation asks what that means for our understanding of masculinity and consumer culture.

For the sake of self-reflexivity, I should explain how I came to be interested in this topic. I arrived at this research project not through an interest in men's fashion but through an interest in subculture. Falling victim to the same gendered conceit as many of my research participants

(a subject discussed in Chapter 5), I was under the impression that I was interested in subcultural style, not fashion. Fashion was something that I had always steered clear of. As soon as I was old enough to select my own clothes, I chose the blandest, most generic clothes I could find. Then, when I was around fifteen, I took on a subcultural identity through my involvement in the punk rock scene in Toronto. I started to dress in the confused mix of 1980s punk signifiers (patches, studded bracelets, boots) and 1990s skate wear (baggy pants, gas station attendant shirts, skateboard shoes) that defined punk's 1990s aesthetic. This was the beginning of my personal engagement in youth subcultures, leading to my developing a keen interest in British youth subcultures of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s through books and records. Over the course of my late teens and early twenties my personal style evolved, drawing on various permutations of punk, mod and skinhead. These are decades-old subcultures that have little connection to my age, nationality, or social class, but nonetheless fascinated me. As I went from wearing baggy skate wear to Doc Marten boots, Harrington jackets and Fred Perry polos, clothes became important to me as a way in which to signal subcultural belonging, but I spent relatively little time and money on clothes compared to what I spent on music. I certainly would never have described myself as someone who was "into" fashion.

That all changed when I found myself living in London, England, working full-time in a public-sector job that involved spending my workdays sitting in front of a computer with a fast broadband connection (a novelty at the time). The job provided me with a good level of disposable income while demanding relatively little of my time and energy. What followed was a story that became a familiar one over the course of my research, echoed in the accounts of the research participants. Carrying out an internet search for a subcultural garment that I desired, my search terms let me to an online forum for the discussion of mod clothing. This discovery dramatically expanded my interest in clothing, while normalising levels of consumption that I had previously been uncomfortable with. This led to an explosion in the size of my wardrobe. As I

spent more and more time in the mod forum, I internalised the tastes of its users and attempted to bring my own personal style in line with that favoured by the forum.

This newfound interest in clothing coincided with a return to school to complete a part-time Master's degree in Media and Communication. I was interested in what theories of subculture developed at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies in the 1970s could tell us about the persistence of post-war British subcultures as a global phenomenon. The mod forum I was participating in seemed a perfect site for exploring how 21st century technology was shaping this decidedly 20th century subculture. Expecting to write about subculture, I instead found my MA thesis focusing on how subcultural identities are formed in and through the consumption of fashion commodities. I also became interested in the homosociality of these very heterosexual spaces. Over the course of the research I found that the mod forum's "Clothes and Fashion" section was just one among many online menswear forums, and that little had been written about this aspect of internet culture. So, I set off to research this online culture. The results of that research are before you.

1.2 Research Design

1.2.1 Research Methods

This project was initially conceived as an online ethnography supplemented by qualitative interviews. I had anticipated that because the user base of online menswear forums is so dispersed, it would be difficult to locate interview respondents. However, the result is better described as research based on qualitative interviewing, supplemented by online ethnography. By recruiting from six different forums, offering an honorarium of $50/C$50/£25 and travelling to multiple cities, I was able to recruit fifty participants for qualitative, in-depth interviews[1]. The data generated by the interviews was so rich that I curtailed the ethnography to focus on coding and

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[1] The honorarium was funded with an Ontario Graduate Scholarship and the travel was funded through York University's Research Costs Fund.

analysis of the interview data. Qualitative interviews are used to provide insights into the ways in which individuals understand the world, something that cannot be easily observed. Ontologically, this is about privileging meaning-making practices; the concern here is with arriving at a representation of how individuals' worlds are socially constructed. Interview data has a dual purpose, allowing the researcher to analyse not just what interviewees have to say but also *how* they say it (Alasuutari, 1995; Rubin & Rubin, 1996; Seidman, 2013). An iterative approach was taken to research design, with interview questions generated in response to an initial stage of online ethnography, and findings from the interviews followed up with further observation of the online forums. This ensured that I did not take a top-down approach where the researcher's interpretations are imposed upon the culture being studied. This dissertation is based on a bottom-up approach that uses the perspectives of forum participants to make sense of their culture. Combined, the two methods allowed me to triangulate my findings, so that my interpretation of the culture could be checked against the research participants', while my informants' accounts could be checked against what was actually going on in the forums.

Thanks to the support of York University, I was able to travel to New York, London and San Francisco to carry out the interviews. These cities were selected because online menswear forum users are concentrated there and I wanted to explore the role of urban space in the seemingly deterritorialised culture of online menswear forums (a topic discussed in Chapter 7). I also carried out interviews in the Greater Toronto Area and two other Canadian cities (Montreal and Ottawa) where I happened to be presenting at academic conferences. Three more interviews were carried out online through Skype, with users based in Boston, MA, Corpus Christi, TX and Albuquerque, NM because these particular research participants offered unique insights. I met the research participants in bars, pubs, coffee shops, restaurants and parks. The interviews were between one and two hours in length. They were semi-structured in-depth interviews, or what are referred to as "cultural interviews" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which are

about learning the norms and values of a culture and are often concerned with everyday practices.

The demographic character of the research participants is discussed in Chapter 3, but it is worth noting for the purposes of self-reflexivity that there was no power imbalance between interviewer and respondent as I matched the research respondents along many axes of identity: I am white, middle-class, heterosexual, able-bodied and cisgender, as are most (but not all) of the research participants. I was also a forum user myself. In the intervening years since discovering the mod forum, my interest in mod and skinhead style had led to my dressing in one of the styles popular on menswear forums: Ivy style (I will explain what this means in the Style Typology section later in this chapter). As was the case with most menswear forum users, I discovered this style mainly through forum use, although I had already become aware of it through a piece of writing on the American Ivy League origins of UK late mod/early skinhead style that I had encountered some years prior (Rowland, 2001). I was by then already spending a lot of time reading forums (some of which are included in the research sample), buying clothes and worrying about such minutiae as whether my trousers should have a 1 3/4" or 1 5/8" cuff. I was, in short, what is known as an "informed insider". As a heterosexual man in his thirties living in a major metropolitan centre and employed in creative/intellectual work (graduate student/contract lecturer at a polyethnic college), I was very much a typical menswear forum user. That meant I had a lot in common with interview respondents, which helped in establishing rapport.

As I explain in Chapter 6, there is a look of mutual recognition shared between forum users as they check out one another's clothes. Such looks were shared between my interview respondents and me when we met, as the clothes I wore to these interviews made me recognisable as someone who most likely read menswear forums. The interview participants were comfortable meeting me because they were already comfortable meeting people from

forums. I had made it clear in my posts recruiting forum users that I was one of them[2], and they treated me as such. They spoke to me as if I was already familiar with the forums and what being a forum user was like. Sometimes I needed to ask them to elucidate what they meant when they made such assumptions, reminding them that my readers would not have the familiarity with their culture that I did. A digital audio recording of the interviews was made and then transcribed. The transcription process was the first stage of data exploration and was used to identify themes. These themes were used to generate codes, and the data was then coded using NVivo. Following sociologists Sharlene Janice Hesse-Biber and Patricia L. Leavy (2010), coding was used to arrive at key concepts that were the basis for analytic categories. Where quotes have been reproduced in this dissertation, I have preserved colloquialisms but lightly edited them for readability.

The online ethnography was carried out over the course of three years, through regular observation of the six forums that made up my research sample. Online ethnography is a form of ethnography adapted for the study of online cultures, involving the experiential rather than physical displacement of the researcher, and is considered the preferred method for engaging with online sites where social interactions take place (Hine, 2000; Lindlof & Shatzer, 1998). Like ethnography, online ethnography is concerned with coming to an understanding of a culture; the only difference is that these cultures are online rather than in physical space. The online ethnographer shares the ethnographer's interest in investigating the ways in which individuals construct meaning through culture and online ethnography is a logical extension of media and cultural studies' adoption of ethnographic methods (Alasuutari,1995; Machin, 2002). Sociologist Christine Hine (2000) argues that online ethnography reinvigorates the practice of ethnography through its emphasis on the textual, allowing the researcher to present the research subjects' social reality in their own words. Memos were made while observing the forums, and these

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[2] See appendix A for example text.

memos were used to generate interview questions and coding categories. A Firefox browser add-in called ScrapBook was used to save pages to my hard drive for future analysis. It was also used to organise comments and discussions from the forums into coding categories. I approached the online ethnography from the position of an informed insider, having participated in online menswear forums before undertaking the research.

1.2.2 Research Philosophy and Theoretical Perspective

Virtual ethnography recognises that identities are always performative and that worlds are always imagined, assuming an inherently social constructivist research paradigm (Paccagnella, 2006). This is the research paradigm that guided my research. Social constructivism is part of the interpretivist tradition and social constructivist research is concerned with how individuals construct and navigate the world; it places emphasis on meaning-making practices and lived realities, and is associated with the more empirical, less textual side of cultural studies research (Saukko, 2003; Walsh, 2004). This dissertation has an empirical bent, for it was the lack of empiricism in the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies' (CCCS) canonical 1970s research on subcultures that sparked my interest in researching subcultures in the first place. As I discuss in Chapter 2, this body of work's high-handed theorising of youth subcultures turned subculture members from subjects into academic objects, depriving them of agency (Laughey, 2006). Sociologist David Muggleton (2000) points out that the CCCS' description of subcultures renders them unrecognisable to individuals who have actually participated in youth subcultures. This was an impetus for Muggleton and other researchers with subcultural backgrounds to produce new accounts. Like Muggleton, I was determined to let my research subjects speak for themselves.

Readers will be right to note that this dissertation focuses on consumption at the expense of production. This is not because I think that production is unimportant. I agree with cultural studies scholar Grossberg (1995) that cultural studies and political economy need not

be at odds with each other, for they both offer valuable, but very different insights into how culture operates. The work of communications scholars such as Mark Andrejevic (2013) and Christian Fuchs (2014) demonstrates that there is much to be learned about how the political economy of the internet shapes its everyday use. A political economy approach to these forums might have looked at the economic structure of the sites on which they are hosted or at how forum users perform free labour for the benefit of designers, marketers and retailers. However, this research is not a work of political economy and I will leave the political economy of online menswear communities to those better-equipped to carry it out. This dissertation is not intended to be an uncritical celebration of consumerism, something that cultural studies work on consumption is sometimes accused of being (Frank, 2000; McGuigan, 1992). It reflects core cultural studies concerns with power and inequality in its analysis of masculinity, while remaining firmly in the cultural studies tradition of trying to understand how capitalism structures everyday life. As this dissertation is concerned with members of relatively privileged groups in society, it diverges somewhat from cultural studies' original concern with validating the experiences of marginalised groups (Dworkin, 1997). It does so motivated by the belief that in order for us to understand how individuals are marginalised within popular culture, one must understand what representations, ideas and symbols are placed at its centre.

1.2.3 Research Questions

After carrying out my literature review and a period of initial observation of the online menswear communities, I developed a set of research questions that guided the research. Qualitative research is an iterative process, and the questions changed over the course of the research project. The final research questions were:

1. What is discussed within online menswear communities?
2. Do online menswear communities reflect changes in masculinity?
3. How do the members of online menswear communities distinguish between clothing and fashion?

4. Can these communities be considered subcultures?
5. What is the role of consumption and online consumption within online menswear communities?
6. How do online menswear communities relate to space and place?

1.3 The Online Communities

1.3.1 Style Typology

Online forums have coalesced around a limited range of looks. Some might cater to a single style, whereas others will cater to a few. I will discuss the significance of these styles in greater detail throughout the dissertation, but readers will need to understand the following terms, as they are used throughout the dissertation.

Avant-garde / goth ninja: These terms are used online to describe a fashion-forward, designer-led style involving draped silhouettes, layering, and monochromatic, usually black, palettes. The designer most associated with the style is Rick Owens, but it is part of a lineage of *avant-garde* fashion that includes designers such as Yohji Yamamoto and Rei Kawakubo. More so than any other style discussed in this dissertation, goth ninja is a style that coalesced within online menswear communities (Sanchez, 2013; Wharry, 2014).

Classic menswear: According to menswear journalist Bruce Boyer (2015), classic menswear refers to the style of western dress[3] that originated in Britain following the 19th Century Great Male Renunciation, "a movement from gorgeousness towards simplicity" (p. xiii). The three-piece suit and its accompanying accoutrements are most closely associated with classic menswear, but classic menswear also encompasses less formal, but still traditional, men's clothing, such as chinos, sports coats and polo shirts – what would be understood in lay terms as "business casual". There is no one era that is universally considered classic; rather, these

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[3] Anthropologists Joanne B. Eicher and Mary Ellen Roach-Higgins (1992) define dress as "an assemblage of body modifications and/or supplements displayed by a person in communicating with other human beings" (p.15). They explain that defined this way, "the word dress is gender-neutral". While this dissertation is primarily concerned with male clothing (rather than ornament or body modification), the ways in which men's clothes are worn constitute part of what is termed "dress".

clothes are considered classic because while the proportions and fabric choices change slightly over the years, the components and fundamental essence of their styling is relatively static. The term "classic" reflects some unspoken assumptions that I interrogate in Chapter 5.

Heritage: A look best recognised as one comprising heavy work boots, heavy denim, work shirts and flight jackets, drawing influence from American workwear, outdoor and military clothing of the early-to-mid 20th century, such as that produced by the mail-order retailer LL Bean. While there have long been devotees of this style in the west, sold here by vintage dealers and companies such as Scotland's Aero Leather and Germany's Pike Brothers, its current online popularity is closely tied to the Japanese preservation of these styles, a phenomenon that I explore in Chapter 4. A diluted version of this style has entered mainstream fashion in the past decade, as fashion brands have produced pieces inspired by this look, or reproduced items from their archives. In a 2014 online article published on the *Daily Beast* website, writer Tim Teeman uses the term "lumbersexual" to describe the look. He argues that the beard and flannel look is a co-option of a hyper-masculine gay style, but this argument is a little simplistic and overlooks both the role of Japanese manufactures and online forums in the dissemination of heritage style. It is also described as "Americana" or, in Japan, "heavy duty".

Raw denim: Raw denim is not a style but a material, however it is discussed so widely online that I treat it in this dissertation as a distinctive style category. Denim is referred to as "raw" when it has not been washed. This means that the indigo will rub off from different parts of the garment at different speeds, creating personalised "fades" that are highly desirable to devotees of the style. All jeans were once produced in raw form, but changes in fashion in the 1970s and 1980s saw the rise of pre-faded jeans. Raw denim is sometimes unsanforized, meaning that it will shrink upon the first wash. Again, all jeans were once "shrink-to-fit", and many baby boomers have fond memories of wearing their Levi's in the bath to get a perfect fit. The

invention of a manufacturing technique known as sanforization means that most mass-market jeans sold today are now prevented from shrinking.

In the 1980s, Japanese companies reverse-engineered vintage jeans to produce pain-staking reproductions of vintage jeans, right down to inconsistencies in the weave of the fabric (Coe, 2011; Marsh & Trynka, 2005). Then, in the early 2000s era of pre-faded denim, western brands such as Nudies and APC re-popularised raw denim, and the online raw denim culture can be traced back to the now all-but-defunct mynudies.com forum. On this forum, Nudies fans traded tips on how to achieve more pronounced contrasts and posted photographs of their jeans to compare fades. Thanks to importers of Japanese jeans, Japanese denim became very popular in this emerging online culture. There has since been a blossoming of raw denim brands in the west such as Tellason and 3sixteen (Marsh & Trynka, 2005; Marx, 2015). Raw denim has also entered mainstream fashion and can be purchased from fast fashion retailers such as Uniqlo and the Gap. Raw denim is sometimes referred to as "selvedge denim" because of the (usually red) coloured line that runs along the outseam of the garment. This indicates that the fabric was woven on a shuttle loom, an anachronistic type of loom that was replaced by projectile looms in the 1950s and 1960s. Not all raw jeans are made this way, but most are. This makes the selvedge seam a symbol for raw denim, even though it is possible to obtain selvedge jeans that are not raw, and raw jeans that are not selvedge.

Streetwear: Streetwear is difficult to define, because the looks described by the term are multiple and subject to change. It has its origins in dance music, hip-hop and skateboard scenes, and is largely brand-driven (Sims, 2010; Vogel, 2007). Some well-known contemporary streetwear brands are A Bathing Ape ("BAPE"), Palace, Supreme and Visvim. Streetwear has much in common with the sneaker/trainer culture from which it is an offshoot, particularly the emphasis on collecting limited-edition releases at "drops" that sometimes mean devotees must queue overnight, or pay inflated prices in secondary markets (Kawamura, 2016). Whereas large, visible logos used to define streetwear, in recent years streetwear has taken a turn

towards a subtler, more minimalist look associated with Scandinavian brands such as Acne Studios, Our Legacy and Norse Projects. This is a look sometimes referred to as "Scandinavian streetwear". It involves very plain, but well-designed and well-fitting casual clothes such as jeans, chinos, cardigans and button-down shirts distinguished by slim fits and use of high-quality materials.

Trad: This term refers to traditional American clothing, which includes the Ivy Look and its antecedents, preppy and southern trad, as well as some elements of traditional English tailoring. The Ivy Look is a style that emerged out of the Ivy League schools and elite prep schools of the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. It carries strong connotations of old money and White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) supremacy, but the style's history is more complicated than that. Ivy League clothes were popular amongst youth on non-Ivy campuses, and the mass expansion of post-secondary education under the GI Bill meant that it was not just upper-class WASPs who wore the style. Moreover, as men graduated from college and entered the workforce, the style spread. It was ready-to-wear and affordable, the everyman clothing of the 1960s until the ascendancy of hippie fashions and the peacock revolution later in that decade. The Ivy Look was also popular amongst African-American jazz musicians and was exported to the United Kingdom through record sleeves and films, making it the epitome of American Cool for British mods and some skinheads (Boyer, 2015; Marsh & Gaul, 2010; Mears, 2012). It made a comeback in the 1980s in the form of preppy (Birnbach, 1980), this time remaining true to its elitist WASP overtones. The style was also adopted enthusiastically by the Japanese who, according to writer David W. Marx (2015), "saved" American style. It is in many ways the United States' unofficial national dress and some American men have stayed true to the look over the decades thanks to old-fashioned menswear shops such as J. Press in New York, NY and Washington, DC, O'Connell's in Buffalo, NY and the Andover Shop in Boston, MA. The Ivy Look also has a cult following in the UK thanks to its early associations with the mod subculture. London menswear retailer John Simons has been selling the look since 1965 (Campbell, 1995;

Barker, 2018). The style underwent a revival in the 2000s thanks in part to online menswear communities. The 2012 Fashion Institute of Technology exhibition *Ivy Style: Radical Conformists* and accompanying book bears testament to the lasting appeal of the style, which has also inspired well-known fashion designers such as Thom Browne and Michael Bastien. Trad includes such staples as button-down shirts, striped ties, chinos, navy blazers, madras check shirts, penny loafers, longwing brogues and sack-style suits.

Some other looks, which are not as common in online menswear communities but are discussed in this dissertation, are worth noting:

Football casual/football lad/retro scally: This refers to "terrace style" worn by football fans in Britain from the late 1970s onwards as football hooligans transitioned from skinhead style to a less conspicuous, more brand-led look known as "football casual" (Polhemus, 1994; Redhead, 2012). It has gone through many permutations and along the way has become somewhat (although not entirely) divorced from football violence. While a revival of the 1980s sportswear style is underway amongst a younger generation of casuals, also identifying as "football lads", the look has come to be associated with a handful of designer brands including Stone Island and CP Company. During the early 1980s in Liverpool, some football casuals reacted against the dominance of designer brands and embraced traditional English clothing. This look came to be known as "retro scally" (Routledge, 2013). An evolution of this look, blending American heritage, British heritage pieces and Scandinavian outdoor-wear, has been propagated online by the Manchester-based shop Oi Polloi, whose proprietors followed a common path through football casual, rave and Britpop (Fox, 2008; Sandison, 2013).

Traditional skinhead: The term is used to describe the original skinhead look of the late 1960s: an evolution from mod that involved many classic menswear staples such as button-down shirts, jeans, boots, loafers, brogues, V-necks and cardigans (Ferguson, 1982; Hewitt, 2002). The "traditional" adjective is used to distinguish this skinhead look from the punk-influenced

revival look that emerged in the 1970s and came to be associated with far-right politics (Worley, 2013, 2017).

Normcore: A term first defined in *New York* magazine as a style pursuing sameness over difference, with urban hipsters becoming indistinguishable from middle-American tourists. Fleeces, stonewash denim and New Balance sneakers are associated with normcore. It is an anti-fashion look that, true to fashion's inherent contradictions, is currently very much in fashion (Cochrane, 2014; Duncan, 2014).

Sneakerheads: refers to avid collectors of sneakers/trainers, often in retro designs reissued from the archives of the big athletic brands such as Nike and Adidas. In the US, it has roots in hip-hop and skateboard scenes, whereas in the UK it has roots in the football casual subculture (Kawamura, 2016; Redhead, 2012; Thornton, 2003).

1.3.2 An Introduction to the Online Communities

I recruited from six forums, each of which has a distinctive character. There is a great deal of overlap between forums, and forum users often move between them. The internet is a place of flow and connections - discussions in forums often link to other forums. And many of the men interviewed are either active in, or at least lurk in, two or more forums. For example, there is a great deal of interchange between Clothes Forum, Style Questions and Tailored Forum, which are similar, with minor yet important differences. Many forum users favour more than one look, so they might look at one forum for tailoring, and another for denim.

There are also several forums not covered by this research project that the interview participants also post on or at least read. The forums in the research sample are not the only menswear forums on the internet – there are, by my count, at least twelve more online menswear communities. My sample is purposive and non-random; the six forums were chosen because they are particularly representative of style niches, or types of online menswear communities. In keeping with the norms of internet research ethics, I excluded forums that

required a login to post on or were not receptive to my recruitment efforts. I also excluded

forums that I deemed to be overly niche in the stylistic interests to which they cater. Some of

these forums arose in discussions with the research participants, and some are mentioned in

this dissertation. Unfortunately, the most fashion-forward forums are the ones that I was not

able to access. This shaped my results, and readers should keep this limitation in mind,

particularly when reading my discussion of anti-fashion sentiments in Chapter 5. In any case, it

would not have been possible to capture every facet of online menswear culture – a vast and

ever-changing configuration of aesthetics and discourses. The names of the forums have been

changed to ensure the anonymity of the forum users. The use of pseudonyms for both forum

names and user names in online ethnographic research is commonplace, reflecting the fact that

these are not static texts akin to print media but social spaces (Bassett & O'Riordan, 2002;

Constable, 2003; Paccagnella, 1997). This accords member of online communities the same

rights to privacy and confidentiality that members of an offline community would have as the

subject of a research project employing social research methods (Angrosino, 2008; Bird &

Barber, 2006). The forums are as follows:

Brit Forum: Where the other forums are oriented around certain styles, the forum's main unifying

feature is that it is British. It incorporates a range of stylistic looks, from Americana to retro scally

to prep to *avant-garde*, although it places an emphasis on streetwear.

Clothes Forum: This is one of the oldest and biggest menswear forums on the internet. It is a

site for discussion of a broad range of styles, encompassing classic tailoring, heritage, denim,

streetwear and even some fashion-forward clothing. Its two main sections are titled "Classic

Menswear" and "Streetwear and Denim". Classic Menswear covers the more formal clothing

such as suits, sports jackets, dress shirts, dress shoes, ties and so on. There is a great deal of

discussion of bespoke and made-to-measure tailoring but ready-to-wear clothing is discussed

extensively as well. Streetwear and Denim encompasses everything else. There are several

different looks discussed here including streetwear, heritage, prep and *avant-garde*. This forum

is the most commercial of those I looked at, with official affiliate shops who pay to have their own threads appear at the top of the thread list.

Denim Forum: This is hosted on a much-larger discussion site that hosts a huge range of online communities. Because Denim Forum is hosted on this site, its format differs from the traditional bulletin board interface as posts do not appear in chronological order the way they do in the other forums studied for this dissertation. Instead, there is system whereby more popular posts rise to the top of the page. Denim Forum is a site mainly for the discussion of raw denim. Other clothes are discussed here too, but they tend to be aesthetically congruent with raw denim. While Denim Forum users appreciate heritage pieces, they tend to prefer more contemporary silhouettes; on one denim forum excluded from the research sample, the users dress like early 20th century industrial workers.

Steel Soul: Dedicated to a Japanese brand of the same name[4] and other Japanese manufacturers of the heritage look. This site has been operating since 2010 and is hosted on the brand's English-language website. The forum is moderated by the same person who runs all of Steel Soul's distribution outside of Japan. Users who make purchases from the web-store are encouraged to discuss their purchase in the forum. In this sense, it is a "brand community" (Muniz Jr. & O'Guinn, 2001), although there is discussion of other similar brands.

Style Questions: This online menswear community is divided into two sub-forums. One covers classic menswear. The other grew from the popularity of a thread discussing trad, posted in the original forum in 2004 resulting in an entire sub-forum being created for adherents of trad style. These forums are part of a website designed to offer style advice and sell an e-book encyclopaedia of men's clothing, but these sections of the website are rarely discussed by forum members.

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[4] The name has been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Tailored Forum: This discussion forum was started in 2013 by disgruntled Clothes Forum members disappointed with the site's flagrant commercialism. It is a much smaller community than Clothes Forum, making it considerably easier for members to keep up with daily activity. It is mainly dedicated to classic menswear, but not exclusively.

1.4 Structure of the Dissertation

My literature review can be found in Chapter 2. I use this review to discuss how the literature of three areas of study – fashion, consumer culture and masculinity – intersect and shape the dissertation. The thread that binds these fields together is the gendering of fashion and consumption, which places these practices outside the parameters of hegemonic notions of masculinity.

In Chapter 3 I discuss the activities in the forums, and what kinds of people use them. After explaining the demographics of the forums and the differences between them, I show how they operate as communities, even though not all their members participate in them fully. The community spirit of the forums is directed towards consumption, complicating some of our notions of the individualising nature of consumerism. In the final section of this chapter I discuss how such forums act as evolving archives of knowledge, used by forum members as sites for research. The exchange of knowledge is one of many ways in which forum members help one another in the spirit of mutual aid.

In Chapter 4 I turn my attention to the insights that these forums offer to our understanding of consumer culture. The first section of the chapter concerns what kind of things forum users buy, and why. Users of all forums and devotees of all styles are united in a stated preference for high-quality items. As quality is judged in terms of how clothing items are made, I argue that the intense attention given to production techniques can be understood as a case of what the anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1990) calls "production fetishism". I explain how the forum user is an example of what the sociologist Colin Campbell terms the "craft consumer"

(2005) and argue that the craftsmanship that goes into the clothes they buy makes the items much closer to the ideal-type of luxury than much of what is produced by luxury brands. I also examine the role of money, bargain-seeking and secondary markets within forum culture. In the second part of the chapter I shift my focus to questions of how identities are formed within the context of consumer culture, arguing that while forums have stylistic coherence, they lack a sense of group identity or common concerns, making them more akin to "neo-tribes" (Bennett, 1999) than subcultures. Consistent with theories of lifestyle and late modernity, the forum users I interviewed defined themselves in terms of their consumer preferences rather than membership in a collective.

Chapter 5 examines the relationship between the forums and the fashion system. I show how forum users reject fashion and the fashion media as exclusive, manipulative and silly. The forums, used for both news and inspiration, are replacing the fashion media, which is disliked for its commercial imperatives and promotion of unrealistic body ideals. Fashion itself is viewed with suspicion because it encourages a rapid cycle of consumption and disposal. In keeping with their interest in high-quality, durable items, forum users prefer longevity over chasing trends. They favour what they refer to as "timeless style" – style that will outlast the vagaries of fashion. Consistent with menswear forums' emphasis on research and knowledge, dress is approached as a system that can be mastered. I maintain that this is a way of masculinising fashion, making it a rational pursuit in which forum users can be in control.

Chapter 6 continues this discussion of masculinity, demonstrating that the approach to dress as a system is just one among many strategies deployed to avoid fashion's perceived femininity. These strategies include comparing menswear to other masculine hobbies, describing shopping as "collecting" and invoking nerd masculinity by labelling one's interest in clothing as "nerdy" or "geeky". This chapter concludes with a discussion of how menswear forums reflect changes in contemporary masculinity, arguing that while forum users' openness to enjoying the narcissism and gaze of forum participation reflects declining "homohysteria"

(Anderson, 2009), the moves they make to masculinise their consumption of clothing items demonstrates the persistence of ideals associated with "hegemonic masculinity" (Connell, 1995). This contradiction is addressed through use of the theories "pastiche hegemony" (Atkinson, 2011) and "hybrid masculinity" (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014).

Chapter 7 is concerned with the role of space and place in online menswear communities. It explores the relationship between the deterritorialised space of online forums and the places in which forum users live. It shows that while they are concentrated in "fashion capitals", their rejection of fashion results in them seeing little connection between their personal style and the street style of the cities they inhabit. This is equally true for men who live in second-tier fashion cities and fashion hinterlands. Where offline places are important to forum users, it is as sites of consumption. Drawing on the German critical theorist Walter Benjamin's (1982/2002) influential work on spaces of consumption, I describe how the intersection between tourism and shopping makes certain shops sites of "pilgrimage to the commodity fetish". I conclude with a discussion of how the imaginative and experiential dimensions of online shopping mean that online stores, too, can be understood as sites of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. "Fashion capital" has a dual meaning: as well as being a type of city, it also refers to a fashion-specific form of cultural capital.

Chapter 8 looks at online menswear forums as Bourdieusian "fields" in which knowledge about menswear is displayed. This takes two forms: discursive fashion capital, in which individuals display their knowledge in text posted in forums, and embodied fashion capital, in which they display their skill in dressing by posting photographs of their outfits in forums. I argue that this fashion capital is used as a means of distinction, before going on to explain how fashion capital can sometimes be transformed into economic capital.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

2.1 Masculinity

As the historian Herbert Sussman (1995) points out, in studying men and masculinity, one is studying the oppressor. Yet there is much to be gained from the study of men and masculinity, for as Sussman further asserts, drawing attention to masculinity's contingency highlights the possibility for masculinity to change. The subjects of this study are all male and most of them are part of the most dominant group in our society in that they are also white, cisgender, middle-class and heterosexual. While studying such a group might seem at odds with cultural studies' original project of studying marginalised or oppressed groups (Dworkin, 1997), it is consistent with cultural studies' interest in the intersections between power and culture.

With the assumption that the universal subject was male, men's gender was invisible in the humanities and social sciences until the interjections of feminism in the 1970s (Coltrane, 1994; Filene, 1987; Morgan, 1981). Early studies of masculinity tended to take on a confessional or therapeutic tone, looking at men as victims of masculine expectations and prisoners of the male sex role. These studies were somewhat oblivious to questions of power in their discussion of gender (Coltrane, 1994; Carrigan et al., 1985; Middleton, 1992; Pleck, 1987; Whitehead, 2002). Much of the popular literature on masculinity dealt with a supposed "crisis" resulting from feminism and gay liberation's challenges to traditional notions of what it is to be a man (Carrigan et al., 1985; Seidler, 1997). Masculinity studies became less inward-looking as scholars aligned themselves with feminism (Tolson, 1977; Morgan, 1981) and distanced themselves from the pop psychology of the mythopoeic men's movement, with men's exercise of power and domination of women becoming an explicit subject of study (Brod, 1987; Coltrane, 1994; Carrigan et al., 1985; Jefferson, 1994; Whitehead, 2002).

2.1.1 The Social Construction of Masculinity

Masculinity studies approach gender as a socially constructed category that is variable across contexts, cultures (Brittan, 1989; Connell, 1995; Reeser, 2010; Rotundo, 1993; Tolson, 1977; Whitehead, 2002) and history (Carrigan et al., 1985; Connell, 1995; Dummit, 2007; Roper & Tosh, 1991; Rotundo, 1993). Masculinity is neither stable nor monolithic but the product of struggles over meaning (Reeser, 2010; Whitehead, 2002). There is a relationship between gender and sex, but as gender scholars Arthur Brittan (1989) and Judith Butler (2011) point out, biology and society are mutually constituted: a new-born baby boy's sexual organ is meaningless without the social and cultural categories associated with it. This is an anti-essentialist reading of masculinity that owes much to the feminist scholars of the 1970s and their critique of biological determinism (Brittan, 1989; Petersen, 1998; Vance, 1995). This dissertation advances masculinity studies' project of de-naturalising masculinity, looking at how its research subjects drew from and contributed to the ongoing social construction of masculinity.

2.1.2 Hegemonic Masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is the dominant concept in scholarly work on masculinity. Sociologists Tim Carrigan, Bob Connell and John Lee (1985) coined the term to describe the most culturally-exalted form of masculinity: strong, rational, unemotional, white, heterosexual and middle-class. It is "hegemonic" because it subordinates other forms of masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is the product of a structure of gender relations that privileges men over women; while all men benefit from this arrangement, some men's masculinity is more hegemonic than others. As a gender ideology, masculinity naturalises existing gender relations, relying on the common-sense assumption that makes the currently dominant form of masculinity a taken-for-granted norm (Brittan, 1989; Buchbinder, 2012; Hearn & Collinson, 1994; MacInnes, 1998; Reeser, 2010; Whitehead, 2002). This is the reason why conformity to masculine norms

is the default option for those who can conform to them. Like other forms of ideology addressed by cultural studies (Hall, 1980; Eagleton, 1991), the ideology of masculinity is reproduced through culture. Much scholarly attention has turned towards issues of representations of masculinity in fields such as art, film, television, theatre, advertising, comic books, popular music, and novels (as in, for example, Dubbert, 1979; Lay, 2000; MacKinnon, 2003; Middleton, 1992; Sedgwick, 1985; Segal, 1998; Simpson, 1994; Solomon-Godeau, 1995; Reeser, 2010; Silverman, 1992; Walsh; 2010).

Carrigan, Connell and Lee (1985) advocated the use of the plural term "masculinities", pointing to how hegemonic masculinity is dominant over a multitude of other forms that masculinity can take. Masculinities (as distinct from the singular "masculinity") are explored in more depth in Raewyn Connell's book *Masculinities* (1995), in which Connell shows how masculinity is linked to other forms of subjectivity such as race and class. While certain masculinities fall within Connell's hegemonic, dominant category, others fall within the "subordinate" or "complicit" category. Another variation is "protest masculinity", which is used to describe a group of Australian working-class bikers who reject hegemonic masculinity's concern with money and work, yet engage in hegemonic practices of machismo, power and violence. The same term is used to describe a group of middle-class pro-feminist men, who have access to the privileges of hegemonic masculinity but actively reject it. While Connell's categories are somewhat static (Reeser, 2010), they emphasise the point that men have the agency to reject or negotiate hegemonic masculinity. This can be a matter of resisting, subverting or simply ignoring dominant norms, as in the case of anti-sexist men (Christian, 1994; Moffat, 2012). Much of the work on masculinities echoes Connell's intersectional approach, looking at different ways of being a man in terms of the intersections between masculinity, race (hooks, 1995; Marriott, 1996; Mercer & Julien, 1988; Rutherford, 1988; Wacquant, 2008; Wallace, 1979) and class (Back, 1994; Dunk & Bartol, 2005; Rotudno, 1993; Tolson, 1977; Willis, 1978), as well as culturally or geographically specific forms of masculinity (Edwards, 1997; Ramsay, 2011).

The "hegemonic" in hegemonic masculinity is derived from Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, meaning that the form of masculinity that is hegemonic at any one time can, and does, change because of struggles over what meanings and behaviours are idealised. Yet as in Gramsci's theory of hegemony, whatever the outcomes of these struggles, the fundamental balance of power remains intact (Connell, 1995). Given hegemonic masculinity's mutability, more recent work on masculinity has investigated the significance of the softening of masculinity; for example, in the case of egalitarian "New Fathers" (Messner, 1993). This includes privileged men's incorporation of identity traits that are coded as gay, female or non-White (see Bridges & Pascoe, 2014 for a review), as in the case of straight men who describe aspects of their personality as "gay" (Bridges, 2014). These new forms of masculinity have come to be known as "hybrid masculinity" and there is debate as to whether these are meaningful changes to the structures of gender inequality (Anderson, 2009) or simply changes in the style of hegemonic masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt; Demetriou, 2001; Messner, 1993, 2007). Chapter 6 engages with these debates, looking at whether online menswear forums demonstrate a change in the substance, or just the style, of hegemonic masculinity.

2.1.3 Post-structuralist Masculinity Studies

Scholars have critiqued Connell's approach for its essentialist assumption that masculinity is located within the body, arguing that this assumption reifies existing social constructions of sex and gender (Hearn; 1996; MacInnes, 1998; Morgan, 1992). For an anti-essentialist alternative, we can look to post-structuralist approaches to masculinity. These approaches build on the work of post-structuralist feminists whose radical deconstruction of gender understands gender to be arbitrary and constructed in discourse (Butler, 1990; Butler, 2011; Middleton, 1922; Mouffe, 1992; Petersen, 1998; Saco, 1992). Individuals are produced by a multitude of discourses, resulting in a subject that is multiple and contradictory and a subject

position that can never be fixed, meaning there can be no single way of being a man. In this sense, post-structuralist masculinity studies are similar to the masculinities approach in their celebration of forms of masculinity that interrogate "the cultural scripts of normative masculinity" (Gutterman, 1994, p. 224). But post-structuralist approaches also open up more radical possibilities in their assertion that masculinity can be performed by individuals of any sex/gender combination (Halberstam, 1998; Petersen, 1998) or done away with altogether (MacInnes, 1998). This destabilising of gender is part of an explicitly political critique of the ways that dominant gender norms proscribe and oppress (Benwell, 2003; Berger et al., 1995).

If gender is performative, then one does not need to be biologically male to be masculine. Yet the majority of those who are biologically male perform some form of masculinity while, conversely, the majority of those who perform masculinity are biologically male. This includes all the men who participated in my research project. In recent years, the radical critiques of gender found in post-structuralist gender studies have gone mainstream. Gender fluidity, gender non-conformity and agender are all part of the contemporary cultural *zeitgeist*. Clothing's role in the performance of gender has made these terms particularly current in discussions of fashion. But as will be seen throughout this dissertation, most menswear forum users stick to strictly codified gender scripts. The radical new configurations of masculinity celebrated by post-structuralist masculinity studies are of little interest to them. But insights from post-structuralist masculinity studies help us understand why traditionally masculine style typologies are so popular within online menswear culture.

Sociologist Stephen Whitehead's (2002) work on the masculine subject offers useful insights to this research. Following Butler (1990), Whitehead describes how when a biologically male baby is born, it is assumed to be a masculine subject. That subject will, in turn, most likely assume itself to be masculine. Engaging with the discursive framework of masculinity, the masculine subject carries out the cultural practices that denote his gender. He models himself on the idealised representations of masculinity that surround him in culture. The category "man"

provides a stable reference point, explaining why so many men choose the traditional (that is to say, hegemonic) ways of "being and becoming" masculine. The category "man" also confers power in a way that its binary opposite, "woman", does not.

The implication of Whitehead's work is that masculinity is formed in relation to ideals circulating in discourse. Individuals have the agency to change the meaning of masculinity through the discursive identity work involved in the performance of the self. The disruption of masculinity's grand narratives has opened up possibilities for such identity work, creating a multiplicity of masculinities, many of them non-normative. However, for many men this disruption can be threatening, resulting in a reassertion of traditional forms of masculinity. Whitehead's theories appear to be borne out by a relatively recent development: the rise of the online "manosphere" where men celebrate reactionary forms of masculinity and denigrate women (Ging, 2017).

Online menswear forums have little to do with the manosphere, although there are some parallels that are discussed in Chapter 5. Whitehead's work does, however, help to explain why many forum users are so distrustful of clothing styles that deviate from traditionally masculine ones, something discussed in Chapter 5. Furthermore, Whitehead's work helps to elucidate why, despite the supposedly fragmentary and fluid nature of the postmodern subject, the vast majority of men perform traditional forms of masculinity based on approximating the idealised form of masculinity found in Connell's hegemonic masculinity model. Sociologist Michael Atkinson's (2011) theory of "pastiche hegemony" describes how men selectively incorporate these cultural ideals, taking the "goods" of masculinity and distancing themselves from the outdated "bads". Chapter 6 deploys these concepts in its discussion of how forum users draw on the aesthetics of historic masculine ideals, a phenomenon detailed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

2.2 Consumer Culture

The attitudes and behaviours observed in this dissertation need to be situated within the context of consumer culture. Media scholar Arthur Asa Berger (2004) defines consumer culture as a culture "in which there has been a great expansion of commodity production, leading to societies full of consumer goods and services and places where these consumer goods and services can be purchased" (p. 27). We could say that consumer culture is the culture of what the French social theorist Jean Baudrillard (1970/1998) terms "the consumer society". A consumer society is one in which a society's dominant values are organised around and through consumption (Featherstone, 2007; Lury, 1996; Slater, 1997). Baudrillard identifies two important aspects of consumption that this dissertation takes as given: 1) we live in a consumer society saturated with commodities, and 2) these commodities operate as signs. Much of the literature on consumer culture shares Baudrillard's interest in signification and meaning-making, taking a semiotic approach (see Du Gay et al., 1997; Dyer, 1982; Fiske, 1989; Goldman, 1992; Leiss et al., 2005; Wernick, 1991; Williamson, 1978, 1986). This dissertation addresses sign-value as it explores the ways in which clothes signify values, group-belonging and status. However, its approach is more in keeping with material culture studies' interest in how material objects such as articles of clothing are ascribed meanings within culture (Banim & Guy, 2001; Crane & Bovone, 2006; Miller, 1987, Miller & Woodward, 2012; Woodward, 2007).

Advertising's separation of commodities from use-value is the focus of critical theorist W.G. Haug's (1986) theory of commodity aesthetics, which describes how advertising, sales techniques and design all work to imbue commodities with an imagined use-value. This explains how it is that commodities with the same use-value come to command different exchange values. The consumer imagines him/herself as the sort of person who would use the product, and his/her identity is thus constituted, in part, through their use of said commodity in the imagining of the self. Campbell (1989) is also interested in the role of imaginative consumption, arguing that consumption is driven not by needs but by daydreams. We fantasise about the

things we are going to buy and how we will use them. The fantasies are not just about the

goods but about the self, the kind of person we will be once we have that item. The imagining of

the ideal self through consumption is a topic to which I return in Chapter 7's discussion of online

shopping.

2.2.1 Reflexive Modernisation, Identity and Lifestyle

The post-industrial economy of late capitalism is widely recognised as one in which

consumption plays a central role (Giddens, 1990; Harvey, 1989; Jameson, 1991; Lash & Urry,

1994). The corresponding late modern or postmodern culture is characterised by the ubiquity of

advertising and consumerism (Featherstone, 2007; Harvey, 1989; Jameson 1991; Lury, 1996).

The coming of postmodern society was anticipated in critiques of 1970s America, published by

the historian Christopher Lasch (1979) and the sociologist Daniel Bell (1976). In their work, both

Bell and Lasch condemned the hedonistic, individualistic and consumerist culture that

coalesced in the 1960s at the expense of traditional forms of culture. Lasch terms this new

culture "the culture of narcissism", arguing that advanced capitalism's creative destruction of the

industrial mode of production and commodification of all aspects of life has accomplished what

the radical left had attempted yet failed to accomplish: the sweeping away of repressive

sexuality, the Protestant work ethic, the authoritarian family, and the power of the church. Bell is

similarly interested in how advanced capitalism has undermined the Protestant work ethic in its

promotion of the pleasure principle. Bell describes the culture of late capitalism as one based on

freedom, self-realisation and self-fulfilment. Replacing the Protestant work ethic as the cultural

justification for capitalism is hedonism - "pleasure as a way of life" (p. 22). Sociologists Anthony

Giddens (1990; 1991; 1994), Ulrich Beck (1994) and Scott Lash (1994) similarly argue that

capitalism's maturation has inadvertently brought about radical transformations to culture and

society. They describe a process of "reflexive modernization" which involves "the *disembedding*

of social systems… and the *reflexive ordering and reordering* of social relations in the light of

continual inputs of knowledge affecting the actions of individuals and groups" (Giddens, 1990, p.17; his italics). This means that identities are no longer determined by institutions such as religion, work and the family to the degree they once were. Instead, individuals must work on their identities, reflecting on who they are and who they want to be.

This is relevant to my study because reflexive modernisation suggests that in post-traditional societies, the freeing of individuals from collective structures has produced new patterns of consumption. Consumption, rather than work, religion or family is now the basis for individuation. It is an individualised act that is romanticised, divorced from needs, targeted to niche markets, driven by one-upmanship, based on "sign-value" and motivated by "calculating hedonism" (Lash, 1994). In contrast to the nihilistic pessimism of postmodern theorists such as Frederic Jameson (1991) and Jean Baudrillard (1994), reflexive modernisation is a more optimistic take on the changes brought about by late capitalism (Glennie & Thrift, 1992). It points to the new forms of individuation, subjectivity, friendship, community and work found in the post-traditional order (Giddens, 1992; Lash and Urry, 1994); for example, in communities of consumption such as new age festival-goers (Hetherington, 1992).

Giddens (1991) describes how the self, freed from the bonds of traditional institutions, has become a reflexive project. Individuals must sustain "coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives" (p. 5) because of the disappearance of proscribed societal roles. This makes lifestyle choice an increasingly important aspect of self-identity and everyday life. Lifestyle in this context refers to a "set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfil utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity" (p. 81). Individuals choose lifestyles to cope with the overwhelming number of choices faced in everyday life, providing coherence amongst the chaos. Lifestyles are unique to post-traditional societies because they assume a plurality of choices and are voluntarily adopted rather than ascribed. Theories of lifestyle provide the framework for analysis of how dress and consumption are integrated into a whole set of identity practices that shape

both the body and the self: practices such as diet, exercise and demeanour (Featherstone, 1987; Turner, 1996).

Giddens' work on lifestyle suggests that identity has become an ongoing project, with individuals expected to "sell" or even "brand" themselves (Berger, 2004; Bauman, 2007; Wernick, 1991). The sociologist Zygmunt Bauman (2000) describes identity in late modernity as liberated from traditional identities and thus requiring a project of self-identity based on consumer choice. Along with the sociologist Rob Shields (1992b), Bauman (2000) argues that individuals now organise themselves into what the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli terms "neo-tribes": lifestyles based on consumption. While one cannot change traditional markers of status and identity, with enough economic capital one can change his/her lifestyle through consumer choice (Featherstone, 2007; Slater, 1997). Such an individual, described by sociologist Mike Featherstone as the "hero" of consumer culture, signals his or her individuality through consumption. The economic cost of consumption means that some social groups are more actively engaged in the stylisation of life than others, but this does not mean that stylistic self-consciousness is restricted to the affluent. As sociologist David Chaney (1996) notes, the working-class youth subcultures canonised by the CCCS (Hall & Jefferson, 1976) can be understood as groups engaged in lifestyle practices *avant la lettre*. I draw on these theories of lifestyle, self-identity and neo-tribes in Chapter 4's discussion of group-belonging.

2.2.2 Consumption and Identity

As we have seen regarding the discussion of lifestyle, consumer culture is one of the principal sites in which identity is developed and expressed (Bourdieu, 1994; Edwards, 2000; Veblen, 1899/1973; Slater, 1997). Sociologist Don Slater argues that identity is best understood through the metaphor of consumption, with self-identity chosen from "the shop-window of the pluralized social world" (p. 85). Cultural anthropologist Grant McCracken (1988) also sees consumers as "engaged in an ongoing enterprise of self-creation" (p. 88), with goods used to

"complete the self" (p. 88). Consideration of the relationship between consumption and identity takes as a given the anthropological notion that goods carry meanings (Douglas & Isherwood, 2006). Scholars studying material culture and subcultures emphasise the way in which individuals and groups imbue objects with new meanings, making consumption the basis for group identities (Clarke, 1976; Laughey, 2006; McCracken, 1988; Mort, 1996; Miller, 1987; Tomlinson, 1990; Willis, 1990). While the subculture scholars of the 1970s argued that this is a form of stylistic resistance (Hal & Jefferson, Hebdige, 1979), anthropologist Daniel Miller points out that re-contextualisation is not an inherently positive or political act. It can be understood as just another example of the way in which consumer culture divorces sign-value from use-value (Tomlinson, 1990). This dissertation looks at how material objects such as Goodyear-welted shoes, Neapolitan-tailored jackets and Japanese jeans are vehicles for meanings around which both personal and group identities are formed.

Socio-musicologist Simon Frith (1996) suggests an alternative model with which to approach consumption and identity. It is based on two premises: "first, that identity is *mobile*, a process not a thing, a becoming not a being; second, that our experience of music…. is best understood as an experience of this *self-in-process*" (p. 109, his italics). Taking this as his starting point, Frith argues that social groups "only get to know themselves *as groups…. through cultural activity, through aesthetic judgement*" (p. 109, his italics). Individuals join these groups in their identification with the aesthetic consumption choices of others, imagining themselves as the sort of person who might purchase a particular type of record or go to a particular type of concert. In Frith's approach, consumption is a process of imagining the self, as it is in Haug (1986) and Campbell's (1989) work on consumption, but here consumption is part of a social, rather than an individual, process. While music is an admittedly unique type of commodity, Frith provides a way of theorising the relationship between identity and consumption in social groups organised around shared tastes. It does not seem like too much of a stretch to include online menswear communities in this category. Cultural studies scholar Paul Willis' (1990) work on

youth's "symbolic consumption" similarly understands the relationship between identity and consumption as processual and group-based. Willis argues that youths' stylistic choices in consuming clothing and music are "crucial to the creation and sustenance of individuals and group identities, even to cultural survival of identity itself" (p. 2). As in Frith's work, identity is a function of aesthetic consumer choices, and these choices are part of an ongoing process of identity-formation occurring on a group level.

This take on consumption as part of a process involving social identification and belonging contrasts with more pessimistic critiques of consumer culture that present the subject as completely individualised and commodified. Let us take, for example, Bauman's (2007) pronouncement that "Consumption is a supremely solitary activity (perhaps even the archetype of solitude), even when it happens to be conducted in company. No lasting bonds emerge in the activity of consumption" (p. 78). In the next chapter, I will show how my findings challenge this assertion. Theories of lifestyle suggest that, in Slater's (1997) words, "identity seems to be more a function of consumption that the other, traditional, way round" (p. 30). Yet empirical studies of consumption seem to support Frith and Willis' interpretation of consumption as something more social than individuated. Miller et al.'s study of London shopping centres found that they were spaces in which traditional identities based on ethnicity and gender were rediscovered through processes of identification. Muggleton's (2004) study of punks, mods and goths found that their consumption of subcultural commodities was tied to subcultural group identification. Respondents in both studies described a discovery of the authentic self through group identification worked out in the field of consumption. This demonstrates that identities based on group-belonging are not completely subsumed within individuated consumer lifestyles; they still have a place in contemporary society and overlap with more postmodern identities that can, indeed, be "tried on" (Lury, 1996; Miller et al., 1998). Chapter 4 explores online menswear communities' place in this dialectic between sociability and individuation.

2.2.3 Consumption and Leisure

As consumption is a voluntaristic activity that occurs during free time and is shaped by class and taste, it has much in common with leisure activities (Chaney, 1994). Studies of postmodern shopping practices highlight how the line separating consumption and leisure has become blurred (Chaney, 1990; Newby, 1993; Shields, 1992a; Stebbins, 2009). This is seen most clearly with the theming of shopping at flagship stores and mega-malls, for example. This blurring of the lines between consumption and leisure has made shopping a popular touristic pursuit (Chaney, 1990; Goss, 1993; Lowe & Wrigley, 1996). Consumption-as-leisure is not a new phenomenon. Historian Erika Diane Rappaport (2001) describes how wealthy Victorian women shopped for pleasure in London's West End and the historian Christopher Breward's (1999) history of men's shopping in Victorian London similarly describes shopping as a form of leisure. What has changed is that shopping-as-leisure is no longer the purview of the wealthy and is now a mass phenomenon. With the rise of consumer culture, leisure time has been redefined as consumption time (Slater, 1997).

Shields (1992a) articulates how in consumer societies, consumption-as-leisure enacts lifestyle and self-identity. For example, the yuppies of the 1980s organised their lives around shopping, and this was what defined them as a lifestyle group. Sociologist Robert A. Stebbins (2009) argues that shopping can be classified as a form of either casual or serious leisure, with the latter category encompassing what he calls "shopping-as-hobby". As will be seen in Chapters 3 and 4, forum users are deeply and frequently engaged in discussing, researching and buying clothes. Their shopping would be best described as "serious" leisure, meaning that their intensive consumption practices fall into Stebbin's category of shopping-as-leisure. As I discuss in Chapter 6, menswear was explicitly described as a hobby by some of the interview respondents. Stebbins briefly mentions "distance shopping" as a form of leisure, adding that nowadays, "shopping appears at least as likely to be done by computer as by catalogue" (p. 94) but unfortunately, he does not expand on this point. There have been some theoretical

explorations of online shopping (Featherstone, 1998; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010b), as well as studies of eBay (Beer & Burrows, 2010; Cohen, 2002; Denegri-Knott & Molesworth, 2010a; Hillis et al., 2006; Petit, 2006; White, 2012), of webstore design (Currah, 2003; Quinn, 2003) and of the carceral aspects of online shopping (Fernback, 2007; Jarrett, 2006), but little critical work on the experiential dimensions of online consumption.

Blurring the lines between consumption and leisure, forum use takes place in leisure time, a pleasurable distraction occurring either at home, on mobile phones or in moments stolen away from work. As will be seen throughout this dissertation, the lines between shopping and forum use are equally blurry, with forum users following hyperlinks from the forums to e-commerce sites. Conversely, after seeing something they found interesting on an e-commerce site, forum users would seek out or start discussion threads about that item in a forum. With this back-and-forth between reading, posting and shopping, links and images from e-commerce sites make up a large proportion of content found within online menswear communities. Because online shopping is so integrated into participation in menswear forums, my study of them offers new insights into the experiential dimensions of online shopping. The theoretical implications of this are addressed in Chapter 7.

2.4.4 Consumption and Masculinity

Historically, women's relationship with goods was understood in terms of consumption, while men's relation to goods was understood in terms of production (Roper, 1991). Consumption to this day still carries connotations of femininity, for the ideal-type shopper is a woman (Campbell, 1997; Featherstone, 1998; Miller, 1997). Scholars have looked at how spaces of consumption were gendered sites in which women entered the Victorian public sphere and experienced urban life (Bowlby, 2010; Chaney, 1983; Domosh, 1996; Dowling, 1993; Felski, 1995; Laermans, 1993; Nava, 1997; Rappaport, 2001; Whitaker, 2006; Wilson, 1991), but as historian Michael Roper notes, masculinity has been mostly overlooked in

discussions of the gendering of consumption. The absence of men from the history of consumption leads Breward (1999) to describe London's Victorian male consumer as "the hidden consumer". As sociologist Tim Edwards (2000) argues, it is absurd to think that men were not involved in consumption. This idea is the result of dominant gender ideologies surrounding masculinity and femininity - the masculinity of the self-controlled man standing in contrast to the hysteria of the out-of-control female consumer. This creates a tension between consumption and the hegemonic version of masculinity discussed in the previous section of this chapter.

Men have participated in consumer culture for as long as there has been one, but the way in which masculinity is defined against femininity has shaped the ways in which they consume. For example, in the early 20th century, American men found department stores to be too feminine, so the stores created men's sections to save men from wading through the cosmetic aisles (Whitaker, 2006). In the middle part of the 20th century, magazines such as *Esquire* and *Playboy* helped advertisers reach male consumers by presenting consumption as rational, masculine connoisseurship and placing ads for consumer goods alongside objectifying images of women. These images were intended to assuage anxieties about masculinity that might result from active participation in consumer culture (Coulter, 2014; Osgerby, 2001). In an analysis of more recent marketing techniques, marketing scholars Douglas B. Holt and Craig J. Thompson (2004) use the man-of-action model to explain how marketers have redefined consumption as an act of heroic male valour to make it compatible with dominant masculine ideals. The work of menswear forum users to make consumption masculine, by redefining it as an economically rational pursuit, "collecting" and "hunting", is discussed in Chapter 6.

Consumer culture is a site in which representations of men are frequently analysed to draw conclusions about the changing nature of masculinity (Edwards, 1997; Holt & Thompson, 2004, Mort, 1988; 1996; Nixon, 1996; Turner, 1996; Osgerby, 2001). Since the 1950s, the range of consumer goods aimed at men has expanded greatly, incorporating everything from personal

care products to jewellery (Wernick, 1991). The 1980s and 1990s saw consumption redefined as an acceptable practice for men, no longer feminised and passive but an active and meaningful activity (Moore, 1988; Osgerby, 2001). One does not need to be a political economist to understand why and how men have become so closely integrated into consumer culture. This is a subject I return to in the next section's discussion of menswear. Many studies have focused on advertising not just as a mirror reflecting contemporary masculinity but as a driving force behind recent changes in masculinity, making men more concerned about bodily appearance and more comfortable with consumption (Patterson & Elliot, 2002; Schroeder & Zwick, 2004; Turner, 1996; Wernick, 1991). As will be explained in Chapter 5, menswear forum users have positioned themselves outside the fields of fashion found in fashion advertising and men's magazines. The types of masculinities they perform nonetheless take place within the context of these bigger cultural shifts in consumer culture, of which men's fashion is a part. It is to the subject of fashion that we shall now turn.

2.3 Fashion

This dissertation makes a distinction between fashion and style. The geographer Wilbur Zelinsky (2004) offers a concise definition of fashion as "[a] system of artificially induced change in the character, design, or perception of an item subject to individual preference, a change sufficiently great to be detected readily by the casual observer" (p. 88). Fashion is so bound up in notions of change that it is seen as an integral facet of modernity (Lehmann, 2000; Lipovetsky, 1994), with fashion studies scholar Elizabeth Wilson (1985) writing "Fashion, in a sense *is* change" (p. 5). Fashion is not a process exclusive to clothing, but in everyday English the term is used to refer to the garment industry, or at least those aspects of it that are driven by the fashion cycle (Kaiser, 2012). While often confused with fashion, style is something different. Fashion scholar Carol Tulloch (2010) points out that fashion is a social process whereas style is individual, referring to an individual's active and personal manner of dressing. I follow sociologist

Julia Twigg's (2007) example in addressing "clothing, not fashion" (p. 5). This means turning attention away from retail and the catwalk to look at how clothing is used by men who are neither fashion-forward nor involved in spectacular youth subcultures. In so doing, this dissertation contributes to efforts to redress the over-representation of the cutting-edge and youthful in fashion studies (Buckley & Clark, 2012; Twigg, 2018).

As the sociologist Herbert Blumer argued in 1969, fashion should be taken seriously. However, this is an argument that scholars working in this field have had to continue to make until recently. This is in part due to fashion's association with the superficial, fleeting and irrational (Edwards, 1996; Wilson, 1985). These notions of fashion were most explicitly articulated in economist Thorstein Veblen's *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899/1973), which presents the wearing of fashionable clothing as one of the forms of conspicuous consumption with which the new middle classes of the 19th century United States engaged in status distinction. Veblen argues that the reason for the rapid turnover in styles within the fashion system is that as new clothing styles are taken up by those lower down in the social hierarchy, they lose their values as markers of status. This means that stylistic innovation is required to ensure that this form of consumption remained conspicuous. A similar argument was developed by the sociologist Georg Simmel (1904), who introduced the notion of "trickle-down" to describe how styles change in response to the metropolitan upper-class's need to keep ahead of other classes as they diffuse outwards from the elites to those they live side-by-side with in the city.

There is a moralism to Veblen's work that contemporary fashion scholars reject, emphasising instead the creative and democratising aspects of fashion (Breward, 2003; Lipovetsky, 1993; Wilson, 1985). In any case, with the coming of mass fashion, these theories of what McCracken (1988) terms "chase and flight" (p. 94) now seem somewhat irrelevant (Blumer, 1969; Horowitz, 1975). Furthermore, since the 1970s, scholars have observed that fashion is just as likely to move the other way, "floating" upwards from street-level working-class style to high fashion (Blumberg, 1974; Davis, 1992; Edwards, 1996; Field, 1970; Polhemus,

1994; Polhemus & Proctor, 1978). Status is central to anthropological theories of fashion, which look at clothing as a way that status and belonging are communicated in both traditional and post-traditional societies (Douglas & Isherwood, 2006; Polhemus & Proctor, 1978; Roach & Eicher, 1979; Schwarz, 1979). These approaches to the material culture of clothing understand clothes in terms of their "objectification" of cultural values (Attfield, 2000; Miller, 1987; 2010; Miller & Woodward, 2012; Woodward, 2007). As explained in section 2.2, I follow material culture approaches in my exploration of the meaning that articles of clothing hold within online menswear communities. The way in which forum users' clothes signify and objectify status is addressed in Chapter 8.

Another common approach to the study of fashion is inspired by the semiotician Roland Barthes (1957/1973; 1967/1983), "reading" meaning in clothes as if they were texts (Lurie, 1981; McDowell, 1997). These readings can be somewhat reductionist and often make sweeping assumptions about the wearer's intent. They tend to overemphasise the degree to which dress is shaped by conscious, active decisions and downplay the ways in which clothing choices result from social conventions, social constraints, lack of meaningful alternatives, dress codes and the purchase decisions of family members (Campbell, 1996). More nuanced approaches to fashion-as-communication read clothes as polysemic texts shaped by prevailing social discourses (Barnard, 1996; Calefato, 2004; Davis, 1992). What semiotic, material culture and class-oriented approaches to fashion have in common is a concern with clothing's role as a vehicle for identity, something they share with the approaches to consumption discussed earlier in this chapter. While open to misinterpretation by both encoder and decoder, clothes do come laden with cultural meanings. Following Wilson, I approach fashion as "an aesthetic medium for the expression of ideas, desires and beliefs circulating in society" (p. 9). This means looking at the images and ideas beyond the garment - what Barthes (1967/1983) describes as fashion's "paratext". It also means working to understand what the clothes actually mean to the people

who wear them, something that is missing in the purely semiotic approaches to subculture discussed in the next section.

2.3.1 Fashion, Subculture and Identity

Simmel (1904) first identified the dualistic contradiction at the heart of fashion: while fashion is used to express individuality, it is also used to express group belonging. The use of fashion as an expression of collective identity has been explored extensively in studies of subculture. While the term "subculture" was first used by the Chicago School of Sociology in relation to urban deviance (Laughey, 2006), it was only in the mid-1970s at Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that clothing came to be recognised as an important element of subcultures. The CCCS scholars accepted only working-class stylisation as authentic subcultural dress. Looking at post-war English youth groups who wore spectacular clothing styles, groups such as the teddy boys, mods, rockers and skinheads, they argued that subcultures are a form of cultural resistance against both the dominant culture of the bourgeoisie and the parent culture of the adult working-class. They were interested in how subcultures' members assemble commodities into distinctive stylistic ensembles homologous with subcultural groups' concerns, subverting the meanings of the commodities in the process. For example, in the teddy boys' wearing of Edwardian drape coats once worn by upper-class guardsmen, the previously aristocratic coats became a sign of menace (Clarke, 1976a, 1976b; Clarke et al., 1976; Cohen, 2005; Corrigan, 1979; Hall & Jefferson, 1976; Hall et al., 1978; Hebdige, 1979; Mungham & Pearson, 1976).

This body of work highlights the weaknesses inherent to purely semiotic approaches to fashion. The Birmingham School scholars used semiotics to "read" acts of stylisation as forms of cultural resistance, but never attempted to find out from subculture members what their clothes meant to them or what their motivations were. This allowed them to theorise subcultures as a sort of working-class vanguard when they were much more fluid in their membership and

heterogeneous in their class composition (Clarke, 1982; Cohen, 1980; Muggleton, 2000). Nevertheless, by turning attention to the clothing choices of working-class males, the CCCS showed that the creativity and self-expression of fashion is not confined to the wealthy or to women. Moreover, although the CCCS approach over-theorised these young men's stylistic choices, it did draw attention to how the meaning of clothes can change depending on who wears them and how.

Convinced that postmodernism has done away with group identities and the authentic self (Featherstone, 2007; Slater, 1997), many scholars now argue that subculture is an out-dated and irrelevant concept, preferring instead to speak of "club cultures" or "post-subcultures" (Bennett, 1999; Malbon, 1999; Weinzierl & Muggleton, 2003; Redhead, 1990). Anthropologist Ted Polhemus (1994) theorises a "supermarket of style" in which individuals employ postmodern pastiche and historicity, ransacking past subcultures for their now free-floating signifiers. In this interpretation, subcultural styles no longer mean anything, and certainly do not say anything about class, or any other form of identity for that matter. Polhemus argues that instead of the old modern identities tied to fixed attributes and collective membership, we have individuated, fluid identities formed entirely through consumption. However, it seems that adherents of this perspective may be a bit premature in describing society as a "fancy-dress party" (Slater, 1997, p. 30). As mentioned in relation to consumption and identity, Muggleton's (2000) enquiries into the impact of postmodernism on subcultures found that while his respondents were less likely to identify themselves as goths, punks or mods than they might have been in the past, they still felt a strong sense of belonging to these groups. Their consumption of subcultural commodities was tied to group identification; it was much more than just postmodern play with free-floating signifiers.

Other scholars have also found that despite the declining role of social class, individuals continue to identify with distinctive style subcultures (Hodkinson, 2002; Hodkinson & Bennett, 2012; McCulloch et al., 2006; Shildrick & MacDonald, 2006). As indicated earlier in this chapter,

with their use of consumption to define membership in voluntaristic groupings formed around leisure, subcultures are akin to lifestyle groups (Chaney, 1996; Du Gay et al., 1997; Lury, 1996). Lash (1994) describes subcultures as "reflexive communities" because unlike traditional communities, members *choose* to join these communal worlds with their subculture-specific meanings and practices. The difference between subcultures and lifestyle groups or neo-tribes is the degree to which membership involves a sense of belonging that extends beyond shared consumer tastes: what sociologist Paul Hodkinson (2002) refers to as "substance". What remains to be seen is where menswear forum members fit into this continuum. I take this matter up in Chapter 4.

2.3.2 Studying Menswear

While the Birmingham School has been rightly critiqued for ignoring the role of girls in subcultures (McRobbie, 1980), the CCCS researchers should be lauded for being among the first to give serious scholarly attention to male dress. Even today, fashion is most commonly studied in relation to women. Fashion scholars' continued emphasis on women's fashion tends to reproduce the common-sense assumption that fashion is feminine (Breward, 1999). While there are books dedicated to men's fashion (Breward, 1999; Edwards, 1997; Malossi, 2000; McDowell, 1997; Osgerby, 2001), they are dwarfed in number by the number of books about women's fashion. At the same time, these books often sit at the cross-section of the academic and the popular, offering photographs, historical background and wry commentary rather than critical analysis (see Farren, 1985; Gunn et al., 2012; Hewitt & Rawlings, 2004; Marsh, 2010; Marsh & Trynka, 2005; Roach, 1999; Sims, 2010; Sims, 2011; Sims, 2014). In recent years increasing scholarly attention has been paid to men's fashion (Geczy & Karaminas, 2017a, 2017b; de Casanova, 2015; Hill, 2018; Kawamura, 2016; Rizzo, 2015) and the journal *Critical Studies in Men's Fashion* redresses the imbalance (Reilly, 2013), but most of the scholarly work

on fashion is still about women.

2.3.3 Masculinity, Fashion and Consumer Culture

Where fashion studies has been concerned with menswear, this work has tended to be concerned with the more contemporary, fashionable or youthful aspects of men's clothing such as the new man (Edwards, 1997; Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996), the metrosexual (Shugart, 2008), youth subcultures (Hebdige, 1979; Polhemus, 1994), cutting-edge designers (Geczy & Karaminas, 2017), self-identified followers of men's fashion (Barry 2015; Barry & Martin 2015; Barry & Phillips 2016; Rinallo, 2007) and gender rebels (Barry & Martin, 2016). At the other end of the spectrum there has been research on men with ambivalent feelings towards fashion, such as men who struggle with the fits on offer (Barrie, 2014), more concerned with practicality (Galilee, 2002; Green & Kaiser, 2016; Noh et al., 2015; Twigg 2016) or who have anxieties about fashion's perceived femininity (Bakewell, Mitchell & Rothwell, 2006; Kaiser et al., 2008). This dissertation addresses a wholly separate category of male clothing consumer, one highly interested in clothing yet still sceptical of fashion. As will become clear in Chapter 5, they are not the fashion-engaged men who are indicative of the increasing appetite for men's fashion, nor are they the fashion-indifferent men who play down their concern with appearance.

As a system of change for change's sake, with overtones of vanity and frivolity, fashion has historically been gendered as female (Crane, 2000; Edwards, 1997; Featherstone, 1998; Jones, 2004). Fashion implies a kind of feminised victimhood, of being taken in by a vast apparatus of commercial manipulation (Bowlby, 1985; Wilson, 1985). Since what Flügel (1930) described as the Victorian period's "great masculine renunciation", it has been thought that men are too serious and rational to concern themselves with the trivialities of fashion (Edwards, 2006; Steele 1989, 2000). The idea that men suddenly stopped following fashion is historically inaccurate (Breward, 1999; Ostberg, 2012; Rizzo, 2015), but the notion that men are not interested in fashion persists (Crane, 2000). As Edwards (2006) writes:

Fashionable, image-conscious or simply "dressy" men are often seen to arouse anxieties in gendered as well as sexual terms, being perceived not only as potentially gay or sexually ambiguous but as somehow not fitting in, particularly in terms of rumbling any wider belief in masculinity as a form profoundly "un-self-conscious being-ness" or in undermining the notion that "real" men just throw things on or just *are* men (p. 113).

With masculinity understood as the repudiation of femininity (Buchbinder, 2012; Reeser, 2010), the femininity of fashion put it at odds with hegemonic notions of masculinity (Edwards, 2006; Steele, 1989). Homosexuality has historically been associated with effeminacy, resulting in the common conflation of femininity and homosexuality in dominant ideas of gender and sexuality (Edwards, 2006). Gay culture's adoption of both fashion and femininity as gay signifiers has further compounded the idea that fashion is somehow gay (Cole, 2000; Kates, 2002; Stines, 2017). Despite many gay men's rejection of effeminacy and adoption of hyper-masculinity in the 1970s clone look, this perception persists (Cole, 2000; Edwards, 2006). The most culturally-exalted way of being a man - hegemonic masculinity - is heterosexual, while gay masculinity is a subjugated masculinity (Connell, 1995). It follows, then, that fashion's association with the subjugated masculinity of gay men makes it threatening to heterosexual men's masculinity (Tuncay & Otnes, 2008).

This has been slowly changing since at least the 1960s "peacock revolution", as has been noted in the large body of work on the changing of representations of masculinity in advertising (Barry, 2014; Barthel, 1992; Botterill, 2007; Patterson & Elliott, 2002) and men's magazines (Benwell, 2003; Monden, 2012; Simpson, 1994; Stevenson et al., 2000a). There are numerous examples of straight men embracing gay-coded aspects of fashion and consumption, such as the new man moment of the 1980s. Sociologist Sean Nixon's *Hard Looks* (1996) describes how male stylistic self-consciousness spread throughout mainstream Britain during the 1980s. He looks at how the trope of the new man broke down distinctions between gay and straight culture, inviting heterosexual men to practice narcissism and dress-up, interpellating them into the once-feminised sphere of consumer culture. Cultural historian Frank Mort's *Cultures of Consumption* (1996) similarly describes the new man as a rupture in traditional

masculinity, with advertising encouraging men to look at themselves and other men "as objects of consumer desire" (p. 194). These practices spoke to their target market's "renegotiation of maleness" (p. 197) in fashion and consumer culture.

Literary scholar Rainer Emig (2000) is also interested in the ways in which gay masculinity and straight masculinity have merged because of men's entry into consumer culture, arguing that aspects of hegemonic masculinity have been eroded through British straight men's adoption of gay-coded consumerist ideals, particularly as relates to fashion. Emig traces this back to the youth cultures of the 1950s and 1960s, for whom homosexuals were trendsetters. The fashion for silk neckerchiefs in the 1960s, dyed hair in the 1970s, bomber jackets in the 1980s and piercings of the 1990s all originated in gay culture. Yet just as there was a "consumerist-motivated adoption of gay styles by the hegemonic straight majority" (p. 215), there was also an adoption of straight styles by gays. More recently, scholars have focused on the metrosexual, with his gay-coded grooming, dressing and shopping habits, as indicative of changing masculinity (Rinallo, 2007; Shugart, 2008). Both the new man and metrosexual moments were followed by a period of revanchism when the blurring of lines between gay and straight gave way to a reassertion of the boundaries of traditional heterosexual masculinity: "new lad" in the first instance, and übersexual in the second (Atkinson, 2011; Clarkson, 2005; Edwards, 2006; Gill, 2003). Emig (2000) reminds us that "participation in formerly 'gay' styles by no means implies a willingness to be (even erroneously) identified as gay" (p. 213). In Chapter 6, the ways in which forum users negotiate this tension between gay and straight aesthetics are discussed.

Because of these changes in masculinity, men's fashion remains a growing market (Barry & Phillips 2016). The fashion industry is currently embracing a wider cultural shift away from rigid gender boundaries, and recent research has shown how some young men are actively challenging gender binaries through clothing (Barry & Martin, 2015, 2016; Jordan, 2017). Despite these incremental changes, clothing retail remains thoroughly binary (Ostberg,

2012). As critics have pointed out regarding previous shifts in men's fashion, there is a disjuncture between how men wear clothing and the commercially-oriented representations of men's clothing found in magazines, on the catwalks and in stores (Edwards, 2006; Galilee, 2002; Ostberg, 2012). There is now a growing body of empirical work on this subject and much of the research suggests that despite the changes in men's fashion outlined above, many men still avoid a fashionable appearance because of its connotations of effeminacy (Bakewell et al., 2006; de Casanova, 2015; Frith & Gleeson, 2004; Galilee, 2002; Kaiser, 2012; Noh, 2015). Participants in American and British studies on the subject emphasise comfort and quality over having a fashionable appearance.

Because of the gender anxieties discussed in the Edwards quote discussed earlier in this section, heterosexual men work to cultivate an appearance that, paradoxically, does not draw attention to their concern with appearance, as was discovered in research on rural and suburban American men's attitudes towards clothing (Kaiser et al., 2008). The participants in this research study expressed disinterest in fashion, with the authors of the study arguing that this reflects men's desire to leave their gender and sexuality unmarked. Scholarship on gender and sexuality tells us that heterosexual masculinity is the taken-for-granted, a default option in western cultures (Edwards, 2006; Richardson, 1996; Seidman, 2009). This means that to embody hegemonic masculinity through dress, men need only worry about not standing out (Edwards, 1997).

Research carried out with urban heterosexual men in the United States by marketing scholars Linda Tuncay and Cele C. Otnes (2008) found that the research participants perceived fashion and grooming as feminine even while shopping for fashion and grooming products. So even for so-called metrosexuals there is discomfort with the effeminacy of caring a little *too* much about appearance. In his research on heterosexual Italian straight men's engagement with fashion, consumer culture scholar Diego Rinallo (2007) has identified a "danger zone" where men's fashion consumption can be sanctioned as "illegitimate" for violating the norms of

masculinity. The way in which masculinity is defined against femininity means that this "illegitimate appearance" is that which is "effeminate/homosexual". This shows that while the parameters of men's consumption of clothing and beauty products may be shifting, there is still ongoing boundary work to define what commodities are and are not legitimate for heterosexual men to consume. This subject will be returned to in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Those heterosexual men who do actively seek out a fashionable appearance have been found to take measures intended to reconcile their interest in fashion with the masculine norm that this interest breaks. In their research into how men engage with fashion advertising, fashion scholar Ben Barry and marketing scholar Barbara J. Phillips (2016) identify how some of the men they interviewed characterised fashion as labour. These men used the metaphor of "investing" to describe their fashion buying, describing it as part of a process of developing expert knowledge. This made recourse to the masculine trait of rationality. Barry and Phillips write "Characterizing fashion as labour allows men to link the dignity and traditional masculinity of work to their fashion behaviours and helps to alleviate the gender identity tension arising from behaviours that could be perceived as feminine" (p. 449). They note the similarities between this characterisation of fashion as labour and marketing scholars Otnes and Mary Ann McGrath's (2001) finding in their research on male shopping that many of their participants shopped "deliberately and pragmatically in order to fulfil one of the most pervasive tenets of the masculine ideal – achievement" (p. 128). Both fashion-as-labour and shopping-as-achievement involve boundary work to masculinise behaviours otherwise coded as feminine. This allows heterosexual men to enjoy clothes and shopping without experiencing any gender anxieties. The steps taken to make menswear masculine will be explored in Chapter 6.

2.3.4 Fashion Online

In Barry's (2015) research on Canadian men's attitudes toward fashion, he found that because an interest in men's fashion is associated with gay men, his heterosexual male

research participants saw online menswear communities as a safe place to discuss fashion without their sexuality coming into question. Yet while a great deal of work has been done on fashion blogging (Findlay, 2017; Luvaas, 2016; Pedroni, 2015; Rocamora, 2011, 2012; Rocamora & Bartlett, 2009; Titton, 2013; Woodward, 2009), the older form of online sociality found within online menswear communities has received less attention. Only three studies have been carried out into online menswear forums, a decidedly Web 1.0 predecessor of fashion blogging and social networks. The first is sociologist Peter Corrigan's (2008) study of an online fashion forum, but his study is female-specific and based on research carried out over a decade ago on the now-redundant Usenet system. The second is merchandising scholars Kelly Reddy-Best and Alexandra Howell's (2014) study of a brand community dedicated to a type of kilt manufactured by a brand called Utilikilt. They found that because kilts, as un-bifurcated garments, are coded as female, Utilikilts fans work to emphasise their masculinity. The men in the forums I studied also work to emphasise their masculinity, as I will discuss in Chapter 6. The Utilikilts community, however, is quite different from the online communities I studied, as it is based around a specific garment rather than an aesthetic. As the authors of the study acknowledge, their findings are limited by the lack of in-depth interviews, which would have offered insights into the forum users' motivations for participating in the Utilikilts online community.

The third is sociologist J. Slade Lellock's (2018) study of the Male Fashion Advice section of the popular news aggregator and discussion forum Reddit. Using a virtual ethnographic method, Lellock found that the openness with which the men discussed clothing in the forum reflects a shift in masculinity, allowing for more open engagement with fashion. On the other hand, the ways in which these men engaged with fashion supports Barry's assertion that when heterosexual men do engage with fashion, it is done strategically to obtain the power that comes with conforming to masculine ideals (Barry, 2015). Conformity to masculine ideals is a theme throughout this dissertation, but the interview respondents, whose motivations are

discussed in Chapter 6, did not articulate them in such a mechanistic way. Like the online

clothing communities observed for this dissertation, the site of Lellock's research was

characterised by knowledge-seeking practices and a concern for following dress norms.

However, while there are many similarities between Male Fashion Advice and the forums where

I conducted my research, as the title of their subReddit suggests, the users of Male Fashion

Advice were actively engaged with men's fashion. They sought to understand and follow fashion

trends in order to conform to the norms of fashionable dress. As will be explored in Chapter 5,

the men who participate in the online communities from which I recruited are much more

sceptical about the value of fashion. My research also differs from Lellock's in its use of

qualitative interviews to gain first-hand insights into online menswear community members'

perspectives and motivations.

In this chapter, a great deal of overlap between studies of masculinity, consumption and

fashion has been shown. Key themes drawing these fields of study together include the use

fashion and consumption to enact identity and the idea that consumption and fashion are

gendered practices which shape, and are shaped by, cultural ideals. Post-structural approaches

to masculinity highlight the fact that masculinity is fluid and contextual, yet traditional ideals

remain dominant. The persistent gendering of fashion and consumption demonstrates how the

relationship between fashion, consumption and masculinity is still an ambivalent one. In the

chapters that follow I explore how users of online menswear forum negotiate the tension

between gendered cultural ideals and their passion for clothing.

Chapter 3: The Online Menswear Communities

3.1 Forum Demographics

3.1.2 Gender and Sexuality

The clothing industry is organised around the gender binary, and the forums studied are almost entirely concerned with the male side of that binary. These forums are oriented towards the consumption of male clothing, so the vast majority of visible users are cisgender men, the main demographic for whom men's clothing is designed. All the interview respondents are cisgender men, and while some of them told me of female users active in the forums, I did not come across any female users during my research. Regarding sexuality, forty-nine out of fifty of the interview respondents identified as heterosexual, with one participant identifying as homosexual and one participant identifying as "mostly straight". This is indicative of how deeply heterosexual the culture of online menswear communities is, a subject to which I return in Chapter 6.

3.1.3 Age

The men I interviewed are aged between nineteen and sixty-three. Most of the interview participants are in their twenties and thirties, but I also interviewed several men in their forties and fifties. This does not tell us anything about the age break-down of forum users, only about the age distribution of those willing to participate in the research project. It is impossible to accurately determine the ages of people in an online forum, but I was able get a broad sense of users' ages through my online ethnography. The tone of discussion, the personal details that are disclosed and the photographs that users post all gave indications of how old the users of particular forums tend to be. The interviews also provided insights.

Forums dedicated to streetwear or denim have a younger user base than those dedicated to more formal clothing. This is consistent with what one would expect based on the

professional demands of the life course, as well as what is known as "age ordering" in fashion (Twigg, 2013). Denim Forum has the youngest members, with many still in their teens, and is considered an entry-level forum. Age tends to bring greater disposable income and progression to more expensive, usually Japanese, brands. The Japanese imports discussed in Steel Soul demand greater disposable income, with users often in their thirties and forties. Brit Forum users seem to range in ages from their late teens to early forties, and the men in their late twenties and early thirties whom I interviewed described themselves as typical of the forum in age. The Streetwear and Denim section of Clothes Forum skews younger (twenties and thirties) than the section for classic menswear (thirties to sixties). The age range of Tailored Forum is similar to that of Clothes Forum's classic menswear section. Perhaps because it is the most stylistically conservative, Style Questions attracts the oldest men, with many users in their sixties and seventies, although there is still a wide age range, from late teens upwards. Younger men often join to ask questions about what clothes to wear to their first graduate job or to job interviews.

3.1.4 Race

The men I interviewed are mainly, although not exclusively, white. As with age, it was impossible to estimate the racial make-up of the forum user base with any accuracy. Based on online self-disclosure and the photographs of themselves that users posted, however, it seems that the racial make-up of those who volunteered to participate in my research project is broadly reflective of the wider forum population. Thirty-eight of the research participants identified as white, in various ways including "New England WASP", "White dude from America", "White British", "American with Italian and Polish-Russian Jewish roots" and "Caucasian of Greek descent". One of the research participants identified as Hispanic-American, one as Black, one as "mixed race" from Jamaica and one as "Southeast Asian". Five identified as Asian Chinese. Three identified as part-Asian: one as "Mixed, mostly white but also part-Chinese" and two as

part-White, part-Japanese. As in the forums, the majority of non-White interviews participants are of Southeast Asian heritage.

With its roots in American prep schools of the post-war period, trad is strongly associated with the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant (WASP) culture of the United States. This is despite the fact that in its heyday, the Ivy Look was mass fashion, worn by a wide range of men, including Catholics, Jews and African-Americans (Mears, 2012). The Ivy Look was popularised by African-American Jazz musicians in the 1950s and 1960s, and images of their album covers are posted online and cited as inspiration by present-day devotees of the look. I was interested in the intersections between race and dressed identity, but my minority-ethnic interview respondents consistently downplayed the role of race in influencing their style. I asked Style Questions user Jose, a second-generation Hispanic-American living in Texas, about the WASPiness of the trad look that he wore. Jose acknowledged the fact that the look was associated with WASPs but disassociated himself from those connotations: "I'm not a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant, I'm a Hispanic Catholic. It's a different part of the country. The only thing that appeals to me about the philosophy of trad is just that it's classic". Jose likes the trad clothes of the 1960s, as well as other aspects of that time, but recognises that as a member of a minority-ethnic group, he would not actually want to have lived in that period. Chinese-Canadian Wilson, also nostalgic for the 1960s, told me something very similar, explaining that while he would like to live in the 1960s era that the television show *Mad Men* was set in, his Chinese ethnicity would make that difficult. Ronald, who is mixed-race, explained that while his Jamaican identity informs many aspects of his life, style is not one of them:

> The impact of my country of birth as it relates to clothing is quite minimal. It is quite fundamental in other areas but because I left Jamaica at eleven years old and at that point was just wearing whatever my school uniform was of the day, it really doesn't inform who I am in terms of my appreciation of menswear. It fundamentally informs who I am in a great many other respects.

3.1.5 Social Class

One of the limitations of this research is that without a representative sample or detailed information on users' family backgrounds, it cannot offer a valid or reliable description of the role of social class within online menswear communities. Nonetheless, I asked all the respondents about their education and occupation. Their responses, along with qualitative analysis of both the interview transcripts and the activity in the forums, offer insights into class location and class background. Most of the research participants (if they are not students) work in creative or white-collar occupations and have post-secondary qualifications. The interview sample includes a lawyer, a project manager, an analyst, an economist, a negotiator for a pharmaceutical company, a sports journalist, an IT consultant, a software engineer and a public relations officer. The interview respondents in white-collar occupations tend to participate in classic menswear forums as they wear suits to work. Those in creative occupations tend to participate in heritage or streetwear forums, but as many white-collar workplaces have casual dress codes and most people wear casual clothing when not at work, some of the interview respondents who work in traditionally white-collar roles are also interested in heritage and streetwear styles. As sites organised around the consumption of usually quite expensive clothing, it is tempting to reduce online menswear forums to sites for the performance of class-based identities. This would fit nicely with the canonical class-based theories of fashion originating in the work of Simmel (1904) and Veblen (1899/1973). But I also interviewed men in blue-collar jobs including a contractor, a metal worker, a kitchen manager and a farmer, as well as several young men who worked in precarious service-sector jobs.

Whereas the canonical subculture research of the 1970s was concerned with bringing marginal groups into the centre (Hesmondhalgh, 2005), this dissertation is about a group that is already at the centre of social life: male, cisgender and mostly white, straight and middle/upper-middle-class. It would be easy to approach the wearing of Style Questions' trad look or Clothes Forum's classic menswear as simply a matter of *habitus*, of an internalised preference for high-

end clothing reflecting an individual's class background (Bourdieu, 1984), but if dressing smartly had come naturally to the men on these forums, they would never have needed the guidance of online forums in the first place. The interviews reveal that it is precisely because dressing skills have *not* been learned naturally that the respondents participate in online menswear communities. Their dress preferences are rarely the product of class socialisation in the family, neighbourhood or school. Rather, these preferences originally sprang from users' concerted decision to improve their wardrobes and have been in large part shaped by their forum use.

Similarly, it would be easy to make assumptions about social class by looking at the amount of money that forum users spend on their clothing. This kind of spending is certainly dependent on a certain level of middle-class comfort and the privilege of living in a developed country. But as we shall see in the next chapter, the forum users I interviewed are not all as wealthy as they appeared, as a huge amount of the activity in menswear forums is dedicated to getting clothes cheaper through sales, second-hand markets and shopping at charity shops, also known as "thrifting". I also interviewed men who practise a studied minimalism with their wardrobes or who cannot afford the clothes they want, but still enjoy looking at photographs of expensive clothing and discussing them online.

Moreover, my findings regarding class identity challenge assumptions about the meaning of wearing expensive clothes. Class in late modern societies has become more fluid and is based on a constellation of factors including income and cultural capital (Bennett et al., 2009). The class position that the interview participants occupy is not necessarily the one in which they grew up. Some of the respondents explained that they prefer to pay a premium for more durable items because they grew up in households where money was scarce; their parents instilled in them the notion that one should buy the best-possible quality clothing so that items would need less frequent replacement. This is a subject which will be investigated in Chapter 4. Others spoke of growing up poor and not being able to have the clothes that they wanted when they were younger. They cited this relative deprivation as one of the reasons they

spent so much money on clothing now that they can afford to. For example, this is the

explanation given by Phillip, a forty-two-year-old Steel Soul user and sneaker collector working

in advertising:

> We didn't have a lot of money when I was young so I wore [cheap] stuff, it's the same thing with sneakers, I only ever had one pair at a time growing up, so when I could afford my own, I bought a lot. Same thing with clothes. I grew up wearing some pretty nasty stuff, the equivalent of Wal-Mart stuff.

If Style Questions' trad aesthetic is the most moneyed and conservative, Brit Forum's is

the least. But its streetwear aesthetic means that the forum is characterised by an embrace of

expensive brands and a frenetic pace of consumption. As we saw in the previous chapter,

marginalised groups have long been at the forefront of men's fashion. The history of working-

class subcultures in Britain, from the 1950s teddy boys to today's football lads tells us that this is

particularly the case in the UK, where thriftiness and anti-fashion values are more associated

with the middle class than the working class (Bennett et al., 2009). The fast pace of

consumption in Brit Forum is very much in keeping with the lineage of British youth subcultures.

There is a distinctively British working-class aesthetic to the streetwear looks found in Brit

Forum, with ties to the football casual subculture. Although generalisations should not be made

from the small sample of interview respondents, this aesthetic contrasts with the class positions

of the Brit Forum users I interviewed. They all have, or are engaged in obtaining, post-

secondary qualifications. Those who are not students all work in white-collar occupations such

as market research, journalism and public relations.

The discourse observed in Brit Forum contains laddish "banter" of the sort found on

football discussion forums or in now-defunct British "lads' mags" such as *Zoo* and *Nuts* (Beynon,

2001). It is known for what thirty-one-year-old London graduate student Dave described as a

"very much British pub taking-the-piss culture" and Brit Forum users consistently cited banter as

one of the reasons for their continued engagement with the forum. The way that the online

menswear community members speak to one another, and the subjects they talk about

(football, women, drinking) are consistent with new lad masculinity (Benwell, 2003. 2004; Gill, 2003) – seemingly boorish in outlook and working-class in enunciation but with elements of self-awareness and middle-class affectation. Sociologists Alison Phipps and Isabel Young (2015) sum up laddishness as a "middle-class fetishisation of working-class machismo" (p. 307). The Brit Forum user is very much in keeping with 1990s understandings of the new lad as a "fun-loving, politically incorrect, and insistently heterosexual" consumerist (Benwell, 2004, p. 5).

Of all the forums observed, Clothes Forum features the most conspicuous consumption, with much talk of high-end brands and bespoke tailoring. Photographs of users' homes, cars, boats, holidays, gadgets and so forth posted in Clothes Forum suggest an upper-middle-class user base. Fifty-nine-year-old New York Clothes Forum user Jeremy is prosperous, a self-described "very old computer programmer" at a bank. He is conscious of looking like "a rich white man", and this is deliberate. He explained: "People have always assumed I'm a couple steps higher on the social food chain than I really am. And that's general appearance, accent, whatever". But while users who project such an image are the most visible, they are not indicative of the whole of the forum's user base. Clothes Forum has lively discussion threads about thrifting and affordable brands such as Uniqlo. The high prices of the brands and tailoring most valued in Clothes Forum have created a sense of relative deprivation for some of the men I interviewed, even though they are successful professionals. These men are willing to spend a good deal of money on clothing, but they still cannot afford (or at least justify) the most expensive clothing items discussed in the forum such as, for example, Savile Row suits. Wilson, the child of Hong Kong immigrants who has a senior role in the insurance industry and owns many off-the-rack suits, told me that he feels "inadequate" compared to the men in "perfect" bespoke suits that he sees in Clothes Forum: "I mean a couple guys who define perfection, they live in Manhattan, they shoot animals and crap for Christmas. You go 'holy crap, isn't that what I just saw on Downton Abbey?' I come from a working-class background".

Like in Clothes Forum, discussions in Tailored Forum place emphasis on tailoring, but its users sneer at Clothes Forum members for having more money than sense. On the more dressed-up end of the style spectrum - Tailored Forum, Clothes Forum and Style Questions - aspiration is an explicit motivation. The men I recruited from these forums are highly reflexive and aware of the class-signifying symbolic properties of clothing. They dress not to reflect their social status, but to project the social status to which they aspire. Twenty-two-year-old Style Questions member Rubin is a devotee of the Ivy Look, but was educated at public schools ('state schools' in British usage) and a state university. His Ivy style is not something handed down through his family or based on emulation of his peers. It is entirely inspired by books, blogs and online forums. He adopted the Ivy Look to be more successful in college and in his professional career, explaining "there's definitely an aspirational element to it…. I saw it as something to strive for and I felt that as an individual I might be more respected or be taken more seriously or be thought of more highly". Rubin talked about using the symbolic properties of the Ivy Look to his advantage, telling me: "I can pull off the appearance of someone who's already more successful than I am now or from a different background than I am now". Another follower of the Ivy Look, forty-one-year-old Tailored Forum user Donald, described the style as an "aspirational, be a step or two above your real station" look. A draughtsman in a New Jersey factory, Donald labelled his class position as "white/blue collar" and described himself as a "lower-middle-class person in the suburbs working a dirty job". San Francisco contractor Jerry wears a suit at weekends and changes out of his construction gear to put on an ironed shirt every day after work even on the days when he will not be leaving the house again. Wearing more formal clothing is an important aspect of his self-identity. He described himself as "blue-collar" but "educated" and wants to project the latter side of himself.

Japanese heritage clothing and denim are encoded with altogether different class meanings. The clothes discussed in Steel Soul and Denim Forum come with a blue-collar aesthetic, but not a blue-collar price tag. Most of the research participants who are into this style

are professionals or students, and their choice of style has more to do with masculinity than

class (a topic which will be examined in Chapter 6), but there are a few exceptions. Thirty-

seven-year-old San Franciscan Carl is a machinist and metalworker who posts in Denim Forum.

He noted the irony of the fact that he is probably one of the few users in the forum who does

manual work, the task for which jeans were originally intended. Yet he does not wear his jeans

to work as he does not want to ruin them. Steel Soul user Frank is a hemp farmer who is one of

the few forum users who performs physical work while wearing Steel Soul's heavy denim and

work shirts. He conveyed how these clothes are actually very good for their original, intended

purpose:

> If you have the right piece you know, for instance [number] eight was the original super-black material… just crazy-thick duck [canvas], I don't know what it was, it was actually bullet-proof. I've cut probably a hundred trees down wearing that shirt, crazy chainsaw grease splattering, wood chips flying everywhere and at the end of the day you can take a stiff brisk brush to it, scrub it down, it's good to go.

Frank told me that a lot of his friends from the Bay Area who wore Steel Soul are mechanics

and metal-workers who appreciate the brand's durability. Another Steel Soul user, Mike, works

in a pub kitchen in a blue-collar town near Toronto. He appreciates how heritage workwear

reflects his working-class identity:

> I've always come from a blue-collar family. My dad always worked hard, worked shifts, factory work and things like that. That was the same with my grandfather, it's always been, that's just part of life, and so that's kinda influenced it too.

3.2 Forum Dynamics

3.2.1 Discovery

Within the interview sample there is a clear demarcation between those whose strong

interest in menswear preceded their forum use, and those for whom their strong interest in

menswear developed over the course of their forum use. Most of the interview participants

discovered their online menswear communities through an internet search. A few were

specifically looking for a forum, but most were either looking up a brand or looking for the

answer to some sort of query, with a forum thread coming up high in the list of search results. Older respondents tend to have had a pre-existing interest in menswear developed before the internet era, whereas for internet natives it was already second nature for them to pursue any kind of interest or question online. Twenty-nine-year-old Clothes Forum user Justin's account is typical: "I would read in a magazine about selvedge and I'd be like 'what the hell is that?' So, I would research it online and sure enough it brings you to forums". The mystification surrounding raw denim, which can shrink or fade differently depending on how it is washed, led a number of the interview respondents to online menswear communities. Take Steel Soul user Kenneth's account, for example:

> I was living in Boston at the time and I bought some new jeans, Naked & Famous were my first raw selvedge jeans and I just was looking them up to see some more information because I didn't really know a whole lot about it. And so just going online and checking some stuff out and eventually found that forum and just started lurking on there pretty much.

With users of classic menswear and trad forums, their initial interest in dressing well was often spurred on by a desire to dress better for work or, for those just about to graduate into the workforce, a job search. As sociologist Erynn Masi de Casanova (2015) argues, professional success in white-collar workplaces demands "strategic conformity" to dress norms. When Jose received a promotion at work that required him to walk around a lot, he set out to find a dressier pair of rubber-soled shoes and ended up discovering Style Questions through an internet search. This, in turn, led to him reading the forum and eventually becoming an adherent of trad style. Insurance industry worker Wilson started participating in Clothes Forum when a secondment to London made him realise that everyone in his office was better-dressed than him. Most of my younger Brit Forum participants discovered the forum while searching for particular streetwear brands such as Visvim or Norse Projects. Twenty-year-old London Brit Forum member Josh conveyed how the discovery of menswear forums was an immersive process that brought about a deeper engagement:

in my first year of getting into it most of my free time was spent in the forums or different websites just reading and searching on different retailers, just looking into it. It probably did take up most of my free time. When I'd come home, when I'd take a break from work, a break from my studies I would definitely be researching all the time.

Especially with forums, when a conversation begins I would find myself going back to the beginning, even if that meant going through four pages of comments, five pages of comments, to follow and participate.

Searches for brands also lead individuals to the buy-and-sell sections of forums, and the preponderance of rare items and bargains in these sections is another common reason that many of the interview respondents initially signed up to the forums they use.

Those of the interview participants who are over the age of thirty usually came to menswear forums with a pre-existing interest in clothing, although that interest expanded greatly after participating in them. Thirty-eight-year-old Jovan grew up around his mother's tailoring business, so he already possessed a great deal of knowledge about menswear before joining Clothes Forum. But a google search led him to Clothes Forum and since discovering the forum he had found himself spending more time and money on clothing, as well as buying clothing items of a higher-quality than those he had shopped for previously. Sixty-three-year-old Tom has been interested in clothing since the late 1960s. He discovered Style Questions and Clothes Forum through a recommendation from another user in a fragrance forum. Finding threads there that resonated with his long-standing interest in how British subcultural styles of the 1960s continued to influence menswear, he became involved in both communities. As in Jovan's case, this led to what he sees as an "upgrade" to his style. Fifty-year-old Toronto lawyer Roger has been wearing classic menswear since graduating from law school. However, finding Clothes Forum made him think that while his clothes "were pretty good", his shoes "were not up to snuff". In the four years since joining Clothes Forum he has amassed nearly thirty pairs of dress shoes. For interviewees both young and old, discovering forums involved this sort of "road to Damascus" moment as they realised how much more there was to menswear than they previously thought.

3.2.2 Online Community

A great deal of research has been conducted into how individuals interact online, and early debates centred on the authenticity of online identities and whether such interactions truly constituted a form of community (Baym, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Turkle, 1995). The consensus that has emerged is that online communities really are communities and that most participants in them really are who they say they are. Research findings from online communities used by style subculture, such as Chamberlin's (2007) study of a "pin-up punk" forum and Hodkinson's (2003) study of a newsgroup for members of the goth subculture, reinforce that consensus. This dissertation takes for granted the notion that online menswear communities are indeed really communities, where individuals, apart from the occasional "troll", are truthful in their self-presentation. From the data gathered through the interviews and online ethnography, it is clear that with prolonged participation in online menswear forums, users get to know one another and experience them as a community. There is a familiarity with which they address each other, and references to what they know about one another's personal lives and interests, information that has been gleaned from the online self-disclosure that takes place in forum discussions. The tightness of these online communities was evident in Clothes Forum when a prolific poster passed away: there were tributes to him posted in the forum, and users posted photographs of themselves wearing his favourite type of shoe - Alden longwings – in his memory. While users typically discover forums on a search for information, they would remain active in the forum as they became a part of the community. Many of the interview respondents explicitly described the forums as communities and are deeply engaged with them. As with any community, a forum user's process of becoming a part of online menswear communities was a gradual one, evolving from a superficial, transactional engagement to a more meaningful one.

Those of the interview respondents who use the smaller forums such as Steel Soul, Tailored Forum and Brit Forum perceive them as much more closely-knit than the bigger forums such as Clothes Forum. Donald said of Tailored Forum "because that's so tiny and downright

incestuous, you feel like you know these people more than you know people in real life".

Twenty-six-year-old Toronto-area photographer Luke explained that he prefers Tailored Forum to Clothes Forum because he can get to know the users there. He compared this to Clothes Forum, where the sheer volume of activity makes it very difficult to keep up with what is going on. However, some Clothes Forum members do experience it as a community. Sub-communities tend to be localised in particular Clothes Forum threads, such as the New York thread, Alden shoes thread or thrifting thread, which have the same volume of activity as the entirety of some of the smaller forums. Justin said of the men who participate in the Clothes Forum New York Thread: "I would call them family".

Much more is discussed within online menswear communities than just clothing, and a common theme that emerged out of the interviews is that while forum users joined forums to discuss clothes, they ended up staying there for the more general discussions. Donald noted that there is only so much that can be said about trad clothing, so it is the personalities and the discussions of other topics for which he returns frequently to Style Questions. Jacob said something very similar about Clothes Forum:

> I don't look at the menswear [outfit photos] anymore and I haven't for a while. I'm more interested in the community aspect of it that isn't actually the clothing. It's the "what are you drinking", it's "what Scotch do you have" and the stock trading thread and the 'scent of the day' stuff and all the other sort of peripheral things that make it a community and not just a clothing forum.

These non-clothing discussions are where users gained insights into each other's lives and personalities, an intimacy that creates a sense of belonging and togetherness. These discussions are characterised by a high level of personal self-disclosure, with users talking about their backgrounds, families, interests, jobs and politics, strengthening the sense of community in the forums. The interviewees were able to talk at length about some of their fellow forum members – people they have never met – telling me, for example, all about their clothes, their tastes, their lifestyles, and what kinds of people they are. Nineteen-year-old Bay Area sales assistant William explained that he is known for personal self-disclosure in Denim Forum

discussions: "I write stories about my romantic life in the style of a soap opera and call it the Fadez of our Lives". This is a pun on the denim "fadez" discussed in Denim Forum. Also identified by interviewees as important in bringing communities together is the use of humour or what my British interview participants referred to as "banter". Long-running in-jokes solidify a sense of community as they are based on shared meanings that have emerged from the forum's day-to-day discourse. As in lad mags, the humour found in online menswear communities forums sometimes involves casual sexism, with irony used to distance posters from the meaning of what they post; it is treated as "just" banter (Attenborough, 2014; Benwell, 2004; Benwell, 2007; Stevenson et al., 2000b).

Relationships developed within online menswear communities often graduate from the public discussion threads to the personal messaging system, then to e-mail or social media. Style Questions user Ian referred to the forum members he corresponded with through e-mail as friends and told me that he knows them "quite intimately now". These relationships sometimes move offline too. Reflecting how close-knit the Brit Forum community is, one Brit Forum user invited men in the forum to his New Year's Eve party. One of the interview participants attended the party and met several other Brit Forum members there. New York Steel Soul user Graham told me: "I have two, I would say, very close friends from the forum that live around New York and I hang out with them all the time because of the forum". Graham explained that many of his friendships started through meetings to buy or sell clothes. This is a common reason for forum members to meet up, as it allows them to save on postage and put a name to a face at the same time. Denim Forum user William developed a close-knit friendship group though the forum:

> [Some forum members] ended up saying "hey do you want to go rock-climbing" and so we put on our jeans and went rock-climbing and I'm just involved in that community now because some of my closest friends are there. We all went hiking together this past summer. We all go out and play board games and drink beer and whatever else.

The forming of lasting friendships through menswear forums was a common theme in the interviews. Whereas critics of consumer culture such as Bauman (2007) argue that consumption is a socially isolating, individualising act, these are friendships formed *through* consumption.

William's experience of real-life community through Denim Forum is made possible by the huge presence of Bay Area users on that forum. Despite being spread out across time and space, there is a geographical embeddedness to some of the forums that helps foster their sense of community. Clothes Forum has a strong New York presence, for instance. Organised meet-ups in cities with large concentrations of forum members are another way in which a sense of community has developed within menswear forums. William and his group of friends from Denim Forum expanded their social circle to include even more forum members by organising events such as rock climbing, marathon training, dinners and visits to the store Self Edge in San Francisco. Justin came to know his Clothes Forum "family" through New York meet-ups, where members go to bars to get to know each other. Tom organised a meet-up in London for participants in a thread in Clothes Forum dedicated to subcultural style. This became a regular, bi-annual event, with forum members travelling to London from all over the UK. Toronto lawyer Raymond told me about how Clothes Forum meet-ups in Toronto have led to lasting friendships:

> I was remarking to my wife the other day that the internet has become very real for me because I have developed friendships with participants, sometimes local, sometimes international, that have lasted a good deal of time and have created the opportunity to attend social events that are born of that forum in the real world. You know, get-togethers and different social events for people who have shared participation in a given forum is part of my current social reality that didn't exist ten years ago or more. So, the sense of community is a definite plus. It's not just virtual, it's real as well.

Another activity that brings forum users together offline is the act of consumption itself, with meet-ups often organised around visits to clothing shops. The global mobility of many forum members means that work or leisure travel is also a basis on which meet-ups occur. One of the interview participants from New York has, by coincidence, met up with one of the forum users I interviewed in London and one of the forums users I interviewed in Toronto. Several of

the interviewees told me that people they know from forums sometimes get in touch with them when visiting their city. The commonplace nature of such meet-ups is one of the reasons that the interview participants were so willing to meet me to participate in this research. Graham stated: "I've met fifty people off the forum so meeting you isn't a weird thing to me, when you posted I [thought] 'yeah, I'm in Toronto, it doesn't really matter, I meet people all the time'".

A few of the men I interviewed were members of other types of online communities before getting involved in online menswear communities. Where some might be uncomfortable about etiquette or have privacy concerns about online communities at first, these men were already enthusiastic forum users. William told me that he just assumed that there was an online community for men's clothing, since there was one for all his other interests. He described himself as having been part of an "intense community" for Rubik's Cube enthusiasts. Raymond came to Clothing Forum after years participating in forums for knife-making and cars. It occurred to him that since there are forums for these hobbies, there must be one for clothing. The subject of hobbyism is one that will be returned to in my discussion of masculinity in Chapter 6.

While I have focused in this section on how the research participants engage with menswear forums as communities, it should be noted that this is not the case for everyone. When I asked them if they have ever attended meet-ups, many of the men I interviewed explained that they have not because they do not feel engaged enough with the forums in which they participate. For example, Edward, a thirty-one-year-old Torontonian employed in finance, told me that he not been to any of the Clothes Forum meet-ups because he is not an "active poster". Like Edward, those who are not active do not really see themselves as part of a community. Jerry does not post at all in forums. He nevertheless reads them regularly, making him what is known as a "lurker". He explained why he never started an account in Style Questions:

> I don't really want to join the discussion, I don't see any point in it, the only thing that could really improve [my style] is critiquing the way I look, helping that way, and I don't

really feel I'm at that point in my life where I need to be critiqued because I don't wear [classic menswear] all the time.

Jerry is representative of the many men who read these forums but do not post. It is never really possible to know how many are in a forum, but Jacob's experience of selling fragrances in Clothes Forum offers some insight:

> There are at any given time a 1000 to 1200 people online in the forum and only 300 of them are registered users. So, there's a massive shadow community, which I think is fascinating, of guys who are lurkers, who aren't posters, and even I'd say maybe a third of my sales have come from posters with zero post count. I've just had people contact me, either just signed off or had been registered for years but never posted, and just met up and bought something.

For those that do not participate actively in forums, they are strictly a source of information. Brit Forum user Neil, a twenty-seven-year-old account executive from London described Brit Forum as "a tool", saying "I was never so much into it for the community. I would never go on there trying to make friends, meet up with people, it was more just like a tool for me I guess". Similarly, Gary, a thirty-two-year-old Toronto teacher who is an irregular poster to Clothes Forum conveyed "I wasn't trying to find a community, definitely not... I didn't want to make friends or anything like that, I just wanted to find information…" While the non-clothing aspects of Clothes Forum help maintain a sense of community, these sections do not interest him as he only follows a few select threads that cater to his clothing interests. For forty-one-year-old MA student Matt, forums are not communities but just another source of information to be looked at alongside blogs and webstores. The tone of the discourse in the menswear forums that he reads does not appeal to him: "In forums I generally see a lot of posturing and negativity and bullshit so it doesn't draw me in to keep returning to it". Some of the interview participants told me that they rarely post because they can get answers to their questions by waiting for the topic to come up in the day-to-day discussion. It is also possible, and even expected of users, that they use the forum's search function to look through archived discussions before asking questions. So, while many aspects of online menswear forums make them communities, they are not communities to all the research participants. The amount that the interviewees post, the

amount of time they spend reading forums, the duration of their membership in forums, their participation in non-clothing discussions and the social connections they make with other users are key factors in determining whether they see themselves as part of the online menswear communities in which they participate.

3.2.3 Communality

Consistent with the sense of community in menswear forums is the kind of mutual aid and communality that characterises the internet more generally (Dyer-Witheford, 2015). Much of the activity of online menswear communities involves forum members helping one another by answering questions, offering advice, tracking down bargains and even forwarding packages from online stores. Gordon, a forty-one-year-old economist in Toronto, described Clothes Forum as a place for getting constructive advice, helping him with the difficult task of choosing the right size when purchasing shoes online:

> One of the big advantages of Clothing Forum is that there are people on there that have dozens of pairs of shoes from different makers so they can talk about how they fit and the different lasts of the different makers and at this point I'm pretty confident based on using that information that I can find the size even from a maker that I've never used before.

Kenneth, a twenty-six-year-old customer service representative in Albuquerque, NM told me that his enthusiasm for Steel Soul is a result of how helpful the members were in aiding his initial research into how different cuts of Steel Soul jeans fit. While responding to questions can be as simple as posting a photograph of the pocket stitching on one's jeans, it can also involve detailed and demanding exchanges of information. Jacob explained to me that he has spent hours discussing fit with other Clothes Forum users just to help them.

Research participants told me that on occasions when they received guidance they felt obliged to return to the forum and let other forum members know how they used that guidance; for example, to update them about which pair of jeans they ended up purchasing. They understand that because conversations are archived and searchable, their responses will help

the next person with that same query. Jacob put it succinctly when he described his forum use as going "From taking to giving back to taking again". This mutuality is something that the interviewees really appreciated about online clothing communities, with William telling me "I really like being able to teach other people and learn from one another – the knowledge exchange".

Beyond the simple giving of advice, forum members help each other with aid in making purchases and even by giving gifts. When he first became interested in raw denim, William benefited from the generosity of another Denim Forum member who gifted him a pair of Gustin jeans that had shrunk too small for him to wear. William returned the gesture by gifting jeans from his work to other members of the forum. Tom told me about how after posting a photo of himself wearing a Tootal scarf, a Clothes Forum member contacted him out of the blue to send him some Tootal cravats. Forum users are also willing to go to stores and take photographs of clothing items or check stock for other members. In Steel Soul, members get in touch with one another when they come across shirts or jeans in each other's sizes. Many of these communities are so tightly-knit that forum users know each other's sizes and what is on their "want" lists.

Forum members also help each other with their shopping through a process known as "proxying". This involves going to stores to buy garments on behalf of other users when those items are not available online. This is referred to as a "pick up". This phenomenon is particularly salient in Brit Forum because limited-edition releases are more common in streetwear. I asked twenty-nine-year-old pharmaceutical negotiator Steve what motivates him to help other Brit Forum members out this way. He explained that it is "just good will. Props, if you like, in the forum". Another type of pick-up in Brit Forum involves helping members get bargains that are not available online, by purchasing high-end items spotted in the discount retailer TK Maxx. Brian, a twenty-seven-year-old who works in PR for a London-based charity has done pick-ups for other Brit Forum members. When I asked what motivates him to do these pick-ups, he

referred to the forum's values of mutual aid and reciprocity: "It's an interesting question because it's a little bit of trouble, but people seem to be really willing to do favours for me on there. I don't know what it is but it's definitely a good thing about it. Goodwill, community". Proxying also involves users having online purchases sent to their home and then forwarding those packages to another user, either because the items are not available in that user's country or to help that user avoid high postage costs and import duties. Again, these acts of communal reciprocity challenge Bauman's (2007) assertion that consumption is a purely individualistic act. At the same time, we should recognise that communitarian impulses are being directed towards participation in consumerism. This is indicative of the bigger contradiction at the heart of internet culture, which is based on communitarian principles yet thoroughly shaped by corporate capitalism (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Terranova, 2004).

3.2.4 Social Dynamics

Different online menswear communities have different social dynamics and users often move between them. The interview respondents are conscious of these differences. They might use one forum just for research purposes, lurking but not posting, but they might be very active on another forum that they see as a better fit for them. Steel Soul, Style Questions and Denim Forum are known for their friendly and supportive atmosphere. Twenty-two-year-old Toronto undergraduate student Conrad joined Denim Forum because of its friendliness:

> Their community is really friendly, I think. I thought they were really friendly, welcoming, and everybody posts pictures of their [outfits] a couple times a week and they're all encouraging each other, like "oh yeah they look really great", and it just feels really nice.

Denim Forum was a gentle entry point for Jonathan, who told me: "People are a lot more welcoming there, and there's not as much presumed knowledge, a lot of people are like 'I just got my first pair, I'm coming here'". Of the classic menswear forums, Style Questions is the only one known for being a nice and welcoming place. Jose told me that he stayed in Style Questions because of "the camaraderie. Everybody was a gentleman". Clothes Forum members

tend to be snarkier than Style Questions members, with very forthright critiques of users' outfits and vigorous disagreements about tailoring techniques. Jeremy compared the two forums:

> Style Questions is a much friendlier, it's not a critically astute place. Clothes Forum is less friendly but more incisive in their criticism... Everybody who's ever been on Clothing Forum for any length of time, they will post and get their head bashed in a bit and they get bruised a bit and they bleed and pick themselves up and think about what they're doing and go "maybe I'll try something this way".

Jeremy is referring to the feedback that users get from photographs of the outfits that they post, a phenomenon explored in more depth in Chapter 7.

This brusque criticism in Clothes Forum appeals to some of the men I interviewed, but its harshness makes others avoid posting there. William told me that he reads Clothes Forum but finds it too intimidating to post on: "[It] scares me. Because if you ask a question people will just tell you you're a moron instead of answering it". Tailored Forum is even more negative than Clothes Forum, with even more pointed critiques. Users in Tailored Forum re-post outfit photographs and discussion threads from other forums expressly for the purposes of mocking them. Some interviewees described Clothes Forum as cliquey and commented that it has elements of a popularity contest, with the most active members receiving the most praise. They also commented that it has conformist tendencies, with the words of more prominent members taken as gospel. Wilson told me how now long-gone members have left dictates on dressings for others to repeat as mantras: "[It was like] Jesus or Moses saying these are the Ten Commandments and then people started talking about what the ten commandments were and started their own commandments".

Civility, or lack thereof, can be seen in the varying levels of conflict on individual forums. Conflict is most evident in Clothes Forum, with its users arguing about everything from the best way to shorten sleeves to how much one should spend on a pair of shoes, but conflict is present in all the forums in the sample. Most of the interview participants stated a desire to avoid this kind of online conflict. But for a minority of the interviewees conflict is part of the appeal of forums, offering a sort of entertainment. A few of the respondents actually enjoy provoking

conflict. This is what is referred to as "trolling". Donald was banned three times from Style Questions for mocking other users, but not from Clothes Forum or Tailored Forum. This gives some insight into why Style Questions is seen by the interviewees as a friendlier place than the other classic menswear forums – its community, and its moderators, have very little tolerance for negative comments or uncivil behaviour.

3.2.5 Politics

Along with conflict over matters of taste, sartorial codes and decorum, in Clothes Forum and Style Questions there is also a good deal of conflict around politics. Brit Forum has a single, albeit long-running thread on politics, Tailored Forum has some, but not much discussion of politics while Steel Soul and Denim Forum do not have a dedicated section for political discussion. In Clothes Forum and Style Questions, the forums in which the most political discussion was observed, the most audible users seem to lean towards the political right, and threads making fun of feminists cross over with the anti-feminist reactionaryism of the "manosphere" (Almog & Kaplan, 2017). But there are centrist, progressive and pro-feminist voices in these threads as well, hence the high level of political conflict. Tailored Forum has less political discussion, but it also leans to the right. While the presence of anti-feminist discussion threads on a forum frequented by upper-middle-class men might seem to be the height of bourgeois patriarchal *revanchism*, I am cautious not to read too much into this as those engaged in political discussion do not seem to be representative of the wider user base. These sections have much less activity and fewer active users than the clothing and lifestyle discussions. A single Tea Party libertarian has started most of the recent political discussion threads in Clothes Forums, making his politics the most visible. In contrast to the right-wing orientation of Clothes Forum and Style Questions, the tone of political discussions in Brit Forum leans to the left. This is perhaps reflective of the different demographics and aesthetics of the forum. I even interviewed a radical anarchist activist who is active there.

Returning to the subject of Clothes Forum and Style Questions, most of the men I interviewed from these forums avoid the political threads altogether. Raymond, a lawyer, explained that he avoided the political threads because he has enough conflict in his life already from work:

> Generally, I avoid political discussion subforums on any given forum because I find them too fractious and heated and my everyday job involves litigation usually in a fractious and heated context and I just don't need to have that in my leisure time so I do my best to avoid those and in the rare occasions when I don't, I end up regretting it.

Jose said of the politics discussion section of Style Questions that "it can be a really divisive, ugly place. I've gotten into the interchange and every time I do, I wish I hadn't. The conversation, it's terrible, its belittling people, its divisive and I just don't care for it". Gordon, who considered himself "centrist by Canadian standards", and "left-wing by American standards", was discouraged by how the discussions in Clothes Forum are dominated by right-wing American voices, so he avoids those sections altogether. Twenty-two-year-old Style Questions user Jessie, who is politically progressive, told me that men who wear the trad style tend to be both politically and sartorially conservative. But he also noted that the perception of the Ivy Look as a right-wing style is historically inaccurate. Ian also rejected the way in which some Style Questions members have, over time, come to associate trad with political conservatism, wrongly in his opinion:

> In the early days of the forum it was pretty good because we had a lot of old timers who actually were there in the sixties and seventies and they were from all over the political, religious spectrum. One of the most prominent guys was gay, which when you think about somebody being gay in the sixties or seventies, that's pretty out there.

While most of the men I interviewed are apolitical or centrist, I interviewed two men, both active on the classic menswear triumvirate of Tailored Forum, Clothes Forum and Style Questions, who are very right-wing. These are the same interview respondents who told me they enjoy trolling. They are both adherents of Tea Party Republican politician Rand Paul. Donald, as was noted earlier, embraces online conflict. He described himself as a "nationalist" and a "paleo-Conservative" and uses an image of Donald Trump as his forum avatar. He was not explicitly

racist or homophobic in the interview, but explained that he is troubled by a lack of assimilation in American society and what he referred to as "the openness of things". He talked about how he wants to reverse "progressive advances" and wants society "to be much more button-downed and reserved". Donald wants to replace the "everything on your sleeve mentality" with a "much more stiff upper lip". This openness corresponds, for him, with American society's decline in dress standards, which he thinks is disrespectful to the collective. This is a common theme in Style Questions, with many politically conservative forum members seeing declines in sartorial standards as indicative of a lack of respect for tradition and of general societal decline. However, it is not an attitude I encountered elsewhere in the interviews. The other Rand Paul fan, Luke, is Canadian. But he prefers American politics because they lean more to the libertarian right than Canadian politics. He described his trad style as an expression of affiliation with the conservative American political culture of the Republican South.

3.2.6 Knowledge-Sharing and Research

While the interview participants' level of interest in the sociality of forums varies, they all see them as a type of information resource. "Information" is a word that appeared repeatedly during the interviews, along with "learning", "research", "education" and "knowledge". The internet is a place where individuals pool their collective knowledge and experience, leading internet theorists to compare it to Marx's "general intellect" (Terranova, 2000) and refer to it as "collective intelligence" (Lévy, 1997). The forums in my research sample can be understood as sites of collective intelligence about menswear. They are a source of often quite arcane and specialised knowledge that before the internet would have been the provenance of those who worked in the menswear business. There are several books that contain such information (Boyer, 1996; Flusser, 1985), but these books are out of print. Their tenets were often the starting point for the rules adhered to in Clothes Forum and Style Questions, but as an evolving archive of information, the forums are much more extensive and, most importantly, accessible.

Some users arrived at menswear forums with a strong sense of personal style, having internalised their sense of dress by emulating others and following advice from friends, family, sales-people, magazines and books. This mainly describes the older interview participants. Fifty-year-old Clothes Forum member Raymond developed an interest in suits when working as a summer student at a law firm. He described this as a "learning experience" that prompted him to learn as much as he could about classic menswear through the help of magazines and local menswear shops. Thirty-eight-year-old Jovan was interested in clothes long before discovering Clothes Forum. He learned about clothes from his mother, who worked in the garment trade, and by emulating his older male relatives. When he first joined Clothes Forum, he was perplexed by how little some of the users know about clothes:

> The funny thing about Clothes Forum, you'll often see a lot of younger guys coming with really basic questions like they don't know how to buy a shirt. They don't know what's the difference between a casual shirt and a dress shirt. Or how the suit jacket should look like and how they should wear it and so forth. Like the really basic questions. I never had that.

Whereas my older interview respondents developed their stylistic knowledge organically, the younger forum users are "internet natives" and have a much more mechanistic relationship to clothing. For them, knowledge about dressing is just another form of information that can be acquired through internet use. In Chapter 5 I will explore how forum users approach clothing as a system that can be mastered with enough online research. Going through forums and reading old threads while keeping up-to-date with the day-to-day discussions is one of the ways in which the respondents initially develop their stylistic knowledge. Once they felt that they had acquired a sufficient baseline of knowledge through lurking, they then progressed to asking questions. Eventually they accumulated enough knowledge to, in turn, answer questions, demonstrating personal competence in dress (a phenomenon I will return to in Chapter 7). They used terms like "novice" to refer to themselves before they discovered online menswear communities, with dressing and shopping understood as a type of skill that can be developed. Like a few of my other participants, twenty-seven-year-old Toronto journalist Alex talked about having had a

knowledge gap regarding clothing, because his father was part of a baby boomer cohort that rejected traditional men's dress. Because his father has no stylistic skills or knowledge to pass on to him, Clothes Forum is "a community of people who fill in the blanks".

The forums also satisfy an intellectual curiosity about clothing. Jacob does not wear suits but has read a great deal about them, explaining "I was just interested to learn, to understand how this thing works". Others also discussed "absorbing" as much knowledge as they could about tailoring, even when they were not in a position in life where they could afford a bespoke suit or even have cause to wear one. Rubin commented that even though he cannot afford a suit right now, he wants to know about suits so that that when the time comes to buy one he will be able to "align that information with a particular price point". Interest in other styles and aspects of clothing is one of the reasons that so many of the respondents lurked in forums separate from those in which they are active. Jonathan described lurking on higher-end historical reproduction denim forums as "aspirational-slash-educational". He does not wear that style but still wants to read and learn about it. It is not just the younger respondents who approach forums this way: older respondents also want to know as much as possible about the clothes they are wearing. Fifty-three-year-old day trader Paul told me: "whatever it is, I want to do it really well and learn as much about it as I can possibly know. And I thought Clothes Forums was a reasonable place to get some information from". Phillip talked about getting into Raw Denim in much the same way, telling me "When I get into something I get kinda obsessive and want to know everything about it".

In the next chapter I will discuss how highly specialised knowledge derived from the forums is used to make purchasing decisions. This high-level knowledge comes, in part, from people in the menswear business who are active in the forums. For example, I observed cobblers and tailors active in Clothes Forum, answering highly specialised questions about their trade. As modernisation school theorists argue (Giddens, 1990, 1991; Lash & Urry, 1994), late modern individuality is characterised by an increasing dependence on the input of experts. The

growth of digital culture has seen that expertise democratised and in the case of online menswear communities, expert knowledge is shared amongst users and archived in searchable text. For the research participants, technical knowledge is one of the main appeals of these communities. Referring to the minute discussion of details in Clothes Forum, Justin told me: "That's what I love about forums because there is really friggin' nerdy technical discussion and that's what keeps me around". He also commented that he has learned all that a layperson can in terms of what he referred to as "technical stuff". William distinguished between different levels of "information", telling me that he lurks in Clothes Forum for what he calls "advanced information" because the users there have "a better knowledge base" than those in Denim Forum, where he is most active.

The information that users share through personal experience with garments also contributes to the development of online menswear communities as archives of knowledge. William has an almost indexical knowledge of denim makes and models. When I asked William how he knows so much about raw denim despite only owning two pairs, he explained:

> On Denim Forum, if people buy new pairs they'll post a review and when people post reviews, even if I'm not interested in a pair, there's just a set of questions that I'll ask. "Hey, can you post a picture of the rivets?" "Do you know if the rivets are custom to that brand or if they're stock, and if they're stock, are they made by YKK or Ri-Ri or Ideal?" "Are they hand-hammered, are they machine-applied, can you show me the cuff, is the cuff chain-stitched or lock-stitched?" …so, I will ask all those questions and I just remember it.

The expertise shared in the forums concerns fit and styling as well as construction. Forum users post photographs of their outfits to get feedback, and the advice given to individual users on a forum is likely read by many more, who would learn from that advice. Wilson explained that when he first became interested in dressing better, he looked to see what kind of feedback others were receiving about their outfits in the "What are you wearing right now?" thread in which users post their current outfits: "Every day I go to the 'What are you wearing right now?' thread and it's like 'Oh hey! People are saying his lapels aren't meant to match with his tie, or whatever about his trousers, how the coat buttons are or it's too supressed or whatever'".

Another Clothes Forum user, Eugene, told me that he started getting his shirts and suits tailored in response to advice he saw in the forum. Ian is cognisant of the fact that when giving advice, it is not only necessarily for the person asking, but also for the archive, for people like Wilson to read: "You're actually not providing that advice for them, because they're not going to listen to you. You're actually providing that advice for the silent reader who is not there, whom we don't know, who didn't post, who might read it anyway".

Chapter 4: Cultures of Consumption

4.1 Consumption

4.1.1 Quality

Whether their interest is in heritage, trad, streetwear or classic menswear, the interviewees tend to favour high-quality clothes produced on a small scale with high levels of craftsmanship. These consumer preferences are defining commonalities amongst the various style groups to which the interviewees belonged. The terms "quality" and "craft" were used repeatedly throughout the interviews. Online, a large proportion of the forum discussions revolve around questions of quality, durability and craftsmanship. Whereas fashion is defined by rapid turn-over in styles, the respondents want clothes that will outlast the fashion cycle. Aesthetically, this means seeking out "classic" styles, a subject to which I will return in Chapter 5. In terms of clothing's materiality, this means finding items that are well-constructed and made of durable fabrics. The interview participants pay a premium for higher quality items because they believe that those items will last longer. Quality, long-lasting items are contrasted with fashionable items, which are perceived as poorly-made and ephemeral.

Durability is equated with the weight and thickness of a garment's fabric. Within the online menswear communities, participants are very engaged in the material culture of clothing, consistently emphasising the material, sensuous aspects of their garments, especially regarding denim. One of the reasons that Steel Soul has such a cult following is the considerable weight of their jeans. Whereas most jeans use twelve-and-a-half-ounce denim, Steel Soul produces nineteen-ounce and twenty-five-ounce models - jeans so heavy they can stand up on their own. Thirty-year-old New York warehouse worker Liam explained that he first started buying Steel Soul jeans because he wanted "something thicker. For winter they'd be great, longer-lasting as well. Everyone said they wear for really long, the fades are good when you wash them, they're really long-lasting". Brit Forum user Tony told me about how he has a "touch test" where he

judges quality in terms of whether a garment feels "substantial". Clothes Forum member Edward also talked about using a "touch test" to determine the quality of dress shoes. I asked him what he looks for with that test and he explained "just the leather quality. If it's rugged or if it feels really thin or flimsy".

4.1.2 Production Fetishism

Closely related to interviewees' preference for quality is a strong interest in how clothing items are made. Jonathan compared the raw denim community to the local organic food movement, explaining that as with his food, he wants to know where his clothing comes from. This is a common sentiment amongst his peers. There are numerous discussion threads within online menswear forums where participants describe production processes, detailing their visits to factories and workshops. Forum users share production videos and blog posts about manufacturing techniques discussing in detail the relative merits of differing manufacturing techniques. Some post in-depth reviews of garments or even take garments apart to better understand their construction. Ian took a pair of Bass Weejun loafers apart to draw a diagram of the shoes' construction and post it in Style Questions. This contributed to the evolving archive of knowledge found in the forum. Using the examples of zips, Brit Forum user and follower of football casual styles Robert explained how forum users tend to approach clothing a little differently from the general public: "it certainly seems [with] people from the forum you can get together and spend all night talking about zips, which you can't do with normal people, normal people aren't interested in zips. Guys from forums are". Many of the men I interviewed described the chance to access this hitherto arcane knowledge as amongst the biggest draws of online menswear communities.

Forum users' fascination with production techniques can be contrasted with the commodity fetishism that we usually see at work in consumer culture (Goldman & Papson, 1996). Marx (1867/1990) coined the term to describe how capitalism obscures the labour

involved in the production of a commodity, with the exchange value (price) of an object taking

the place of its use value. This theory has been re-worked to account for the development of

consumer culture, with critical theorist Haug (1986) arguing that in consumer societies it is

actually "imagined use value" - the result of advertising and branding - that obscures the

commodity's origin in a system of production. Similarly, postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard

(1970/1998) describes how the "commodity sign" has superseded the commodity, with people

buying things based on what they mean, rather than what they do. By contrast, forum users

often base their purchases on their knowledge and understanding of how items are produced. In

their search for this knowledge, these men are engaged in what the anthropologist Arjun

Appadurai (1990) calls "production fetishism", using the term to describe how an emphasis on

the location of production obscures the myriad of other inputs in a process of production. I

expand this concept to incorporate all the ways in which production techniques are fetishized.

Companies have long sold items based on how and where they are made, but what is different

about this form of production fetishism is that it is driven by consumers rather than marketers.

Forum users' production fetishism is part of a conscious effort to reverse processes of

commodity fetishism, peeling back the layers of symbolic meaning produced by branding. For

example, when I asked Carl what quality means to him, he told me:

> To me it means durability, the presence of interesting details, *and most importantly, lack of misdirection* [my italics]. I don't want to have clothing, or in fact anything in my life, that isn't what it looks like… And the search for craftsmanship ties in really closely with that because seeing it made, or being able to see how it's made, guarantees me that I know what's in it and I know that it is durable and that it'll last.

Forum users work to see through marketing and fashion media hype by developing an intricate

knowledge of how garments are produced, putting materiality before semiotics. Instead of

buying Levi's jeans based on the brand name, they buy lesser-known brands famed for their

quality; brands such as 316 or Strike Gold. Instead of buying Prada shoes for their status

signification, they purchase Goodyear-welted, bench-made shoes from traditional

manufacturers such as Barker and John Lobb. I describe forum users' interest in production

techniques as a "fetish" to emphasise the degree to which production processes are venerated within online menswear communities, obscuring the role of design, marketing, fashion and consumerism in influencing purchasing decisions. As I detail in the next chapter, by convincing themselves that they are seeing through marketing manipulation to purchase items for their inherent qualities, forum users are working to make their consumption seem like a rational, masculine pursuit.

4.1.3 Craft Consumption

The menswear forum user's production fetishism makes him an example of what Campbell (2005) calls the "craft consumer". Craft consumption describes the late modern consumer preference for items produced through craft production techniques. Strictly speaking, craft production refers to the use of pre-industrial production techniques, where there is no division of labour between the person who makes an item and the person who designs it. In respect to clothing, only the bespoke shirts, suits and shoes that are so highly-coveted by forum users fall into this category. However, the term "craft" tends to be applied in a much broader sense to refer to the difference "between a production system in which the worker is in control of the machine and one in which the machine is in control of the worker" (Campbell, 2005, p. 28). This means small-scale manufacturing. For example, industrial machinery is required to produce selvedge denim, but selvedge jeans are nevertheless objects of craft consumption when produced on a small scale. The artisanal nature of forum users' favourite brands' small-scale domestic production contrasts with the mass-scale, overseas production of fast fashion shops such as H&M or Topshop, which are perceived as lacking both individuality and quality. For forum users, buying well-crafted items also means that they can be assured that they are attaining the levels of quality they seek. For example, Edwards' explanation of why he particularly likes a shop called the Armoury is that "they focus on high-quality items. Everything is made by hand, they have a lot of craftsmanship, each brand that they carry".

Justin only wears bespoke shirts and suits, and he told me how he enjoys discussing the ins-and-outs of different tailoring techniques in Clothes Forum, then being able to discuss those technical details with his tailor. He values the craftsmanship of tailoring greatly:

> It's an art, I like the craft, I like to support the craft. It's fun. It's fun to be able to work with someone to create what you want and I like the fact that I get to wear somebody's creation, somebody put their literally blood, sweat and tears into making. It has more life to it I think. And I just like supporting that old-world craft.

Craft consumption is facilitated by the input of expert knowledge described in the previous chapter. Combining forum use and their own experience with garments, forum members train themselves to become experts on quality and construction, reflecting the production fetishism that characterises their overall approach to clothing. When forum users are not confident in their own judgements, they use the online discussions of production techniques and the expertise of others to guide their purchasing decisions. Most people without a background in the clothing industry do not know what makes, for example, a Goodyear-welted sole better than a glued sole, or a canvassed suit jacket better than a fused one. But the interview participants do, thanks to the sharing of expert knowledge within online menswear communities. For example, Gary has a collection of over twenty pairs of shoes manufactured by Alden, a Boston-based shoe manufacturer whose shoes retail for between C$675 and C$950. He explained how he came to understand the craftsmanship of Alden shoes through forum use: "with shoes, like Goodyear-welt versus blade construction, those are things that I only found out through [Clothes Forum], through reading about 'Hey, why do these shoes cost $600, what am I buying'?"

There is a strong connection between notions of place and notions of craftsmanship within menswear forums. If an item comes from a place that has a tradition of manufacturing it, then it is held in high esteem. For example, there is much interest in bench-made English shoes from Northampton, the town in the English Midlands where traditional shoe-makers such as Edward Green and Crockett & Jones are based. Online, forum members detail their visits to these factories in posts that are widely read by the research participants. Raymond told me how

forums introduced him to English shoemakers. He learned online that English brands are superior to the brands available in Toronto, leading him to import dozens of pairs of Northampton-manufactured shoes. For adherents of traditional American style, there is a strong preference for clothes manufactured in the United States, which are deemed to be of superior quality. So, for example, forum users will pay a premium for a button-down shirt produced by Gitman Vintage in Ashland, Pennsylvania. Rubin, a twenty-two-year-old recent graduate explained "I personally value really high quality and craftsmanship and durability and those are things I think have always been associated with American-made products".

Campbell (2005) notes that craft consumption involves an attempt "to recover that "singularity" or "uniqueness" that has traditionally been the hallmark of the handcrafted object" (p. 32). The small-scale production and artisanal nature of the clothing brands that my research respondents prefer means that the clothes they purchase are more unique than those available in the mall or high street. A significant appeal of tailoring is that it allows forum users to purchase clothes that are made personally for them by a skilled craftsperson. Clothes Forum has the most emphasis on tailoring, featuring discussions of individual tailors, fabric options and construction techniques. Most of the men I interviewed cannot afford, or are simply not interested in, bespoke tailoring, but a few are deeply interested in tailoring. Jovan commented that he already has most of the clothes he needs and that his main clothing expense is getting one suit made per year. Tom has been getting suits made since his mod days in the 1960s, and recently visited a tailor in outer London recommended in an online forum for members of the mod subculture. He explained how that tailor offers particular details that are not available off the peg:

> He's particularly skilled at getting a slimmish fit with single pleats, which I prefer, and the front ticket pocket, which I really, really like as well. And I think the comfort of knowing that you're getting English cloth from an English mill, it's being made up in England by local guys, and as many fittings as you want really to get it right. And if you're still not happy he'll take it back and do it all over again for you. So, it's about fit and quality as much as about a look.

In Tom's statement, we see how tailoring is bound up with notions of place, personalisation, quality and craftsmanship.

Forum members do not need to have the bespoke experience to get unique, customised items. Internet shopping has facilitated the growth of affordable made-to-measure, as individuals can now order shirts and suits directly from countries where the cost of skilled labour is cheaper. Whereas this practice was once limited to those who could visit such places or get measured in a hotel room by a travelling tailor, men can now measure themselves and use online sites to pick out the custom details they want. These online made-to-measure businesses are the subject of multiple discussion threads in Style Questions and Clothes Forum. Another way to get a unique item is through custom group orders organised in online menswear communities. This is a process whereby a group of forum users gets an item such as a jacket or shoe made with custom details or materials picked out in forum discussions. Edward has been part of five of these group orders organised through Clothes Forum. He described the process as a "collective effort": "There was one pair of boots, it was a collective effort by all of us. Deciding on the colour, the lining inside, the sole, what kind of sole to use, it was a pair of boots so whether to use speed hooks or not. We all had input on it." Gary explained that he organised a custom order of suede wingtip boots with a commando sole from Alden "because it's unique".

4.1.4 Spending

One of the interview respondents, Frank, told me that he was at one point spending up to $5000 a month on Japanese heritage clothes and another, Paul, estimated that he and his wife spend between C$40,000 and C$50,000 a year. These are not representative examples, but the artisanal and small-scale nature of craft production means that the clothes that forum users buy are not cheap. The interviewees explained that the constant discussion and sharing of purchases in forums worked to normalise levels of spending that they were previously uncomfortable with. Twenty-year-old undergraduate student and San Francisco Denim Forum

member Casey told me: "I feel less guilty when I see guys who have spent 350 on a pair of pants or whatever". When I asked Neil how much he spent on clothes he told me: "I reckon I spent about 200, 300 quid a month. That's not that bad I think". His use of the adjective "bad" demonstrates an awareness that there is a stigma to spending too much on clothing. In the context of Brit Forum, however, it is around the mid-point of what people seem to spend. He explained that the forum is "why you kinda lose your reference, you're like 'I don't spend that much money' then I speak to my friends they'd be like 'what the fuck are you doing'?" The amount the interview respondents spend on clothes varies widely, but at the lower end of the spectrum it is usually around $50 a month and at the higher end of the spectrum it is usually around $500 a month. Seeing what people in the forums spend on clothing helps new forum users overcome their initial discomfort at spending large sums of money on clothing. Because they are buying more durable clothes, spending on high-quality items is seen as money well-spent. From this perspective, it is not shopping but "investing", a term used repeatedly both in the interviews and online. This is another way of making expensive clothing purchases seem like good, rational decisions.

Forum users are willing to spend more money on clothing that the average male consumer, but they also want to get good deals. This is again a matter of making expensive purchases seem rational. Many of the respondents told me, sometimes a little defensively, that they never pay full price. For example, when I asked Jose how much he spends on clothing monthly, he conveyed: "If there's a need that I find, I will try and purchase it at the lowest possible price I can, and that's what I do with everything that I buy as far as clothes go". Paul, with an estimated annual clothing expenditure of more than C$40,000 a year, was keen to point out that the clothes he and his wife buy are "always on sale" and that he "never pay[s] full price for anything". A lot of the discussions in the forums are to do with bargains, as users share discount codes, request discount codes or give each other tips about sales. Tony said of Brit Forum:

> I do use it a lot for just keeping track of the sales and stuff like that. Obviously, nobody likes paying full retail price for stuff so if there's a sale, people keep track of it and people are pretty keen to send deals around so keep an eye on it and stuff, especially when it comes around to sales season and there's discount codes.

Brit Forum offers users exclusive access to discount codes and sales in exchange for a £10 sign-up fee for "elite" membership. When users discover good bargains, they post them in this section, rather than the main section of the forum, so that they can make sure that the deals go to members rather than lurkers.

When they want a clothing item, most of the interview respondents wait for it to go on sale or become available second-hand. They play a waiting game, eagerly anticipating the arrival of sales. They make sure that they know what is available from which retailers so they will be able to snap up the goods come when they come on sale. The interview respondents described a process of continually revisiting product pages, ensuring the sizes they want are still available, trying to figure out when the sale will start and then finally making purchases, sometimes within seconds of receiving email notifications of a sale. Attending sample sales, information about which is shared in the forums, is another way to get bargains.

The high price of the type of clothing that forum users like means that there is often a disjuncture between what the respondents want and what they can afford. This is most often the case with respondents in their late teens and early twenties. These young men have limited spending power because they are in full-time education or in low-wage, precarious employment. Desire was a recurring theme in the interviews, with interviewees discussing the items they want but cannot afford presently. For example, Jonathan commented that he "would love a pair of Roys [an artisan-made pair of jeans], but that's just not feasible for me right now with my salary". Online, users seem to get a great deal of enjoyment out of imagining items they might purchase in the future when they are in a better financial situation. Forum users space out their shopping to keep on budget, and planned purchases are a common topic of discussion in

menswear forums. "Dream" purchases that forum users cannot afford are discussed in all of the forums, and "if I had the money" comments abound.

This disjuncture between wanting expensive clothing items and being able to afford them creates a state of permanent longing. Campbell (1999) argues that the feeling of perpetual longing is one of the main drivers of consumer culture. One manifestation of this desire is the "want list" or "cop list", a list of clothing items that forum users hope to "cop" (purchase). Such lists are common across collecting cultures such as record collecting. William's explanation of his cop list demonstrates the powerful motivating force of consumer desire:

> I probably have my cop list built out for the next five years… It's mostly just about the saving. And I will go look at things and salivate about them, and then when my boss tells me that they want me to come in for an extra shift and it's up to me, while I'm getting ready for that shift and I really don't want to go to work that day I will just leave a picture of a pair of shoes on my laptop screen and be like well, this is $100 more towards whatever pair of brogues I want or towards getting my jeans repaired or whatever.

Some of the interview respondents pointed out that the desire for items is often more pleasurable than their eventual acquisition. The results of their research and patient waiting often disappoint, causing them to shift their attention to a new desire. This supports Campbell's (1989) suggestion that consumer culture is based on the human capacity to perpetually generate new wants. For example, twenty-three-year-old Clothes Forum user Anthony told me how he sold a bicycle to buy a pair of Solovair boots that he desired for a long time, only to discover that they did not live up to his expectations: "it was definitely a much bigger deal in my head than it was getting them. It was like 'yeah, cool, I got a new pair of boots, they look good, fine, that's cool', but it was a much bigger thing in my head than it actually was".

Many of the respondents are self-conscious about how much they spent, and keep this information from friends, family and colleagues. Steel Soul user Harold described his spending as "weird", and when I asked him what he meant by this he replied:

> I dunno. It's not something I grew up with, it's not something I know a lot of people that do. It seems, by its very nature, it's almost exclusive, and it's also centred around spending a shit-ton of money and that's something people definitely frown upon.

Harold feels that it is "irresponsible" and "selfish". Spending a lot of money on clothing runs counter to the Protestant work ethic (Weber, 1905/2002) – nowhere is this better expressed than in Veblen's (1899/1973) puritanical denunciation of fashion as conspicuous consumption. While the money that Harold and others spend on clothing diverges markedly from Anglosphere norms, their guilt reflects the degree to which they have internalised the values of the Protestant work ethic.

4.1.5 Second-hand Clothing

As I mentioned in the discussion of social class in Chapter 3, some interview participants spend very little money on clothing. For those with limited resources, the looks they seek can be attained by buying clothes second-hand. The most affordable way to do so is by scouring thrift stores, also known as charity shops. Style Questions and Clothes Forum both have dedicated threads for discussing thrift "scores". The collective knowledge in these threads allows forum users to recognise good-quality clothes when out thrifting. Those research participants who shop at such stores told me that the forums are an enormous help because they provided guidance on what brands to look for and how to recognise quality construction. Alex explained that when he was on a limited budget, his ability to recognise a well-constructed jacket meant that he could purchase good clothes for a fraction of their usual cost. Rubin dresses in the Ivy Look, a style that, taken at face value, signifies "old money". But the unwanted button-downs, natural-shoulder sports coats and khakis on the rails of thrift stores he visits make this style, in his words, "accessible". It is the most expensive-looking styles - the Ivy Look and classic menswear – that are most commonly found in charity shops and thrift stores. Streetwear and heritage clothes are newer, produced on smaller scales and sold in more specialised marketplaces, making them less likely to end up in such stores.

eBay is also an important source of second-hand clothing, described by one of the interview respondents as "like a big flea market". The same knowledge and skills used in

searching for quality clothing donated to charity are deployed there. Jessie explained that

thrifting sub-forums offer specific knowledge that can be used to track down quality items

cheaply: "You end up getting these bargains based on *knowledge*" [my italics]. eBay is

organised around key words, so search terms are crucial. Style Questions and Clothes Forum

provide information on which brands to search for. For example, forum members use the forums

to find out about now-defunct American shoe-makers such as American Gentleman and Stuart

McGuire, then search for these terms to source high-quality, American-made Goodyear-welted

shoes on eBay at much lower prices than their contemporary equivalents. Benjamin

(1982/2002) describes second-hand goods as failed commodities whose aura has decayed, the

detritus of capitalism's incessant forward motion. But eBay and thrift stores / charity shops give

these commodities a second life as they are re-enchanted by forum discussions that hold up

particular brands and styles as desirable once again (Shields, 1992b).

Buying and selling is also a common practice within online menswear communities, and

every forum I studied has a section dedicated to it. These sections are places where sellers can

sell clothes that they do not like or which do not fit them anymore, while buyers can pick up

quality, curated items for less than their original price. As Jacob put it, "it had been filtered

through that collective *zeitgeist* where they had cherry-picked the right items or found the best

deals and were passing them on". These buy-and-sell sections compete with eBay and clothes

re-selling apps such as Grailed and Depop, but their embeddedness within the forum

community creates a greater bond of trust between buyer and seller. The condition of a second-

hand garment is a major determinant of its price, and the sense of community and importance of

reputation within online menswear communities means that the interview participants have more

faith in the truthfulness of the condition descriptions in forum buy-and-sell sections than they do

in those found on competing platforms. They check the buy-and-sell threads regularly so that

they can react quickly to good deals, which often disappear quickly. Sellers are often motivated

by feelings of community and mutuality, selling items at a low price because they are happy to

see their old clothes go to a good home. Tony told me: "I definitely give people good deals on

stuff because it's a close-knit community so I want to share it". However, the sellers in the

interview sample are not motivated by altruism alone, as some are mainly interested in avoiding

eBay fees and having a more direct line to interested buyers.

In comparison with thrift stores, these secondary markets are still relatively expensive,

because contemporary items from "forum-approved" brands retain much of their original value.

Thus, secondary markets provide an incentive to buy higher-quality items from forum-approved

brands, as such items are easier to re-sell. Respondents affirmed that when buying high-price

items they are unsure about, they do so confident in the knowledge that the garment will retain

some its value and can be re-sold. Again, the notion of clothes-as-investment becomes

apparent. Harold said of his expensive Japanese heritage pieces: "I definitely feel that it's an

investment. Luckily there's a lot of re-sale value because of the forums". Gary used this

knowledge to justify his Alden habit to his wife: "I told my wife, I'd sell them and probably get

back close to what I paid for these Aldens, so I really think that's an important thing". Most

respondents put earnings from such sales towards new purchases. This makes expensive

purchases easier to justify, because they pay for their new garments with capital released from

previous purchases, as one might release equity in a home.

4.1.6 Quality as Luxury

While luxury was once associated with the European aristocracy, notions of luxury in

fashion are now tied closely to global luxury brands such as Burberry, Gucci and Prada (Berry,

1994; Borstrock, 2014; McNeil & Riello, 2016). Much of the scholarship on luxury focuses on

such brands from the perspective of marketing (Fionda & Moore, 2009; Moore & Doyle, 2010).

These studies are consistent with the commonplace characterisation of luxury in terms of

exclusivity, premium pricing, status distinction and individualised experience (Calefato, 2014;

Roberts & Armitage, 2016). However, despite the large sums that forum members are willing to

spend on clothing, luxury brands are mostly absent from forum discussions. When luxury

brands were mentioned in interviews, it was only when respondents were explaining how they

reject luxury brands as style-over-substance. Justin told me how he first became involved in

menswear while reading about raw denim. He explained that "there was a difference between

mass-manufactured jeans and jeans from smaller independent labels. I was more interested in

that than I was [in] Gucci and Prada and things of that nature".

Other interview participants similarly stressed their disinterest in big-name luxury brands,

which they denigrated as pandering to superficial and uninformed consumers. As has been

seen already, for the men I interviewed, being a smart consumer means paying for quality rather

than branding. Edward said that he stopped buying designer brands after discovering raw denim

on menswear forums. He told me: "So that was a big eye-opener towards looking for quality

stuff instead of just finding fashion brands and paying whatever for them, you start realising 'oh,

what am I paying for', right?" Paying high prices is understood as a matter of ensuring quality,

whereas luxury brands are perceived as expensive just for the sake of being exclusive. While

forum users might not be interested in luxury brands, their craft consumption can be recognised

as a type of luxury consumption. Whereas luxury has become a symbolic value attached to an

ever-increasing range of products as part of the process of commodity aesthetics (Berry, 1994;

Haug, 1984), the brands favoured on menswear forums are much closer to the ideal-type of

luxury.

Design scholar Shaun Borstrock (2014) suggests that because luxury brands such as

those owned by the LVMH group (Moët Hennessy Louis Vuitton) are now mass-produced and

mass-marketed, they produce luxury-branded products, rather than luxury products. He argues

that it is quality, craftsmanship, exclusivity and rarity that define true luxury. These factors can

also be related to brands favoured in menswear forums. This chapter has already shown how

emphasis is placed on quality and craftsmanship within online menswear communities.

Exclusivity derives from the high prices already discussed in section 4.1.4. Returning to the

example of Alden shoes, they are sold at a similar price point to luxury-branded products, and they are popular because of the high-quality materials and craftsmanship involved. Rarity and exclusivity are motivators too, as rare colours of shell cordovan are coveted by Clothes Forum members. Much of the discussion on the Clothes Forum Alden thread concerns tracking down these colours or getting on waiting lists for them, as they are so scarce. Similarly, discussion of rare Steel Soul items abounds on the Steel Soul forum. Limited-edition Steel Soul flannel shirts can sell for more than their original C$465 price tag. The heavy jeans and work shirts manufactured by brands such as Steel Soul may not look anything like something LVMH would sell, but they are closer to the ideal-type of luxury in terms of craftsmanship, quality, exclusivity and rarity. Luxury brands tend to emphasise their place of origin, as these brands usually hail from cities such as Paris and Milan that have manufacturing traditions which connote craft and quality (Borstrock, 2014). However, many luxury brands such as Burberry or those owned by the LVMH group off-shore their production, making place a symbolic value divorced from material reality (Crewe, 2017). By contrast, the brands favoured in Clothes Forum are genuinely manufactured in the places that the brands are associated with. As described in the craft consumption section of this chapter, forum users place a great deal of emphasis on place of origin.

4.1.7 Made in Japan

The country that forum users associate with quality clothing manufacturing more than any other is Japan. The raw denim, military reproduction and workwear popular on menswear forums has a long-standing cult following in Japan. The attention to detail, craftsmanship and traditional artisan techniques used in Japan are thought to make Japanese clothes vastly superior to anything manufactured in the west. As a result, the respondents spend upwards of $400 on jeans, $250 on work shirts and $1100 on WWII reproduction jackets. They value Japanese brands such as the Real McCoys and Buzz Rickson because these brands'

reproductions of American military garments are thought to be accurate down to the stitching, threads, buttons and rivets. While luxury is rarely associated with clothes originally worn by industrial workers, farmers, hunters, sailors and soldiers, the case of Japanese clothing offers an excellent illustration of how the clothes favoured in forums can be understood as ideal-type luxury products. Like luxury brands, these Japanese brands use product back-stories, craftsmanship and exclusivity to command a higher price (Calefato, 2014; Fionda & Moore, 2009). While many luxury brands only claim to be exclusive (Borstrock, 2014), the obscurity of the brands, limited production runs and difficulty in sourcing items from Japan make many of these items genuinely exclusive. Forum users pay high prices, struggle with Google Translate, make trips to Japan and use proxy services all so that they can get their hands on what they perceive as the very best clothes. To understand why Japanese brands are so popular online, we first need a genealogy of Japanese denim and military reproduction clothing.

During the American occupation of Japan, second-hand clothes were a currency with which American soldiers paid for sex workers, who then sold the clothes to second-hand shops. Under conditions of scarcity and rationing, these clothes were in high demand. Japanese customers particularly liked blue jeans, which were referred to as "G.I. Pants". Demand for denim was compounded in the 1950s by the popularity of American juvenile delinquent films such as those starring James Dean and Marlon Brando, as well as a second influx of American soldiers into Japan, this time on furlough from the Korean War. Japanese consumers, however, were still dependent on the second-hand market until the 1960s, when a domestic jeans industry was established based on production techniques imported from the United States. Japanese manufacturers could sew the jeans, but still had to import their denim from the USA. In the early 1970s, the Japanese jeans brand Big John set out to find a domestic source of denim. Local textile mills adjusted their machinery to spin the heavy cotton needed for denim while traditional weaving and dying techniques were adapted to mimic the unique fading properties of indigo denim (Marx, 2015).

By the 1980s, there was thriving and fully-integrated domestic denim industry in Japan, but the by-then booming Japanese vintage market had produced a preference for the authenticity of vintage American jeans. Contemporary American imports did not cut it, because as American brands such as Lee, Levi's and Wrangler had shifted to cheaper and more efficient production techniques, the quality of their jeans had declined. Open-ended spinning meant that they no longer had the distinctive selvedge seam, and changes in the dying process meant that they were no longer the deep shade of indigo they were known for. Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s, vintage pickers combed the United States for deadstock jeans to send back to Japanese stores, but when American vintage stores cottoned on to what these jeans were worth, prices went up. Lapine, a vintage clothing store in Osaka came up with the idea of cloning deadstock jeans. The jeans boom of the 1970s meant that the infrastructure to do so already existed, and a few makers had already experimented with techniques that resulted in domestically-produced selvedge denim with a distinctive texture known as "slub". There were soon five reproduction denim companies in Osaka, known as the Osaka Five. They reproduced the details of vintage American jeans down to the rivets, leather patches and buckles, impressing vintage enthusiasts with their attention to detail. This same attention to detail was then applied to American flight jackets by reproduction brands The Real McCoy's and Buzz Rickson.

By the early 2000s, a handful of the more-fashion-forward reproduction brands such as Evisu, 45pm and Capital were selling abroad, drawing on notions of traditional Japanese artisanship in their branding. Evisu was the most successful of these companies, developing a cult following through its associations with streetwear, but most Japanese reproduction brands remained unknown in the Anglosphere until the mid-2000s. This changed in 2006 with the opening of Self Edge in San Francisco and Blue in Green in New York. These stores quickly found a customer base amongst the users of online forums, who already had an enthusiasm for

raw denim. Japanese reproduction brands soon had a cult following online (Marsh & Trynka, 2005; Marx, 2015).

Japanese reproduction brands are very popular in Denim Forum, Steel Soul, Clothes Forum and Brit Forum. For raw denim aficionados, Japanese jeans are at the top of the pecking order. Typically, after owning a cheaper pair of raw jeans, they get more involved in online menswear communities and, in their words, "graduate" to Japanese denim, which are seen as the very best. It is usually only because of forum use that they have even heard of these brands, and it is the discussions in forums that convince them that Japanese jeans are worth paying $300 to $400 for. One of the men I interviewed, a twenty-eight-year-old Bay Area Denim Forum user named Richard, has even made trips to Japan organised around checking out obscure, hidden-away Japanese clothing stores. Others have made pilgrimages to Self Edge in San Francisco and Blue in Green in New York to buy Japanese, a topic for later treatment in Chapter 7.

One of the main reasons Japanese reproduction brands are so popular with users of online forums is their aforementioned associations with craftsmanship. Those of the interview respondents who buy Japanese clothes emphasised the craftsmanship that goes into them. Demonstrating production fetishism, Harold told me how he buys Japanese reproduction items because of the artisanship:

> I think it's cool, I really like looking at the process of what they do. [You get] photos of people making horse-hide leather jackets, there's twenty photos and they show [the process] from start to finish. When you get items like that you know that they're one-of-a-kind and they're made by a person who's been paid well and the materials are really good. I do really like that they're made on a machine that was used a hundred years ago. It's arbitrary why that's cool but I do like the made-in-Japan aspect.

Richard prefers Japanese denim because of the details that are missed out in the off-shore mass production of American brands. He told me: "there's a lot of details with Japanese denim that you don't see in American denim [anymore], like raised belt loops are not something you see in American denim". Brian explained how he loved the Japanese streetwear brand Visvim

because "they use old Japanese techniques and a lot of the material is from little communities in Japan that do all traditional [clothes]". In all three of these quotes we see the how craft consumption and production fetishism intersect with forum users' notions of place. There is an undercurrent of orientalism and essentialism to their imagining of Japan as a traditional culture unsullied by modernisation, as is common in western imaginings of Japan as exotic Other (Sugimoto, 2014). This despite the fact that they are discussing garments produced with industrial machinery in one of the world's leading industrial nations. Forum users' passion for Japanese brands even extends to Uniqlo, despite it being a fast-fashion brand that does most of its manufacturing in China (Hanai, 2011). Uniqlo is not known for high-quality clothing, but its aesthetics are appreciated much more than those of other fashion brands, for Uniqlo produces some items that are classic in appearance. This is in keeping with its origins as a Japanese retailer of the Ivy Look (Marx, 2015).

4.1.8 The Politics of Quality

Underlying forum users' interest in quality and place of manufacture is a type of consumer politics, for many of the men interviewed are guided by ethical concerns. By its very nature, fashion - as a system driven by change (Lipovetsky, 1994; Zelinsky, 2014) - demands that its followers purchase clothes that they do not really need, prematurely replacing the clothes they already own. The textile and clothing industries have long been associated with exploitation, but the recent rise of fast fashion has exacerbated concerns about the exploitation of garment workers and raised new concerns about fashion's environmental sustainability. The cheapness of the clothes sold in fast fashion stores such as H & M, Zara and Forever 21 has made stylish clothing more accessible, but the acceleration of the fashion cycle has greatly increased the rate of both consumption and disposal. The capitalist drive to maximise profits within a business model based on selling clothes as cheaply as possible makes fast fashion brands dependent on outsourcing to sweatshops in developing world countries with lax labour

and environmental regulations (Joy et al., 2015). This issue gained widespread public attention following the horrific Rama Plaza factory collapse in 2014 (Arrington, 2017; Rosen, 2002; Seabrook, 2015).

In response to these serious labour and environment issues, there is a growing movement within both the fashion industry and fashion studies in favour of "ethical" or "sustainable" fashion (Black, 2011; Fletcher & Grose, 2012; Rinaldi & Testa, 2015). The inherent nature of fashion makes the notion of sustainable fashion somewhat of an oxymoron; all fashion businesses are dependent on the creation of new wants, and the only truly sustainable way to consume clothing is to buy second-hand or re-craft existing garments (Fletcher, 2016). It could be argued that as with other forms of "ethical consumerism", sustainable fashion is at best naïve in its attempt to use consumption to solve social ills, and at worst a form of "greenwashing" (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). As anthropologists Mark Moberg and Sarah Lyon (2010) argue, the use of free market solutions to solve problems caused by the natural operation of markets is highly paradoxical. Problems within the fashion industry are symptomatic of wider problems inherent to capitalism, an economic system where increasing the rate of exploitation is one of the ways in which the extraction of surplus value is maximised (Marx, 1867/1990). The current social ills associated with fast fashion did not come about by accident – they are the result of containerisation and neoliberal deregulation, which has facilitated a global race to the bottom (Harvey, 2010). Reducing these issues to a matter of personal choice allows consumers to enjoy clothing without feeling fully imbricated in the misery the fashion industry wreaks, but it fails to make any substantive changes to the existing system. This is not a problem limited to fashion and reflects how neoliberalism encourages citizens to think of themselves as consumers, channelling their ethical impulses towards consumer choice (Banet-Weiser & Mukherjee, 2012). Within our current economic system, only increased union power, government regulation and import tariffs can truly address the exploitation of labour and environmental damage caused by the fashion industry.

These critiques notwithstanding, one can recognise that in the absence of major shifts in economic policy, ethical consumption may at least reduce some of the misery wreaked by the fashion industry. Sociologist Keith R. Brown (2013) argues in his study of fair-trade consumption that while ethical consumption involves a performance of altruism, it is also about recreating identities through the consumption of products compatible with personal ideals. And as sociologist Juliet Schor (2010) notes, the problem is not that we are too materialistic, but that we are not materialistic *enough*. By that she means we do not value our material possessions properly and are too quick to throw them away. Forum users' production fetishism, emphasis on quality and overall interest in the materiality of their clothing seems to heed Schor's call for more materialism and stands in contrast with the throw-away ethos of contemporary consumer culture. I agree with communications scholars Sarah Banet-Weiser and Roopali Mukherjee (2012) that the citizen-consumer is neither a virtuous hero nor a dupe, and that ethical consumption is neither the solution to the ills of capitalism nor little more than a corporate ruse. Looking beyond these binaries, we find well-meaning individuals attempting to do the best they can within a neoliberal consumer capitalist regime from which it is very difficult to extricate oneself.

The men I interviewed are not involved in the ethical/sustainable fashion movement, but they share many of its goals and values. The pursuit of "timeless" style and purchase of long-lasting garments reduces both consumption and disposal over the long term (although these men consume much more clothing than the average consumer). As we have seen already, forum users reject fast fashion in favour of craft consumption. The pursuit of high-quality clothing results in forum users buying clothes manufactured in developed countries with much higher environmental and labour standards than those countries where the vast majority of clothing is now manufactured. Forum users' production fetishism favours clothing made by craftspeople over clothes made by alienated sweatshop workers. Scholars of luxury consumption argue that the craftsmanship and high quality of luxury clothes, along with the

prestige attached to their manufacture in developed countries, can make luxury consumption a more sustainable form of consumption (Beard, 2008; Joy et al., 2015). The same can be said of the ideal-type luxury consumption of forum users, who want to reduce waste and want to know that they are buying items that are not manufactured in sweatshops. For example, hemp farmer Frank told me:

> For me it's about more than a look, it's about practical, efficient, sustainable practice in clothing. There's a lot more that goes into these shirts than meets the eye. Denim too. Talk about fair wages being paid to true craftsman, artisans working on a craft that they've been into their whole lives. Especially in the case of the denim, it's not sweatshop clothing so for me that's the biggest draw, it's also, in my line of work, it's super-super-functional, it holds up crazy [well] even when I'm in shirts that are six, seven years old at this point.

Similarly, Gordon explained:

> I was always interested in buying things that were going to last, both for economic reasons and the environmental side of things is important to me as well. I don't want to be throwing away --- I understand the impact on the environment, so the idea of changing up my wardrobe every two or three years is horrifying. So that's the bottom line argument, bottom-line environmental argument.

4.1.9 Consumer Research

While buying clothing online gives forums users more choice and lower prices, it does not allow them to feel or try on garments. Buying items second-hand usually means that one cannot return them, and even when buying new items from online stores, the cost of returns can be prohibitive. Online shopping is seen as coming with "risk", whether that means a garment does not fit, has quality control issues or simply is not as expected. Because of this, a large proportion of the discussions on menswear forums concerns quality and sizing. That is why the exchange and archiving of knowledge in the forum is so important to the men that use them. The interview respondents talked about the extensive research they carry out before making a purchase. They feel that research is needed to avoid mistakes. William told me that he would need to "know the hell out of" anything he buys. Kenneth told me that almost all of his Steel Soul forum use can be seen as a type of research:

> It's all potential research every time in the forum but *tons* of research you know. For my latest pair of jeans that I purchased two or three weeks ago, I measure four pairs of pants, I had five potential pairs of jeans with all their measurements on there, I did a pro and con analysis for each of the measurements.

As noted in the last chapter, forums are valued for their role as sources of what is often described as "information". Liam talked about wanting to find out as much "information" as possible before making a purchase. When I asked what he meant by this he explained that he meant "The fit, how things run size-wise because ordering online is a bit of a risk size-wise, then people that have had them for a while, good to see how they hold up, if they've had any issues".

Tony talked about wanting to get opinions on clothes before he purchases them, telling me that he will post in Brit Forum to ask "What do you guys think of this item or something, just a general, quick little opinion". He defers to the collective opinion of the forum on these matters. Advice is often of this sort, with forum users asking what to buy, or whether a particular garment is worth buying. Recognising quality is not something that comes naturally; it must be learned through research. When I asked Gary, an avid collector of Alden shoes, if he would have been able to recognised quality in a shoe without the help of Clothes Forum he told me: "definitely not" as shoe construction is not something that can be felt by hand. Before buying his first pair, he needed to know about how Alden shoes are made to see whether their quality justifies their price. I asked Denim Forum user Casey what kind of advice he has received online, and the level of detail in his response as regards quality and fit is illustrative:

> When I was comparing boots and I was going away for the winter, some of them have different soles so [the forum] told me that a certain Vibram sole on the Beckmans or the Red Wings would be better for this than on Iron Rangers because the Iron Rangers are a cork rubber rather than a rugged rubber Vibram sole, right. That's advice that was useful for me.

Brand research is also about developing knowledge and competency for future purchases, so that if a forum user finds an item second-hand or on sale they know whether they should buy it. Jonathan described his forum use as "almost ongoing research so that when I'm out at a store or online shop and I see something I like, I'm more prepared to make that decision if I want to

get something". Another form of information sought in the forums is information about what to buy next. The interview respondents explained that they joined forums to learn about new brands and carry out further research when a brand piqued their interest. Brit Forum user Neil offered this example:

> Recently there was a guy in the forum, he was wearing, there's an offshoot of North Face called the Purple Label and it's owned by a Japanese company called Nanamica and he was talking about how "I wear the North Face purple label exclusively because it reminds me of what Visvim used to be". Basics with a technical flair so then I [thought] "Oh shit man, I don't really know much about this brand" so started researching more about it because of that, that peaked my interest.

4.2 Clothing and Group Identity

4.2.1 Stylistic Coherence

We have seen how some members of the menswear forums engage with them as genuine communities. We have also seen how they bring men with common tastes in clothing together. But is that enough to say that these are style subcultures, in the sense that the term has been used within the canon of CCCS-inspired subculture studies? Before answering that question, let us look at what they are not: post-subcultures (Muggleton & Weinzierl, 2003; Redhead, 1990). There is no mixing and matching in the postmodern "supermarket of style" (Polhemus, 1994). As will be discussed in the next chapter, the looks that these men wear are coherent and highly rule-bound. There is an attention to detail and concern for following rules that has much more in common with the mods, teddy boys and skinheads analysed at the Birmingham School than it does with the postmodern pastiche and fluidity of post-subcultures. Each forum has, to differing extents, a small number of recognisable looks. For example, the classic menswear section of Clothes Forum has a very distinctive look. This look is a product of ideas about what colours and proportions are classic, what shoe and suit manufacturers represent good-quality and what tailoring details are desirable. As Clothes Forum member Jessie observed, consensus around certain rules in the forum has produced a coherent forum style:

Each of those forums has their own sort of aesthetic and so Clothes Forum, because a couple years ago a bunch of people were really in favour of grey pants, the way Clothes Forum works is you had these very persuasive people, about five years ago, and who wrote all this stuff like "never wear a white shirt with a sports coat because it's too formal" or "only wear light grey trousers because otherwise your jacket with be lighter than your pants and you'll look top-heavy", and those have become almost like dogma there.

As places for distinctive styles to be worn, "What are you wearing today?" ("WAYWT") or "What are you wearing right now?" (WAYWRN) threads work to affirm a coherent group aesthetic. These are threads in which forum users post photographs of their outfits, and they are a common feature across all online menswear communities. The format and acronym have since expanded to fashion blogs and Instagram (Findlay, 2017). Online menswear communities have no physical space in which members can be seen wearing their clothes, but with everyone posting photographs of similar outfits, looks emerge from forums in the same way they might have emerged on the street or in clubs within the style subcultures of the past. Twenty-four-year-old *avant-garde* dresser Joseph, who lives in San Francisco explained that he goes online to see others dressing in the goth ninja look because "there's not somewhere I could go right now to experience that offline, at least not in San Francisco". The screen replaces the street as users post photographs of their outfits for others' edification, a move from "street style" to "screen style". The preponderance of particular brands in these photographs is the reason why the interview participants referred to certain brands as "forum-approved". Forum-approved brands are the ones that are discussed the most, and for which users receive the most kudos when discussing their purchases or posting photographs of their outfits.

The coherence of forum looks resulted in many the interview participants articulating an ability to recognise fellow forum members on the street. This shows that that stylistic signifiers announce one's membership of a forum in much the way they once announced membership in subcultures such as the rocker subculture. For Brit Forum users, there are particular items and brands that identify users as one of them. Brian explained:

> There'd be certain items. Like if I saw someone wearing [them], I'd know almost for a fact they're posting on one of the two websites I mentioned that I mainly post on. You don't see too many people wearing those brands, even in London, so I'd definitely guess they were in the forum or they'd been to the forum.

One such item is the Common Project Achilles trainer, a plain white leather sneaker whose only distinguishing feature is a barcode on the side. During the interviews, I noticed that four of the ten Brit Forum participants were wearing these. This small detail could identify the wearer as an in-the-know Brit Forum user. Because a consensus has arisen in the forum that these shoes are good, according to a hyperbolic statement made by one of the interview participants, "everybody" in Brit Forum has a pair. Visvim is another forum-approved brand that is strongly associated with the Brit Forum look.

Similarly, for Clothes Forum members particular items announce forum affiliation. When I asked Justin if there is a Clothes Forum look that he sees on the streets of New York, he told me:

> There's been so many times where I'll see someone looking at me and I'll think this has got to be somebody from the forum looking at me. I've gotten private messages: "Oh I think I saw you on Parson Street, was that you?" I'm like "yes". There is definitely a certain look that goes along with it. Because certain items get hyped. And everyone's getting it, so when you see it, that's what you think of.

I asked him what sort of items he meant and he listed grenadine ties, shantung ties, shell cordovan Alden longwings and "Neapolitan anything" as distinctly Clothes Forum. Shell cordovan is a premium type of leather derived from horses that Alden is known for using. "Neapolitan anything" refers to a style of Italian tailoring where jackets are characterised by very soft, shirt-style shoulders, lapped seams and bigger lapels – details that few New Yorkers outside of Clothes Forum would be familiar with. Justin was describing the classic menswear look, but the Streetwear and Denim section's look is also distinct. Jacob told me he can recognise people who post on this section of Clothes Forum by the brands they wear:

> Like APC, Filson, forum-approved brands, you can see them a mile away because they're not common. You can see when someone is wearing Engineered Garments, some of these are very clear brands. If it's Engineered Garments, if its certain pieces like Filson bags. There was a phase where you'd see the Clothes Forum uniform, certain

brands like Alden shoes and APCs, Filson, whatever it was, you'd just see certain pieces that you would know were forum.

4.2.2 Groups with "Substance"?

Forum members are identifiable by their wearing of codified, coherent styles, but this is not enough to call these groups subcultures. As subsections of the wider online menswear culture, each forum meets the criteria for description as a subculture in the sociological sense of the word (sub-groups of a larger culture), but they lack certain key characteristics associated with youth subcultures. Most obviously, the members of these groups are not young. However, work on ageing and subcultures shows that subcultural participation often extends beyond youth (Hodkinson & Bennett, 2012). Nor are they working-class, although the original Birmingham School subculture theorists argued that subcultures must be working-class, scholars have since shown that the canonical youth subcultures were much more heterogeneous in their class composition than was originally thought (Clarke, 1990; Laughey, 2006; Osgerby, 2012). The CCCS also suggested that subcultures must constitute "resistance", but this had much more to do with the political context in which their work was carried out than it did with the reality of post-war British working-class youth subcultures (Dworkin, 1997; Weiner, 2018). The real reason that we should not approach these groups as subcultures is that they lack what sociologist Paul Hodkinson (2002) calls "substance".

Hodkinson argues that we need to "differentiate those groupings which are predominantly ephemeral from those which entail far greater levels of commitment, continuity, distinctiveness, or, to put it in general terms, substance" (Hodkinson, 2002, p. 24). The style groups of online menswear communities have continuity and distinctiveness, but they lack commitment. They do not demand high levels of commitment, either to the style or to the online community. Those interview participants who subscribe to "timeless" looks such as classic menswear hope to be wearing the same clothing in five years, but that is not the result of any strong belief in what their forum stands for. They are more concerned with getting good value-

for-money out of their purchases. Moreover, those who wear heritage, streetwear or *avant-garde* styles were often non-committal when asked if they would be wearing the same style in five years. They said that they hope they will be, but also acknowledged that their tastes have changed before and might change again. Many of the interview participants said they are losing interest in menswear, either because they now have all the clothes they need or because of changes in their lifestyle priorities. Getting older, saving for a mortgage and having children were among the reasons given.

The men I interviewed also discussed losing interest in the online menswear communities, having learned everything they wanted from them and getting bored with seeing the same topics repeated over and over again. Ian's statement expresses a common sentiment:

> I think with a lot of interests you max out on the amount of information you can gather and that you need to understand a topic. Especially something like this where it's not a scientific pursuit or historical interest where scientific knowledge keeps advancing. This is something that has boundaries to it. You can max out and reach the limits of your knowledge.

Ian also complained that many of the posters from the early days of the Style Questions trad sub-forum – posters who were highly-influential in establishing the tone of the forum and its sartorial conventions - no longer post there. This was a common complaint across interviews with men from other forums as well. Many of the men I interviewed are winding down their participation in online menswear communities, although they still read what is posted in the forums or post sporadically, either to keep abreast of new products or for the sense of community. They talked about developing new interests and switching their forum allegiances. Many have moved from posting on raw denim and streetwear forums to posting on classic menswear forums because of changes in professional circumstances that mean they have fewer occasions to wear raw denim and need a more professional wardrobe. Some simply feel they have learned all there is to learn on the subjects discussed in the forums they read.

Communications scholar David Hesmondhalgh's (2005) view of Hodkinson's notion of substance is that it also includes "autonomy from wider social and economic relations" (p. 30).

Whereas Hodkinson's goths hung out with others goths, attended goth clubs and festivals and shopped for goth fashion and music commodities, menswear forum users have little to do with one another aside from the occasional friendship or meet-up. There is no autonomy from economic relations, for aside from a handful of exceptions (discussed in Chapter 8), the stores and brands where they spend their money do not come from within the forum community. These groups also lack social autonomy. On the macro level, the forum does not over-ride existing identities, or even intersect with them. There is no process of self-identification; no-one would state that they are a "heritageist", "classic menswearist" or "Scandinavian streetwearist", for example, in the way that individuals identify as, say, a mod or a punk. The men interviewed feel no strong sense of identification with their forums or with other forum users. For example, when I asked Jessie if he considers himself a trad, he replied: "that's such a lame identifier because it's just people that post about clothes online". He added that "it doesn't really have anything beyond a set of rules for clothes". Similarly, when I asked Dave if he feels that he is part of a style group, he replied: "Do I feel that I'm part of the international brigade of *avant-garde* dressers? Not particularly".

Although a few interview respondents have deep social ties to other members of online menswear communities, for most of them the forums are compartmentalised from other parts of their lives. In their existing web of social relations, they feel isolated in their clothing interest, hence why they have become involved in online communities for the discussion of clothing. For example, Jessie told me: "There's really nobody in my actual life who shares any actual enthusiasm for clothes… I don't think there's anybody in my life who it matters to them that I've got a shantung tie [a type of premium silk tie]. In Clothes Forum, somebody will appreciate that". Steve explained "in real life I don't really talk to anyone about clothes so its separate, its compartmentalised". Most of the interviewees said that their friends think their interest is weird, if they are even aware of it at all. Forum use is bracketed off as something pertaining to a personal interest, it is not something integral to online menswear community members' identities

or productive of a sense of group-belonging. This can be contrasted with the centrality of clothes, music, motor vehicles and other commodities to identity in canonical subcultures (Muggleton, 2000).

Where clothing preferences shape identity in online menswear communities, it is not through identification with a particular group, but by helping to create a sense of self-identity. Social theorists argue that modernisation has made older identity categories such as religion and social class less important in late modern societies, putting pressure on individuals to form their own identity narratives, establishing themselves as a certain kind of person through consumer preferences and aesthetic tastes (Giddens, 1990; Lash & Urry, 1994). These theories overlook the degree to which old forms of identities might overlap with new ones (Lury, 2011; Miller et al., 1998), but they do ring true with what I heard in the interviews. I asked the interviewees how they would feel if they lost all their clothing and had to wear a cheap suit from Wal-Mart (or ASDA, the UK equivalent). Many of them responded that dressing in that suit would not be consistent with their sense of themselves or their values. But they said that they would use their knowledge and skills in dressing - their personal style - to make that suit look good. The responses reflect the individuated nature of identity found in menswear forums, with identities defined in terms of individual consumer preferences rather than collective identity.

Individuated identities were very much evident when the interview respondents discussed their preferences for quality clothes. When I asked Steve what his clothes say about him, he told me: "I think it's about quality. So, in terms of what I do, and who I am, and how I dress, I just try to stress quality. I don't see it as following a trend or anything like that, it's just quality". It is worth noting that a preference for well-made clothing is treated here as something intrinsic to Steve's identity. This is a common sentiment amongst the interviewees. Brian told me that his clothes said little about him other than his taste for quality items: "I like the clothes to show that I'm dressing nice, good-quality clothes. It's important to me". William told me: "it's about expressing an appreciation for having quality objects". Just as a consumer preference for

high-quality items is understood as a defining aspect of identity, so too is attention to detail. For example, Joseph told me: "My current mentality is that the clothes we wear are pretty much our own personal culture. How we present ourselves, what we wear if we actually pay attention to what we're wearing, it's just showing other people what our own mentality is". When I asked him to clarify what mentality is expressed through his clothing, he told me it is "attention to detail". These men understand what they buy as markers of who they are. This is consistent with the notion that in post-traditional societies, identity projects are pursued through consumption (Featherstone, 2007; Slater, 1997). They pursue this identity as individuals rather than members of a group; far from being part of socially autonomous groups, they are deeply embedded in the wider culture of consumption that characterises the countries they live in.

A final dimension of Hodkinson's "substance" is that it is meant to include "a sense of like-mindedness with others of the same group" (Hesmondhalgh, 2005, p. 30). However, while some research participants spoke of having a common mindset in terms of, say, fastidiousness, these forums do not have any unifying aesthetic or comprehensive set of shared values beyond clothing. Just as their political ideologies are heterogeneous, so too are their tastes. Tastes in things other than clothes, such as art, design, furniture, movies, or music are peripheral. There are threads for discussion of these topics, but as in the politics threads, these threads are much less active than the discussion threads dedicated to clothing. There are some patterns: for example, many of the users on the Style Questions trad sub-forum listen to jazz music, associated, through the clothes worn in the fifties and sixties by jazz musicians, with the Ivy Look. However, many of the men there do not listen to jazz or listen to musical genres that seem incongruous with trad, such as punk rock. Asked if there is anything that characterises the members of the forums he is active on, Raymond told me:

> There's a pretty broad cross-section of individuals on any public forum. Some of whom you will interact well with and others not. Other than a shared interest in the subject matter I don't know that I would have a description of an [Style Questions] member because I know of members who are as different from each-other as I can perceive them

to be, but they do have this common ground, this common interest, so the short answer no.

The proliferation of sub-threads on these forums means that users may find others who share an interest in wine or guitars or motorcycles or travelling in Europe, but these sub-forum discussions are not representative of the whole forum culture. The style groups are united by their interest in clothing and little else.

4.2.3 Forum Groups as Neo-Tribes

The question remains of these style groups - if they are neither subcultures nor post-subcultures, what are they? I posit that these groups most resemble what sociologist Andy Bennett (1999) terms "neo-tribes". The term - adapted from the French sociologist Michel Maffesoli by way of cultural geographer Kevin Heatherington's (1992) and sociologist Rob Shields' (1992a, 1992b) work on lifestyle - refers to comings together of individuals into groups with "fluid boundaries and floating memberships" (Bennett, 1999, p. 600). I am wary of using this term, for scholars have rightly critiqued the neo-tribe model for emphasising the individual over the collective, over-stating the fluidity of groups and overlooking the degree to which many individuals remain committed to clearly-defined subcultures (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; Hodkinson, 2002). In previous work on members of the contemporary mod subculture, I found that clearly-defined subcultures continued to actively exist (Weiner, 2013). I agree with Hesmondhalgh that the term "tribes" is confusing, because it "carries very strong connotations of precisely the kind of fixity and rigidity" (p. 24) associated with more traditional subcultures. I have even argued elsewhere for the continued importance of "subculture" as a conceptual category (Weiner, 2013).

That said, when contrasted with canonical subcultures, these forums really do look like neo-tribes. Maffesoli explains that "neo-tribalism is characterised by fluidity, occasional gatherings and dispersal" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 76). The tribe "is without the rigidity of the forms of

organisation with which we are familiar; it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and 'form'" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 157). As has been shown thus far, the groups found within online menswear communities are fluid, with members entering, losing interest, and leaving again. The notion of the "temporal gathering" has been used to describe a coming together in physical space, as at the Stonehenge Festival (Heatherington, 1992), but is equally applicable to the virtual, with men coming together in forums for days, weeks, even years, but only temporarily, brought together by a common interest until other priorities take over. The common "state of mind" here involves craft consumption and production fetishism, and it is most certainly expressed "through lifestyles that favour appearance and 'form'" (Maffesoli, 1996, p. 157). The matter of lifestyle is one to which I will turn my attention in section 4.2.5.

Critics of the neo-tribe model argue that it presents an overly voluntaristic, postmodern notion of identity, ignoring the continued role of social structure (Blackman, 2005; Hesmondhalgh, 2005). But style groups are already sites of voluntaristic identities, with members *choosing* to dress in a certain manner to express identity. In fashion studies, clothing is understood as either expressing social identities or interiority (Findlay, 2017). In forums, it is very much the latter, with clothing as an expression of highly-individuated identities. With a few exceptions related to social class, the interview participants see clothes as tangential to their social identities. In those cases where identity was described as something expressed through clothing, it is one defined by a preference for quality or skill in dressing. This is precisely the type of voluntaristic postmodern consumer identity associated with lifestyles – with chosen patterns of consumption (Chaney, 1994; Featherstone, 2007; Shields, 1992a).

4.2.4 Homology

In their seminal work on working-class youth subcultures, CCCS researchers Willis (1978) and Hebdige (1979) borrow the anthropological term "homology" to describe the "fit"

between subcultural styles, tastes and values. Because the groups in the research sample are

so heterogeneous in their tastes and politics, there is little about them that is homologous with

their stylistic appearance. However, there is one field in which homology operated, and that is in

relation to consumer preferences. Many of the interview respondents seek quality in all

commodities, not just clothing. This includes cars, coffee, beer, guitars and mobile phones.

William used the term "artisanal culture" to describe his interests and even blogs about artisanal

culture. Jonathan described the mentality that characterises Denim Forum as one based on

developing knowledge and being invested in a commodity, clothing or otherwise:

> I'd say, just that same idea of taking care and caring enough yourself to pay a little more
> for something, not just to pay more, not just a luxury thing, but caring enough to know,
> caring that the producer themselves care about where the beans are from or where the
> denim is from or where the hops are from.

When Kenneth discussed how people in the forum have a similar "mindset", that mindset was

described in terms of consumer preferences:

> I think we really have the same mind-set. There's [a thread] for knives, wallets, cars,
> there's beer and people are very particular about getting exactly what they want out of
> the products you buy. And that goes with the philosophy of you'll invest or you'll vote for
> or you'll continue to do business with brands because of what they offer to you and I
> think there's a lot of that mindset spread across the forum, is that if you really like
> something, if you really value their brand and their craftsmanship and their quality,
> whether it be consumable or not, you're into it, and that mindset is just generally shared
> amongst people.

4.2.5 Lifestyle

The fact that homology within these neo-tribes is limited to what their members purchase

seems to bear out social theorists' arguments that late modern identities are increasingly

defined in terms of consumption (Giddens, 1990, 1991, 1994; Beck, 1994; Lash, 1994). In this

sense, menswear forums are examples of what Lash (1994) would call reflexive communities. It

should be remembered that neo-tribes are a coming together of people living similar lifestyles.

None of these men see their preferences as an extension of group-belonging. As with their

personal style, their consumer preferences were described in terms of self-defined, interior

identity. For example, while discussing how he approaches clothing the same way as he does cars, boats and audio equipment, Phillip told me: "I think I can appreciate things that are well-built and they're an extension of my *beliefs* [my italics] and I think to a degree all these things help me enjoy life more, enjoy being who I am". The way in which these men see their consumer choices as constitutive of their identities offers empirical support to Giddens' (1992) notion that with the dissolution of proscribed roles in late modern societies, individuals must sustain "coherent, yet continuously revised biographical narratives" (p. 5). Giddens argues that in this context, lifestyle choice has become an increasingly important aspect of self-identity. The sociological notion of lifestyle integrates dress and consumption into a whole set of identity practices that shape both the body and the self, practices such as diet, exercise and demeanour (Featherstone, 1987; Turner, 1996).

The men on these forums are very clearly engaged in identity work of this description, producing coherent narratives of the self. In its manifest form, this involves posting photographs of their outfits, discussing their lives, and/or sharing their purchases. The latent form of this identity work involves the kind of homologous consumption described above. These men do not necessarily need anyone to know about their consumption choices (many of them are infrequent posters), but their sense of self emanates from knowing that they seek out the well-crafted, the high-quality and the independent. These forums can thus be understood as examples of "lifestyle enclaves" (Lash, 1994): loose groupings of individuals bound together because of shared tastes and concerns. Consistent with Giddens' notions of self-identity, the *habitus* that these men inhabit does not seem to be so much the result of an ascribed status, which is to say social class, as lifestyle choice. Without discounting the continued role of social class in shaping consumption (Crompton, 1996), particularly for Bauman's (2007) "repressed" or Lash and Urry's (1994) "reflexivity losers" who are either excluded from mass consumption or have their consumption choices subject to "symbolic violence" (McRobbie, 2004), consumption choices for

online menswear community members are more a matter of presenting a coherent narrative of

the self than a reflection of social class.

Chapter 5: Fashion?

5.1 Fashion vs. Style

5.1.1 The Rejection of Fashion

This dissertation thus far has used the terms "fashion" and "style" uncritically, but in this chapter, the terms will be untangled. It is important to recall that "fashion" refers to a system driven by change, while "style" refers to a personal way of dressing (Tulloch, 2010). Confusingly, fashion is a process not limited to clothing, and is a driver of consumption across consumer culture (Slater, 1997), yet in everyday speech the term is used to refer to the clothing industry, for example "the fashion industry", or "fashion reporting". Contrary to what one might expect from members of online communities dedicated to passionate discussions of men's clothing, there is a widespread rejection of fashion amongst the interviewees. For instance, twenty-nine-year-old London Brit Forum user Barry told me: "I'd say I like clothes, but not fashion per se". I asked him what the difference is and he explained "I just don't really think I'm fashionable. I like what I think is good-quality, nicely-made clothes, good knitwear and shoes, button-downs and things, but I don't check what's hot or the latest trends". In keeping with Tulloch's definition, style is seen by forum users as something more personal than fashion, a matter of personal competency rather than following trends. Justin told me that "fashion is about trends, what's in right now," while style "has more of a personal aspect to it". To Jovan, fashion is something imposed from the outside, whereas style comes from within. He told me: "Style is… something that is part of you, fashion is something that's not part of you. Others impose it on you".

With this distrust of the fashion system, "fashion" is associated with bigger brands, and "style" with smaller ones. Discussing the period of his life in which he was a raw denim enthusiast, Justin told me: "I was never really a fashion whore, I didn't really care much about labels". Casey was educated at a private school attended by wealthy students who wore

expensive designer fashion brands but, in his opinion, lacked style. Fashion, to Casey, is about

expensive designer brands and one-upmanship, whereas style is something that "you can't

buy". Being a smart consumer means paying for quality and brand ethos, rather than labels.

Style does not just provide better value-for-money than fashion, it is also more accessible than

designer clothing. Where fashion is driven by expensive designer labels, style is perceived as

something that can be achieved on a budget through the practices of visiting charity shops or

thrift stores described in the previous chapter. Jessie gave me the example of a designer-led

look oriented around Rick Owens, explaining that even if he bought a cheap copy of a Rick

Owens garment from Zara, it would still not be quite right. However, he can achieve his trad

style cheaply by shopping at thrift stores, thanks to the forum-derived knowledge necessary to

spot the right clothing items and assemble outfits well.

Mass fashion, known as high street fashion in the UK, is a target of derision for members

of online menswear communities, rejected for its low quality and associations with mass

conformity. Dave told me that what unites the adherents of the various looks in Brit Forum is

that they are all "anti-high street". This has to do with quality and labour practices, but also with

a more general critique of mass fashion as something that people wear without careful

consideration. In their opposition to mass fashion, forum users want to be a step above, not like

everybody else. Matt recalled a revelatory moment that hardened his resolve to find better

clothes: "I remember walking outside my house and all of a sudden all of the blokes were

wearing a pair of poorly-fitting Diesel jeans, some kind of slip-on shoe and a suit jacket. And it's

just the shittiest look ever". He sought out a look that would suit him, a look that was not just

copied from "some bad comedian on TV wearing that look". Online, forum users often bemoan

society's general decline in sartorial standards because of mass fashion's promotion of casual

looks. Complaining about shorts, flip-flops, sneakers and the like, Jerry explained his penchant

for classic menswear as "rebellion against the culture that we see today on the streets".

For those who wear classic menswear and trad, fashion is equated with what is referred to as "#menswear". #menswear is also an internet phenomenon, but somewhat separate from menswear forums, oriented around twitter, blogs and Instagram. Where forums are seen as promoting authentic and timeless style, #menswear is seen as commercially-driven and short-lived. Donald's problem with #menswear style is that "it is very current, that it came out of nowhere and it's very ephemeral, it'll be gone soon". Luke described #menswear this way:

> It would be these guys who go buy really high-end Italian suits and sports jackets, they'll buy the really nice English bench-made shoes and they're really dainty about it, they'll have really ostentatious ties, really bright pocket squares… they won't wear socks with their shoes, that sort of thing. That stuff is # menswear… they're hipsters with money who like to dress in suits.

In Luke's description we see some common menswear forum complaints about fashion: blindly following trends ("hipsters"), more money than sense ("hipsters with money"), overly showy ("ostentatious") and insufficiently masculine ("dainty"). Luke complained that this look is inauthentic, describing it as "too much dress-up" and "goofy". He feels that it is accorded too much attention, particularly at Pitti Uomo in Florence, the big annual menswear event at which #menswear styles are displayed and documented online. One of Luke's problems with the look is that in its pursuit of individuality, #menswear discards the rules of classic menswear. He gave the example of wearing double-breasted suits with the buttons unfastened. Rules are a subject to be revisited shortly.

Fortuitously, someone wearing the #menswear look walked past during the interview with Donald. Donald pointed him out, explaining:

> Well that guy who just walked by with the very-fitted Italian suit, those baby-poo colour shoes, that's one of those things, tan shoes, I haven't seen people outside the internet wearing, especially with darker coloured suits, it's not done, I've never seen that. There's a real-life specimen. That's a menswear look, #menswear.

And here is another description of the style from Winston: "The jacket is probably a little bit *too* short, trousers are probably a little bit *too* tight, the hem is probably a bit *too* short [my italics]". #menswear suits are doubly problematic for trad and classic menswear devotees because not

only do they break the rules of classic menswear, they do so in accordance with the whims of fashion. The current popularity of "shrunken suits" is attributed to designers Heidi Slimane and Thom Browne (Bowstead, 2015; Rees-Roberts, 2013). Because this trend is designer-led and originates in the world of fashion, it is at odds with the pursuit of classic style. Ronald commented:

> Today you won't find me in the super slim-cut, ultra-shrink-wrap, two-sizes-too-small button-pulling short jacket suits that define the cutting edge of the menswear trend because to my eye, those things look good only within their immediate temporal context and start to not look good very quickly once you moved a little bit further along in time so it just doesn't appeal to me for that reason.

And Justin, who described himself as a "reformed hipster", told me about how his clothes were severely critiqued in Clothes Forum when he first started posting photographs of himself wearing #menswear-style suits. Because the #menswear suit's figure-hugging silhouette emphasises the contours of the body, it breaks with the more traditional suit silhouette, which is meant to de-sexualise the body, emphasising the mind's control over the body (Collier, 1998; Reynaud, 1983). The complaint about suits being too fitted and too fashionable is, at least in part, also a complaint about them not being traditionally masculine enough. These suits produce the feminised look that Luke described as "dainty" on the previous page.

Along with deriding fashion for being overly showy, the men I interviewed explicitly rejected fashion in their descriptions of their personal style, using adjectives such as "boring", "conservative", "simple", "subtle" or "understated". This is at odds with mundane notions of fashion as a site of creativity and self-expression. It is almost as if members of online menswear communities have taken Flügel's (1930) Great Male Renunciation to heart, preferring a form of dress that is sombre and restrained to the more flamboyant and thus possibly effeminate looks of fashion. Talking about "peacocking", a term that describes dressing for attention, Wilson told me: "I don't like to do what they call in the forum, 'peacocking'. Dressing like 'wow you look like a guy from a magazine cover or something', I don't like to do that, I like to fly under the radar". When I asked Rubin to clarify what he meant when he said his style is "conservative", Rubin

explained it as both "not overly showy" and "something that has stood the test of time". Rubin said he would much rather wear a classic navy blazer than a "floral-printed blazer or a camo-printed blazer you might see in more fashion-oriented tailoring" because the navy blazer is "relatively basic in appearance and has that historical basis to back it up". Gary explained that he feels more comfortable in "conservative" pieces than ones that scream "Hey! Look at me!"

Brit Forum user George described his style as "boring" and "not-showy". This is the direction in which the Brit Forum members seemed to be moving with their style at the time of the interviews. Becoming "a lot plainer" as thirty-three-year-old market researcher Noel put it. Steve conveyed that in his youth he wore clothes that were "quite far out", but that his style now is "fairly boring" and "toned-down". He prefers to dress "safely", focusing on quality and integration rather than getting attention. Brian similarly stated that he "wouldn't like to stand out and draw attention". These men are fans of Scandinavian Minimalist brands such as Acne and Our Legacy for their "simplicity". What Brian likes about Scandinavian Minimalism is how "It's plain, it's simple, it's minimal". Similarly, Kevin explained that he wears Our Legacy because it is "simple and understated". A few of the Brit Forum users interviewed mentioned that they wear clothes that can pass the "pub test". I asked Barry to explain this forum in-joke. He explained that the test is based on the question "could you wear it in Wetherspoons, a not particularly great pub [chain], could you wear whatever you're posting into that pub, without getting taken the piss out of by people?" By this he meant that the clothes will not stand out in an ordinary, everyday setting where the patrons have little tolerance for expressive, cutting-edge clothing. Barry said his clothes would pass the pub test because they are "quite conservative".

This cultivation of an understated appearance is consistent with attitudes towards fashion identified in fashion scholar Susan Kaiser's (2008, 2013) research. The participants in her research expressed lack of interest in fashion and she argues that this reflects a desire to leave heterosexual male gender and sexuality "unmarked". Scholarship on gender and sexuality indicates that because heterosexual masculinity is the taken-for-granted, default option in our

culture (Bell & Binnie, 2006, Richardson, 1996; Seidman, 2009), calling attention to oneself through clothing can sometimes be coded as effeminate and thus homosexual. What is of note is that Kaiser's research captures the attitudes of rural and suburban men with an expressed uninterest in clothing, whereas the men I interviewed are mostly urban and are all very enthusiastic about clothing.

Forum users' desire to not stand out, while at the same time spending significant amounts of time and money on their clothing also speaks to fashion's internal contradiction between individuality and solidarity, first identified by Simmel (1904). They do not want to stand out and be recognised as someone fashionable, but at the same time they want those who are in-the-know to recognise and appreciate the thought that their outfits demonstrate. This is down to recognising the small details discussed in Chapter 4. Describing his style Barry explained "It's very under-stated and low-key but at the same time [the clothes] have some slight element that other people who know of it can recognise". Tony emphasised how he wants his clothes to look "regular" to most people: "I don't want to go outside the box and wear crazy stuff, I'm happy just wearing normal clothes, clothes that are more congenial and regular and I don't know if you necessarily can tell but for me it just feels better". Tom finds fashionable menswear looks too "extreme" for him because they are not understated. He said that he does not want to stand out, but then corrected himself, adding "I'm not even sure if that's right because you obviously do intend to stand out in a way". He clarified that his style "is understated but I suppose that at the same time, it's proposing a certain kind of way of dressing". Tom wants to be recognised, but only by cognoscenti. Jonathan discussed this contradiction explicitly:

> I guess I want it both ways; where I like to wear things that are not too crazy with colour, fit, so I don't want to draw attention to myself necessarily, but I like the fact that if I see another guy who's wearing selvedge jeans or one of the same brands or whatever he's gonna give the nod or know what's up.

A few of the trad respondents do like attention-grabbing clothes, but only when worn within the confines of the trad style. For example: salmon-coloured chinos or loud patterned

shirts. Again, this is about standing out while still fitting in. Certain elements of Donald's trad

style, such as argyle socks and striped laces, draw attention. While he emphasised that he did

not want *too* much attention, he also expressed a desire to be "different from the norm". Donald

said that when people describe him as fashionable, he points out that "everyone used to dress

like this". By making recourse to history, Donald can dissociate himself from present-day fashion

and make it clear that he is reviving a "timeless style" rather than trying to be fashionable. Ian

talked about being drawn to the "bling" or "flashy" elements of 1980s prep - what is known as

the "go-to-hell-look". Because it fits within the canon of trad, flashy elements of the look such as

Gucci loafers, patterned trousers and contrast collar shirts are acceptable in Style Questions.

When an element of a style worn by forum users comes into fashion, this can be a

source of bemusement or irritation. The interview participants see those who wear something

just because it is fashionable as inauthentic. They compare this negatively to their more

thought-out sense of personal style. For example, preppy came back into fashion in the late

2000s and Ian described this as "shameless appropriation". He is concerned that his authentic

trad style could be confused with what he called "fashion prep": "It's ridiculous, right? That's

purely just a fashion thing. On the other hand, anyone who does have that [trad look] could

easily be mis-labelled as being a member of that ephemeral fashion thing". Ian does not mind

the incorporation of trad elements into mainstream menswear. What he objects to is the way the

way in which trad items are given a "fashion" update that breaks with the rules of trad dressing,

something which he attributes to "hipsters". Jose also resents the way that "hipsters" wear

clothes from the trad wardrobe without respect for "the rules". Jose was quite specific about this,

citing the example of how he is irritated when he sees a "hipster" wearing wingtip oxfords with

jeans instead of wingtip derbies. Both are a type of brogue shoe, but they are constructed

differently and the derby is considered to be a less-formal type of shoe. As such, trad rules allow

for derbies, but not oxfords to be worn with casual clothes. To Jose's consternation, the fashion

trend for wearing brogues with jeans pays no heed to these rules. Interviewees who wear

heritage style articulated an understanding that raw denim, flannel shirts and work boots are in fashion, but stated that because this is just a fashion trend, it will go away soon. They see their adherence to the look as different because it is committed and researched.

Some claimed in the interviews to be oblivious to fashion, stating that all they know about clothing is what is popular on their forum, and that they have little interest in the wider world of men's fashion. Harold told me that he is a fan of clothing, not fashion. He sees fashion as a bigger field of interest, whereas for him, "the internet is where it starts and ends". Mike told me: "I don't really know what is going on in fashion outside of the handful of Japanese and American brands who have the heritage look". In their narrow focus on Japanese brands, Harold and Mike are typical of the Steel Soul members that I interviewed. These men are not even more broadly interested in heritage style, their interest is in just a handful of Japanese brands.

5.1.2 Timeless Style

Throughout the interviews, those who favour classic menswear, trad, raw denim or heritage styles mostly disavowed the "fashion" label in favour of "style" or simply "menswear". Most of them did so because they see fashion as ephemeral and irrational, compared with "style", which to them is timeless and rational. This is an example of Rinallo's (2007) "boundary work" distinguishing legitimate forms of male clothing consumption from illegitimate forms that violate masculine norms. "Having style" is equated with wearing classic menswear pieces: clothes that have managed to stand the test of time, achieving the status of what fashion historian Michael Carter (2003) terms the "fashion classic". Drawing on Simmel's notion of the classic as "those forms that put up an inward resistance" (p. 78) to change, Carter applies the term to "engage with those clothing forms that have not succumbed to fashionable destruction, forms such as the male suit, the "little black dress" and the jeans and T-shirt combination, an ensemble that has resisted modification for more than 50 years" (p. 78).

Gordon stated that "classic is often a counter-point to trendy". Asked to explain what he meant by this, Gordon articulated an understanding of fashion that underlines the discourses of Style Questions, Tailored Forum and Clothes Forum:

> For me, the difference is: style should be very timeless. Someone who has style should be, whether it's from seventy-five years ago or from yesterday, should look stylish at any point. Versus someone who is into fashion probably runs the risk of looking absurd a few years from now.

Style Questions user Jimmy wears the trad look because it is "classical. You can look stylish without being fashionable". Jimmy rejects fashion as something that changes needlessly every two or three seasons at the behest of marketers. Raymond described style as something that "looks good outside of its temporal context" and fashion as something that "rarely does". He spoke of a desire to transcend fashion in order to avoid future embarrassment:

> I try to think of myself as dressing in a way that when I look at a photograph of myself twenty years from now I won't be giving myself a facepalm going "what were you thinking wearing that?" And I think the more that one pursues the ragged edge of the envelope of menswear at a given time, the more future face palms await.

Edward told me that he is into classic menswear, not fashion. Asked to explain how fashion is different, he defined it "as trendy or whatever people think is in at the moment". Before becoming active in Clothes Forum, he bought his suits from "fashion brands" such as Zara. But Clothes Forum taught him that he wants fits, details, materials and colour that will not just "fade away" with changes in fashion. He kept returning to the example of lapels. Where fashion brands are promoting skinny lapels, he wants "something that has stood the test of time. Something that, when you look at a classical two-button suit, it's got three, three and a half inch lapels, going back to the twenties, thirties, forties, it will still look just as good". Because when it comes to men's suits, changes in fashion register in small details such as lapel width, such details are very important to classic menswear aficionados. A suit is a significant investment, and they want to future-proof their purchases. The survival of a style over the decades seems to promise that it will remain stylish in the future. So, for example, Luke likes classic menswear because "it's respected and it's endured for such a long time".

For those that believe in timeless style, this is not the same thing as historical re-creation. Justin explained timelessness this way:

> Something that doesn't look like it's a part of any certain era. I think sometimes you can see a really great-looking suit but it looks like something out of [the period television drama] *Boardwalk Empire*. I want to avoid that. I like to take aspects of what's good about that, asking what will make that look good? What will make that look as good in 1985 as it does today? What's the chameleon aspect of this? That's what I try to go for. If I walk around wearing a fedora with what I'm wearing now, that would look costume-y to me and that would not be timeless.

Tom spoke at length about retaining elements of the mod and skinhead styles he wore in the 1960s, without trying to re-create those historical looks. Steel Soul members see Americana in much the same way that Style Questions and Clothes Forum members see classic menswear. Discussing the 1950s rockabilly revival subculture, Mike expressed sentiments similar to Justin's about avoiding the pitfalls of historical costume, while still incorporating elements of it:

> I think some guys get carried away with it and get a little clownish with their look, they're too much; they're a stylised version of it. Their hair is too big and there's too much shit on their boots and too much shit on their belts and ugly-ass jackets and it's just overdone. But if done subtlety, classically, it looks cool.

Even members of the more fashion-forward Brit Forum want to outlast fashion. Noel told me that for him, style is about outlasting trends. Robert recounted how he recently started incorporating Americana into his wardrobe. He gives it a British spin, because he does not want to look like a re-creationist of an American period look. He feels the look transcends the period in which it originated: "There is a timeless element to it, it is a classic look but I'm not trying to have any look, I want to have my own look. Go in my own direction". Matt dresses in a similar style to Robert. By no means a devotee of the Ivy Look, he nonetheless likes Americana and trad items such as the Baracuta G9 Harrington jacket and Red Wing Boots. His description of why he likes them closely matches Carter's description of the fashion classic: "There's certain things they get right the first time. It's so well put-together, so well-designed, well-made from its conception that it doesn't need any tweaking". These comments from Brit Forum interviewees reflect a move on

their forum away from a trend-driven street style look characterised by garish colours and large logos.

There were a few exceptions, but most of the men I interviewed expressed a belief that they will have the same style five or ten years from now. In their view, by standing apart from the fashion system and pursuing classic style, they will be happy with their clothes and still look good no matter what direction men's fashion moves in the future. Eugene said of classic menswear style that he "could be out of trend, or not on trend, but it would still look good in ten years - this is just how I'm growing up and I'm going to stick with it". Jovan told me: "I think I now mostly have a style that's going to last well over ten years". In this manner, the desire to have timeless style is closely tied to the general value-for-money ethos of forum culture. For example, Jose bought a jacket of classic proportions so that he will never have to worry about spending money to replace it. For Ian, this goes back to values instilled in him by his mother, that one should buy the best-quality clothes possible because they will last longer. It is only worth having high-quality, durable items, he explained, if they have "timeless style". Discussing his love of Visvim, Brit Forum user Steve explained that he buys Visvim because it is an investment that will transcend the vagaries of fashion, it is "low-key stuff which lasts season after season. That's probably the way forward for me now. Because you spend less money and it works and it lasts".

As was discussed in Chapter 2, fashion has historically been perceived as incompatible with masculinity because of its perceived irrationality. Fashion was said to have been "renounced" in the Victorian period because men were too rational for such trivialities (Flügel, 1930). The suit was said to have provided a sombre and timeless uniform for the emerging middle class as an alternative to the fashionable foppery of the aristocratic courts. This might be inaccurate but it remains the dominant paradigm in thinking about men's dress. To reject fashion - to be above it - is to be strong-willed, rational, and in control. These are traits that came to be associated with masculinity during the 19th century. To follow fashion is to be its victim, to have one's vanity preyed upon, to be easily-manipulated, hysterical and irrational.

These are traits that came to be associated with femininity in the 19th century (Edwards, 1996; Wilson, 1985). Choosing timeless style is thus a way of enjoying clothes without one's masculinity being tainted by the femininity of fashion.

Most of the research participants did not seem cognisant of the gendering of timeless style, but they made it clear in the interviews that they did not want to be a fashion victim. Timelessness is about not being a feminised fashion victim, standing firm against the sales patter of shop assistants, the manipulation of advertising and the promotion of novelty in men's magazines. It is about making good, rational decisions rather than bad, irrational ones, about not being duped into wasting one's money. And a small number of the interview respondents were explicit about rejecting fashion's femininity in favour of timeless style's masculinity. Graham got into heritage clothing because it is the antithesis of the feminine high fashion he works with in his job as a photo retoucher:

> For me personally, it would be just trying to wear something initially different from what I was around. I was around high fashion, mostly women and a lot of the high fashion menswear was not anything I would ever wear, it was like fourteen layers of blacks and greys and costs tens of thousands of dollars. And this was just an opposite of that.

Rubin similarly stated:

> I think that pretty much every item in a wardrobe that has traditional roots, I think do have somewhat masculine connotations attached to them, as opposed to a lot of contemporary fashion which I think inspires more of that feminine appearance, or less-masculine appearance.

Donald is one of only a few of the research participants who explicitly discounted fashion as effeminate. After telling me a story about how he rankles at being labelled "metrosexual" I asked him what is so bad about metrosexuals. Donald's response reinforced the long-standing gendered notions of fashion: "It's effete. It's trendy and basically, it's effeminate and it's over-groomed, which basically, again is the same thing, there's a lack of masculinity about it. There's an excess of vanity". Donald considers his style to be masculine because it has a historical precedent, but considers metrosexual fashion to be effeminate because it does not. Furthermore, he considers metrosexual fashion to be effeminate because of its excessive

concern with appearance, which breaks with the principals of the Great Masculine Renunciation.

Donald critiqued the metrosexual's concern with fashion as a form of "conspicuous

consumption" and "overt lifestyle". This superficiality is incompatible with the essentialist

understanding of masculinity to which he subscribes:

> One of the differences between men and women is that men are a little bit more rough-hewn and practical basically. Certain men, the identification with peacocking is one thing, but I think when you start to get into this back-waxing, exfoliating and whatever the hell else, it's a little too *frou-frou*.

While Donald emphasised that he was not making distinctions based on sexual orientation, he

is clearly troubled by the way that the metrosexual incorporates elements of femininity in a way

that was previously the preserve of gay men. He stated that metrosexuality "speaks to a certain

decadence really". Only Donald and Luke, the most right-wing interview participants, explicitly

reject fashion on the grounds that it is effeminate. But as is seen throughout this dissertation,

the other interview respondents' rejection of fashion is based on less explicitly-articulated

gendered notions of fashion.

5.1.3 Mediated Memory and Mediated Masculinity

Timeless style is somewhat of a conceit, for everything that is treated as timeless by

forum users at some point entered the canon of classic menswear through the fashion system.

During the time periods in which they originated, now-classic styles such as Americana,

skinhead or the Ivy Look were mainstream – not a niche, minority interest but something worn

by a critical mass of men following fashion trends. They were consummate products of fashion,

of artificially-introduced change. However, because they have ossified as classics (Carter,

2003), they have become divorced from notions of fashion. It should be noted that these styles

pre-date the crisis in masculinity when feminism and gay liberation's challenges to heterosexual

male privilege troubled taken-for-granted assumptions of male superiority (Carrigan et al., 1985;

Seidler, 1997). I do not wish to belabour this point by suggesting that timeless style represents a

conscious nostalgia for male power. But what it does tell us is that these historical styles are strongly symbolic of male power. Combined with their status as not-fashion, they make it safe for men to take pleasure in shopping, the material culture of clothing and the narcissistic concern with self-presentation that comes with it, all behaviours that are otherwise coded as feminine (Nixon, 1996). It means an engagement with fashion whereby masculinity will not come into question.

By drawing stylistic inspiration from cultural or personal memory, forum users can derive their look from something that, by being free from artificially-induced change, is the antithesis of contemporary fashion. In Style Questions in particular, trad dressers place emphasis on historical accuracy. That is because trad is a style that is very much a product of a specific historical period, with Donald describing it as "your everyman 1960s classic American". Where the outside observer would see a pair of khakis, a Style Questions member would complain that the rise is not as high as they were on khakis in the 1960s. Similarly, where the outside observer would see an oxford-cloth button-down shirt, the Style Questions user would complain that the shorter collar points means that it does not "roll" like the button-down collars of the 1960s. This is not just pedantry; it reflects a desire for an authentic look that, by virtue of its historical accuracy, is distinct from that which is fashionable. To attain this accuracy, forum users look to primary sources - to old photographs and the written accounts of those who wore the trad style the first time around.

As several media scholars have noted, the internet is just the latest among many mediums to mediate nostalgia (Garde-Hansen et al, 2009; Lizardi, 2014; Niemeyer, 2014). Before the mass diffusion of the internet there were books and magazines with photographs of styles worn in the past, but the internet has given forum users the ability to share photographs easily, quickly and without cost. Photographs are a window into the past, part of a society's collective cultural memory. Shared online, they are an example of what van Dijck (2007) refers to as "mediated memory". In Style Questions, there is a thread dedicated to photographs of

"American Trad Men" that has been running since 2006. It was started by one of the interview participants, Ian, who explained how the photographs he shared in this thread were found by trawling through online photograph databases. When I asked him what he looked for when searching for such photos, he explained that photographs provide insights into how trad style is supposed to be embodied. Fashion, as fashion scholar Joanne Entwistle tells us (2000), is about more than just garments – it is an embodied practice. Ian looks for "details, but also how to wear too. With trad clothing it's not only details but how they wore them and the condition the clothes were in as well".

There are over 3000 posts in this thread. The photographs range from photographs of the Kennedys to photographs of actors to photographs of campus life, drawn mainly from the 1960s but also from other decades. The popularity of the Ivy Look was such that many men in the 1960s would have been photographed wearing what is now called trad. On example of a photograph posted in the thread is a 1959 photograph of a middle-aged man in a sports jacket and tie found in the Time Life archive with the caption "Administrator National Aquarium Washington D.C". Users have commented on the photograph, pointing out details such as a rumpled collar or a cufflink. In this manner, an otherwise unremarkable can become a source of style inspiration. The actor Cary Grant is frequently cited as a style icon in Clothes Forum and the suit he wears in the 1959 film *North by Northwest* has several threads dedicated to it. Users have posted numerous stills from the film in these threads, an old image again acting as a source of style inspiration. Steve McQueen is similarly popular, with everything from his movie stills to *LIFE* magazine pictorials shared in Clothes Forum. Other actors that have style icon status in Clothes Forum included Clark Cable, Paul Newman, Sean Connery and Jimmy Stewart.

Where fashion is all about the present and future, old photographs provide stylistic inspiration from the past. Rubin got into the Ivy Look when he was at college, wanting to emulate "what traditionally a college guy is supposed to do and act like". Style Questions'

images of a bygone era provided him with a template to live by. He explained "I do think trying to replicate [the past] became a goal as time went on". As in Rubin's case, wearing a historic style is sometimes part of a broader nostalgia for an era when forum members were either very young or not even born. A lack of his own personal style memories is the reason trad dresser Jessie gave to explain why he draws on mediated memory. Because his father is part of the dress-down baby boomer generation, he was not able to pass on basic stylistic knowledge such as how to tie a tie. So, Jessie looks to 1970s prep because it is a period whose music and movies he likes. Trad dresser Brian is passionate about "pre-1967": "I listen to a lot of jazz from the fifties and sixties; I love early Motown and Stax/Volt soul". He feels he is between eras, for while his profession involves the use of contemporary digital technologies, his lifestyle draws on the past: "I dress classically, I write with a fountain pen, I still shoot with film for my photography". Raw denim and World War II reproduction enthusiast Liam likes the mid-century version of the heritage look because it is a "A classic look. I'm an old man before my time I guess". His interest in the style dovetails with an interest in World War II and barbering, and he gets inspirations from photographs of both.

Some of the interview participants yearn for a bygone era when a much larger proportion of men dressed with the kind of formality that defines Styles Questions, Tailored Forum and Clothes Forum. Jose acknowledged that as a Hispanic-American, the 1950s and 1960s would not necessarily have been a better time for him to be alive, but he prefers the fact that it was a "simpler time". By this he means that it was an era when "people dressed well, they dressed appropriately". Wilson, who is Chinese-Canadian, made similar comments: when he told me that he took inspiration from old films and the television program *Mad Men*, I asked him what appeals to him about that era and he replied:

> I wouldn't survive because I was a minority then, but I guess life was simple, people enjoyed their stuff - it's the clothing and that's why I'm attracted to it. You take the time to do things right, to do things proper as the English say, and that's really the attraction to it for me. Do things properly. And if you don't do things properly, why do them at all?

Wilson appreciates it when people comment "you should have been born in another time".

Wilson spoke a number of times about doing things "right" or "properly". This reflects a

pervasive sense amongst tailored clothing wearers that dressing-down is indicative of more

general societal decline. Many of them identified as "small-c" conservatives - not necessarily

politically conservative, but cautious about social change. Luke talked about how he wears

clothing from an era when things were better: "now we have this big income disparity, the whole

1% thing, the middle class is getting squeezed out and it seems like fifty, sixty, seventy years

ago after the war, the middle class was a lot bigger and people had good decent values and I

like it".

For others, their interest in past decades ends with clothing. Speaking about the Ivy

Look, Ian explained:

> I just like the clothes, they look good, they fit together, but I'm not interested in any of the
> social, cultural things. I'm not interested in the *Mad Men* thing - sitting around smoking
> and drinking at lunch time and stuff like that. That doesn't interest me.

Of the heritage look, Mike said: "I just think it's a cool style, it looks good, its classic, it doesn't

go out of style. Other than that, no real thought behind it really". But Mike is also into classic

motorcycles and classic motorcycle movies, so while he is not a 1950s re-enactor, the

aesthetics of the decade obviously have an appeal for him. Harold is drawn to World War II

styles because he majored in History at university, but he told me: "A lot of people in the forums

they say they're in love with old films, James Dean kind of stuff, Marlon Brando and I never

really got that. I just think I like the way clothing looks, you know?"

Another way in which style provides a link to past forms of masculinity is by mediating

forum users' personal memories. As Ian observed, many of the older men in Style Questions

wear trad because it helps them re-claim a part of themselves from the past:

> For a lot of guys, I've noticed, especially a lot of the older guys, they were hearkening
> back to when they were younger, it was a golden age for them, they went through the
> sixties or something, maybe the eighties, and it's looked back on fondly and of course
> the youngsters today didn't go through any of that.

These members scan and share photographs of their own past, mediating personal memories for the benefit of the forum. They also share memories of what they wore then, and how they wore it, posting about how Brooks Brothers has changed for the worse or waxing lyrically about now-defunct clothing manufacturers. These memories, frozen in text in the forum, provide a sort of informal oral history that contributes to the collective intelligence of the forum. Their memories provide guidance to younger adherents of the look who wish to re-construct it authentically. Of the interview subjects, Brian, Donald, Ian, Rubin and Jessie all draw from these mediated memories.

A thread in Clothes Forum for discussion of mod and skinhead clothing, with over 20,0000 individual replies, is almost a sub-forum unto itself. The thread was originally entitled "Traditional skinheads" to distinguish between the original late-1960s mass fashion and the racists who took on the style in the late 1970s. This is a discussion thread in which original skinheads, such as Tom, share their memories of the clothes they wore, where they bought them and so forth. A number of men who were skinheads in the late 1960s have found their way onto this thread, and for some it is the only part of Clothes Forum on which they post. The racial politics of the oft-misunderstood skinhead movement have inspired much scholarship (Brake, 1974; Clarke, 1976b; Hebdige, 1979; Worley, 2017), but the style itself has only been documented in a few books, most of which focus on the revival of the late 1970s and early 1980s (Knight, 1982; Watson, 1994) as opposed to the relatively apolitical and much more fashion-driven look of the original late 1960s and early 1970s skinheads. By sharing their own memories and photographs, as well as friends' photographs and photographs lifted from social networking sites such as Facebook and Friends Re-United, the participants in the thread have produced one of the most comprehensive records of the original 1960s skinhead subculture, and one of the most active posters in this thread is putting together a book based on the images and text shared within it. Skinhead revivalist Anthony explained that his sense of what he should wear is in large part derived from this thread: "A lot of the time you see on the internet, it's that

combination of how you think things should be done and what other people are telling you is the way you should be doing that stuff".

Tom's memories of the 1960s are archived in this thread but he also started a second thread dedicated to the progression of the skinhead look because he felt that some of the posters in the skinhead forum were overly stuck in the past. He is critical of how they "almost constantly talk about what it was like in the late sixties" whereas Tom is "more interested in talking about what is the relevance of that period to the way we live today". Tom was nonetheless building on his own memories of how he dressed in the 1960s. In so doing, he provides an example of the final type of memory that the research participants draw on: personal memory, un-mediated by digital platforms. These are still mediated memories, for as van Dijck (2007) notes, neuroscience has demonstrated that there is no such thing as pure un-mediated memory.

Where Tom draws on the skinhead styles of his youth, my American and Canadian trad participants draw on the preppy styles that they wore in the 1980s. They divulged that it was forum use which re-awakened their interest in prep, inspiring them to follow the roots of preppy back to the Ivy Look. Both Donald and Jimmy discussed how their fathers bought shirts from Brooks Brothers, a chain synonymous with trad. Several the research participants mentioned memories of family members as inspiration for the way they dress. As described in Chapter 3, Mike's blue-collar heritage inspired his love of workwear. The heavy denim and work shirts that Mike wears provide a connection to the working-class masculinity of the men in his family. Frank, who also wears Steel Soul, has a similar connection to the rugged Americana look. In response to my question about why he likes that look, he explained:

> It's what I grew up with. I grew up seeing my grandfather wearing it, seeing my father wearing it; it's what I wear now. Definitely. I'm from the mid-West - blue-collar upbringing and I lived in the Pacific Northwest for fifteen years after that. I love trees, I love being outdoors. It captures all that really well for me; it suits my vibe really well for sure.

For Graham it is memories of the rugged outdoorsiness of his grandfather that provide the template for his own woodsman-like appearance. Responding to my question about what draws him to the Steel Soul flannel shirts he collects, Graham told me: "Probably seeing my grandpa when I was younger. He lives in Maine, has a cabin, no electricity, kinda lives off the grid for most of the non-freezing months and he wore L.L. Bean Flannels and things like that. Beat-up jeans". His youthful visits to his grandfather's cabin, hunting and fishing with his grandfather, gave Graham a sense of himself as a woodsman, even if he now lives in New York and works as a photograph retoucher in the fashion industry.

5.1.4 Fashion within Style

While many of the research participants seek a platonic ideal of timeless style, some of them recognise that despite these ideals their online menswear communities are still beholden to trends. One of the more reflexive interview participants, Jessie, acknowledged that the distinction made online between fashion and style is arbitrary. He explained that "there's as much fashion in tailored clothing as there is in fashion, it's just that it's in smaller gestures. So, ties change, shoe styles change". Ian talked about how timeless style is impossible to achieve, pointing out that there are shifting trends even within trad. With this ambiguous relationship to trends, forum users seem to see changes in the styles finding favour on their forums as something that happens slowly over a long period of time, inviting careful consideration. For them, this still compares favourably to fashion's frenetic pace of change and slavish devotion to trends. Jacob uses forums to keep abreast of trends "over long time periods", but was quick to point that he is "not such a fashionista that I throw it out the next year or the next season".

A minority of interviewees who are influenced by fashion described their style as something that is constantly evolving, on a sort of journey towards an ideal. They were not talking about following fashion, but about adopting influences from fashion to facilitate their own stylistic self-development. Richard said that while his style is constantly evolving, it is "taking

cues from fashion" but "not necessarily following it all the way". Richard feels he will never reach

an end point, because that would get boring, and Josh similarly spoke of an always-moving

goalpost: "there's always an end goal but the end goal is never reachable". Josh explained that

"with menswear, your wardrobe is always going to change". Tom is much more positive in his

attitudes towards fashion than most of the classic menswear users I interviewed. He has been

following fashion since the 1960s and reading men's fashion magazines since the 1970s. He

told me about particular moments in his life when he realised that fashion was evolving and that

his style should evolve too. This included a defining break from skinhead style on holiday at a

British seaside town in the summer of 1970, when he met some other youths wearing what was

known as the "French Look":

> They were wearing tightly-fitting shirts, one of them actually had a white lacey sort of
> shirt on and slightly flared trousers… And I think they laid down that marker that things
> had moved on a bit quicker than we'd thought so probably from then really until the
> summer of next year, I was going through that process of evolution. I've got some
> pictures of late summer '71 when I had almost completed that metamorphosis.

This was one of a series of moments where Tom realised things were changing. He recounted

another pivotal moment on a tram in Belgium in 1975 when he saw an outfit that anticipated the

"designer decade" Armani look that was to come. These were moments of inspiration for him to

adapt "to a slightly new way of dressing".

The way in which Brit Forum members disambiguate themselves from fashion is

somewhat different because Brit Forum springs out of a streetwear scene that is trend-driven.

Brit Forum users talked about using the forum to actively keep up with trends, look cool, know

about the latest brands and so forth. These are behaviours traditionally associated with the

following of fashion, but they did so outside mainstream fashion. Steve described the styles

preferred in Brit Forum as trend-based, but *less* trend-based than mainstream fashion. After

exclaiming "I just call it menswear because I don't follow fashion", he explained the difference:

> So fashion is seasonal by nature and it's very much trend-based and menswear is trend-
> based definitely, but it's like a hierarchy, it's the next rung down because the stuff you
> see in [the fashion magazine] *ID*, it might become the stuff you see in Brit Forum, but it

might take a year, then after that, maybe another year later, you'll see it in the high street or reproduced version of that in the high street.

In the quote above, Steve is positioning the clothes worn in Brit Forum outside of the highly trend-driven world of fashion, arguing that Brit Forum trends move at a slower pace and are less cutting-edge.

A certain number of the research participants are wholly positive about fashion. A few of them approach it purely as an intellectual interest. They discussed the ways in which their own interest in clothing has expanded to include an interest in the wider world of men's and women's fashion, even though they do not wear fashion-forward pieces. The most fashion-forward men I interviewed were adherents of the *avant-garde* look, a designer-led style described in Chapter 4. Alex got into this more experimental and expressive look after becoming bored with classic menswear. Alex's wife is a fashion journalist and he has accompanied her to fashion events in Toronto on several occasions. Joseph's interest in *avant-garde* fashion developed after a few years of wearing #menswear clothes. Joseph is one of the few interview participants who described his style using the language of fashion, invoking vague notions of expression and creativity:

> What appeals to me about it is that a lot of the higher-end designers that do that kind of aesthetic are valuing a silhouette, are valuing the energy, the idea of the outfit more than just having slightly changed details in how they do the colour pattern on jackets. Even though it's predominantly black, a lot of it is about how it drapes and how layering adds to the effect of what you're seeing visually to almost create a story with the outfit.

Joseph's *avant-garde* look is "out there" in a way that most of the interview respondents, in their desire to be left unmarked, avoid. It diverges markedly from the conservative and retro styles that are the focus of this dissertation. The results of this research project would have been different had I been able to recruit from the forum that caters to his look, but my post there soliciting interview participants was rejected by the forum moderators. Of the fifty men in the research sample, only three wear this style.

5.1.5 Clothes, Body Size and Age

The perceived exclusivity of fashion is another reason that forum users avoid it. Scholars have shown how men, like women, often feel excluded from fashion because they do not fit the body ideals promoted by the fashion industry (Barry, 2014; Kaiser et al., 2008). Phillip told me that when he was much heavier, he "could never imagine actually being that small to actually wear something that's in fashion". This got him into the habit of wearing jeans and a t-shirt, because fashion did not seem to have any options for him. One of the reasons he first became a sneaker collector is that sneakers always fit. Phillip told me that he is now slim enough to wear fashionable clothes, but they no longer appeal to him. Japanese heritage brands offer high-quality, well-designed versions of the un-fashionable clothes that have come to define his style. Phillip no longer wears large sizes, but one of the reasons for Steel Soul's loyal following is that it is one of the few Japanese heritage brands that offers larger sizes. Shane explained "When you get to the XXL, my size, or triple X, there aren't many high-quality Japanese, heavy-weight flannels or shirts that will fit me". The larger Steel Soul users I interviewed all mentioned how needing larger sizes usually limits them to shopping for poor-fitting, poor-quality clothes. But as Frank explained, Steel Soul is different: "So I was, like, 'Oh wow, cool clothes for a guy my size'. Clothes that are actually made really well that fit". Mike has befriended other men of his body type on the Steel Soul forum through sharing tips about finding clothes that work for larger men: "There's a lot of dudes on there who are a big size and we can discuss what are you wearing, what things look good on you and try to figure it out from there".

Users post "fit pics" of themselves wearing garments to help others better understand the fit and sizing of those items. For those whose body is different from the industry's ideal, whether because they are bigger or smaller than the norm, seeing the garments on men with similar body types allows them to visualise how the clothing will fit on their own body. This is not something they can get from fashion magazines. Frank told me about the importance of fit pics: "OK cool, this is how that fits on my friend that I know is a similar size. Or maybe I don't know

you but I know that you just bought a double X or a triple X". Graham said that in the Steel Soul community, active members have an intimate knowledge of each other's proportions, knowledge they can use to figure out what size they should purchase: "We all pretty much know our sizes and [we'll say] 'Oh, that's not gonna fit you, that's gonna look weird', because I'm short and thick whereas somewhat else might be tall and skinny, these jeans might work on them but might not work on me. Jeremy told me that Style Questions "is a little more democratic, people can be a little pudgier when they post". This contrasts with the sharp edge to commentary in Clothes Forum and Tailored Forum. Jose described himself as "a bigger guy" with "some extra weight" on him. He discussed how Style Questions helps him dress to his body type, whereas before discovering Style Questions he struggled with the current trend of slimmer clothing. The trad style discussed in Style Questions involves fuller cuts and higher-rise trousers that better suit his body type. Jimmy explained that he does not read fashion magazines because all the men depicted in them are tall and slender. Trad, on the other hand, offers clothes that suit his body type. At the other end of the spectrum, the slimmer interviewees also find that most clothes are not cut in a way that is flattering to them. Connecting with other slim men in forums helps them track down slimmer cuts and get advice on how to get clothes altered to better fit their bodies. The shorter men who are fans of Japanese brands benefit from the fact that most Japanese brands, aside from Steel Soul, are designed for smaller body types. The occasional snide comment notwithstanding, online menswear communities are much more inclusive to diverse body types than mainstream fashion.

Some of the research participants feel that fashion is not for them because of their age. Twigg (2013) has shown how "age ordering" within fashion excludes older women by framing fashion as something for the young - a concept that applies to the men I interviewed. For the older men I interviewed, style means dressing in an age-appropriate way. Fifty-nine-year-old Jeremy explained his lack of interest in fashion in terms of both body type and age: "I spent a lot of time as a lumpy bald middle-aged man, now I'm somewhat less lumpy but I'm still bald and

I'm late middle-aged so I try to do things that are appropriate to my age and my station in life". Jerry, who is fifty years old, explained that he feels alienated from men's fashion because the models used look so different from him: "If you open up *GQ* or any of the men's magazines or catalogues they have guys who are young…. but that's not who I look like, they're not marketing to me". Fifty-year-old Raymond made similar comments about men's magazines, which he has not looked at for years because the fashions they promote are so youth-oriented. This comes back to the distinction between style and fashion - where he sees style as something timeless for men of all ages, he sees fashion as something ephemeral for young men. Discussing what he described as the "cutting-edge" look promoted in *GQ*, Raymond said: "Whatever the cutting-edge of menswear is for a given point in time, it's not driven by the fifty to sixty-year-olds of that time, it's driven by the youth of that time so I'm already temporally disconnected from what the cutting-edge will be".

The younger men in the research sample are in the demographic targeted by the fashion industry, so they do not feel alienated by their age the way that older men do. Their comments on the relationship between personal style and maturity also reflect age-ordering, however. Many of them described their move away from fashion to style as part of a process of growing up. Jacob, thirty-one, told me about how when he first found Clothes Forum, he thought that streetwear was "just for the kids", so he gravitated towards the classic menswear side of the forum. During the interview Jacob spoke a few times about trying to make his wardrobe "more grown-up" through Clothes Forum, as he is trying to draw a line between his old student self and his new adult, professional self. Edward, thirty-one, said he progressed from the "streetwear and denim" section to the "classic menswear" section of the same forum because of "just getting older". Josh, twenty, has moved into "Scandinavian-inspired, norm-core" and sold his streetwear wardrobe because he sees streetwear as "a very young look". Kevin, twenty-one, explained: "I think part of that is growing up and becoming a man and realising you have to start dressing like an adult instead of a teenager". Twenty-three-year-old denim Forum user Shaun described

moving away from subcultural dress to be "perceived as more mature," "legitimate" and "an adult". He said that he used to wear baggy jeans, camouflage shorts and heavy-metal t-shirts but as he got older, those clothing items seemed silly to him. Harold similarly described giving up the punk style he wore as a teenager because he realised that wearing his high school subcultural clothes made him look juvenile.

5.1.6 From Fashion Magazines to "What are You Wearing Today?"

Jerry, Jimmy and Ronald's alienation from the young and slender image of men's fashion points to the wider irrelevance of fashion magazines to forum users. A great deal of the scholarship on men's fashion is on the subject of men's fashion and lifestyle magazines (Benwell, 2003; Stevenson et al., 2000a, 2000b), but the fact that such magazines represent those aspects of men's fashion that forum users find the most abhorrent, combined with the ways in which forums offer a more democratic alternative for free, means that very few of the research participants read such magazines. Wilson find *GQ* "artificial" and fashion magazines are widely seen as inauthentic by his peers because they follow commercial imperatives. This critique is closely related to the more general critique of fashion as a system based on commercial manipulation. Jessie has no time for magazines because "they're not for exhibition, they're for consumption. So, a lot of the magazines, they sell you something". Jeremy said: "I used to look at *GQ* all the time but I figured out… magazines are designed to make you buy things".

Forums are perceived to be much more authentic because they are not beholden to the commercial imperatives of the fashion industry. Justin read men's magazines in his #menswear days but said that "I cancelled all of them ages ago, I never look at them anymore. I don't feel a need to". He prefers Clothes Forum because "fashion and trends is what's in the magazines. And fashion and trends is not what's in Clothes Forum". Gary prefers Clothes Forum to the fashion press because of its participatory nature: "Whereas *GQ* you've got advertising all over

the place, with Clothes Forum you've got some human element behind it. This is actually what people are wearing, it's not just pushed through because someone paid a thousand dollars on advertising". Gordon stopped buying *GQ* when he found Clothes Forum: "I mean, I haven't bought a *GQ* magazine in years, over a decade, I really have no reason to do that anymore… there would be nothing I could get from *GQ* that I wouldn't find far more detailed in Clothes Forum". Similarly, Raymond told me: "Magazines have really, for me, been eclipsed by the availability of information online".

Fashion scholar Agnès Rocamora (2012) argues that fashion blogs remediate fashion magazines in the outfit photographs that bloggers post. The same could be said of the "What are you wearing today?" images introduced in Chapter 4. These have taken the place of magazine pictorials as sources of stylistic inspiration. Some, like Jacob, save photographs from the forums for reference. He told me: "So I've used the forum for ideas and I've got a folder of hundreds of pictures that I've saved from what are you wearings and I've grouped them into certain looks or ideas or categories or concepts that I want to try". Edward explained that he looks at photographs of people's suits in Clothes Forum to see "how people match stuff, colour co-ordination, what kind of materials they're using". Unlike fashion magazines, WAYWT threads feature ordinary men who look similar to the men reading the forums. As exemplified in the discussion of fit pics, users look to forums, rather than catalogues or the fashion press, because it allows them to see how people with bodies like their own are wearing the clothes they enjoy. With WAYWT photographs, forum users see how their peers dress in everyday contexts. The banality of the locations (offices, lifts, bathrooms) and the frequently poor quality of the photographs emphasise ordinariness. They offer an insight into the role of clothing in everyday life, something often overlooked because of fashion scholarship's focus on the elite fashions of the catwalk and the cutting-edge fashion of young people (Buckley & Clarke, 2012; Twigg, 2007; 2013).

5.2 The Menswear System

As has been detailed in the preceding sections, the ceaseless turnover and commodity fetishism of fashion make it appear fundamentally irrational to the majority of those in the research sample. Take the example of Steve, for example. He is one of the many interview participants who described his style as "low-key", having moved from the heavily-logoed and colourful streetwear brands such as Bathing Ape and Supreme to more understated Scandinavian and Japanese designers. He sounded almost regretful when discussing his former, streetwear-loving self. When I asked if he saw himself in the same clothes ten years from now, Steve prefaced his response with a discussion of the irrationality of his fashion-following days:

> In the past, I couldn't have answered you rationally because if I was head-to-toe in Bathing Ape and if you said to me, "do you see yourself dressed like that in ten years' time", I'd [have said] "No", then you might rightly ask why are you spending so much money and I'd go "I dunno, it feels good".

In the quote above, Steve describes the following of fashion as fundamentally irrational. He now sees himself as much more rational, because he purchases good quality, understated and timeless pieces. For forum users, being rational means making well-informed, future-proof purchases that are not influenced by the manipulation of the fashion industry. Jacob referred to his experience in business school and fragrance sales to explain how he is too well-versed in the tricks of the retail trade to fall for them: "I think that retail is like a casino. It's a machine that has been organised to sell you a thing". Jacob explained that he, and others like him within online menswear communities, has been "taken by a salesperson" in the past. They were motivated to learn about menswear in hopes of preventing such a deception from happening again. Jacob talked about this in terms of "once-bitten-twice-shy" moments that produced a distrust of the fashion system. He is deeply regretful of clothing "mistakes" he made in the past and is under the impression that other forum members are too, stating that he feels "a lot of

guys in the forum have come from a place where they have a chip on their shoulder" resulting from having once fallen prey to fashion's manipulativeness.

To avoid the perceived irrationality of fashion, forum users construct a notion of menswear as a rational pursuit. Menswear is approached as something that can be studied and mastered, hence the emphasis on knowledge-sharing discussed in Chapter 3. It is thought to have rules that once learned, can lead to a lifetime of good dressing. Jacob described dress as a system that most men fail to understand: "A lot of guys don't really understand how the system works, what the language of clothing is and how this sort of thing works". To Jacob, the fact that men do not understand the fashion system means they can be easily manipulated by it: "They are left at the mercy of the machine and they don't even realise that they're in a machine". William has a very similar outlook, approaching menswear as a "game" with "rules" that can be learned through online research. He initially came to online menswear communities because he was confused by why one fit of clothing is seen as better than another, immersing himself in the forums "looking to find out the rules of the game".

Jacob and William's worldview, wherein dressing is reduced to a set of rules in a system that can be mastered, is reminiscent of the "instrumental rationality" that sociologists Almog and Kaplan (2015) have observed at work in "online seduction communities". They argue that these communities reduce courtship to a "standardized, rule-governed social skill" (p. 1) substituting "the kind of instrumental rationality practiced in gaming culture" (p. 18) for interpersonal interactions, while using rules to navigate otherwise daunting and complex social situations. Clothing in online menswear communities, like romance on the sites analysed by Almog and Kaplan, is often treated as a sort of game that one can "win" or "lose", depending on one's mastery of it – mastery achieved through advice, research and the accumulation of technical knowledge. A few my younger participants, including William, first became interested in clothing because of low self-esteem and difficulties attracting women, motivations that researchers have also identified amongst participants in the online "manosphere" of which seduction communities

are a part (Ging, 2017). The discussion site that hosts Raw Denim is also host to a number of online communities associated with the anti-feminist manosphere, and as a naïve mid-teen William participated in pick-up artist communities before realising how toxic they are.

The men I interviewed appreciate the certainty that the rules of the menswear system provide. A coherent style such as trad limits options and provides parameters within which the style can be successfully achieved. This contemporary, online iteration of the Ivy Look has some parallels with the Japanese interpretation of the style. In his history of American style in Japan, writer David W. Marx (2015) details how Japan's VAN jacket company used its *Men's Club* magazine to publish rules that would ensure that their customers wore their clothes in the manner deemed to be correct. A 1960s *Men's Club* article explained "Rules teach you style orthodoxy and help you follow the correct conventions for dress. Starting with Ivy is the fastest way to get you there" (p. 38). Marx observes that

> In the United States, Ivy League style was steeped in traditions, class privilege, and subtle social distinctions. No one read manuals on the style – they just imitated their fathers, brothers and classmates. In Japan, VAN needed to break down Ivy into a distinct protocol so that a new convert could take up the style without having ever seen an actual American. The resulting pedantry, however, risked turning Ivy's youthful energy into sheer tedium. Back in the U.S., the best part of collegiate fashion was its unconscious cool. *Men's Club* often gave the same style the fun of filing taxes (p. 39).

Fifty years later, in the country of its origin, American men learn about Ivy League style in much the same way. Style Questions has a few members who grew up in the 1960s heyday of the Ivy Look and provide pointers, but as it is a style that has not been worn on campuses for decades, the majority of men learn about it from blogs such as *IvyStyle.com*, books such as *Take Ivy* (Hayashida et al., 1965/2010), *The Official Preppy Handbook* (Birnbach, 1980) and *The Ivy Look* (Marsh & Gaul, 2010) or, more commonly, from online menswear communities such as Style Questions.

The insights of Style Questions, acquired from personal experience, books and forum use, have produced an *ad-hoc* set of guidance and rules through which the style lives on. Rubin told me about the "commandments" of trad:

> There's a lot of flexibility in the rules but there's a lot of general outlines that you follow. For example, favouring natural materials over man-made fibres is one of the commandments and by following that and chasing that role in many respects you open yourself up to, in my opinion, a lot of really good styles that you might have ignored if that wasn't a consideration.

Jessie explained that because he came to online menswear communities without any kind of embodied understanding of clothing, the rules of trad made it an easy style to adopt. He explained "At that point in the forum the jacket had to be un-darted, you had to have the right lapel width, you had to have the proper button-down collar, and I liked that it was simplified so that was why I felt comfortable with it at first". He only realised later that while he had the correct details - "the length of the button-down collar, the shoulders of the jacket, having cuffs on your pants, that kind of thing" - he did not have the correct fit. That would come later, through the process of developing embodied fashion knowledge that will be discussed in Chapter 6. Donald tellingly described trad as "freedom from choice in many ways".

Classic menswear similarly involves a terrain that can be mastered by following accepted conventions. Justin said he finds "comfort in the uniform approach to a suit". Anthony uses Clothes Forum and other sources to get the 1960s skinhead style right and told me: "I think the uniformity of it makes me feel comfortable". As in the examples of research participants complaining about hipsters getting things "wrong", they often used adjective such as "right" and "wrong", "correct" and "incorrect" when discussing menswear. It sometimes seemed that they have confused their own forum-informed set of aesthetic tastes with a universal aesthetic that, like the fashion classic, transcends history. A mix of social customs, fashion trends and chance has combined to produce rules such as "no brown in the town", or "no black shoes with navy pants". Forum members might or might not be aware of the provenance of these rules – there is discussion in forums regarding where these rules originated – but what matters to them is that these rules are now agreed-upon and provide a basis upon which to establish competence in dressing.

Another way that clothing consumption is described in rational terms is by presenting

shopping as a task based around satisfying some kind of utilitarian need. Donald emphasised

the utilitarian benefits of wearing a sports coat in situations where social custom does not

demand it:

> It's very practical clothing. People don't like to acknowledge that because they've been
> fed this lie that it's something you're forced to wear for work. In reality, this stuff was
> developed by need, and real use. I'm sweating in a coat right now because I needed to
> carry a bunch of junk and it made sense to do it this way because there's a lot of
> pockets.

Raymond talked about buying new shoes not because he likes them, but because they will

serve a clearly discernible purpose in his wardrobe: "Any shoe that I buy has to fit either within

the formal business wear, the smart casual wear, which for me would include sports coats

without a tie, or casual wear. So, it has got to fit in there and it can't duplicate closely something

that I already have." The men interviewed talked frequently about shopping in this way. They

start with a specific "need" by identifying a gap in their wardrobe, then think about co-ordination

to make sure that whatever they are buying serves a unique purpose in terms of colour, texture

or occasion. Versatility was commonly cited as a reason for buying garments. This is again

about rationality - buying something from which one will get the greatest possible use. If the

fashion consumer is a sucker taken in by superficial concerns and marketing rhetoric, the forum

user fancies himself to be the opposite - making purposeful, well-considered and evidence-

based purchasing decisions to construct an effective and long-lasting wardrobe.

5.3 White-Collar

For men who work in white-collar jobs, it is the need to dress professionally that is the

main motivating factor behind their forum involvement. This makes dress a masculinised

rational, utilitarian concern rather than a feminised narcissistic indulgence[5]. Recently-

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[5] This is not to suggest that fashion truly is a narcissistic indulgence. I am referring to how fashion has
historically been understood within patriarchal culture (as was discussed in Chapter 2).

unemployed forty-eight-year-old Montreal lawyer and Style Questions member Denis contrasted

his dressing with the following of fashion:

> I would not call it fashion in the sense that fashion is probably mostly women's side of clothing. And fashion might be really skinny suits these days and whatnot. That might be pure fashion. I'd say it is more clothing and an interest in having a certain professional look for when I'm wearing suits and whatnot.

Again, we see the forum user's common rhetorical distinction between masculine clothes/style

and feminine fashion, with clothing in this case deployed towards the rational objective of

professionalism. Denis already dressed professionally for work, but until his discovery of the

forum, he did so without much thought. The forum led him to dress *better*, at least from his

current perspective. Wilson similarly said that he used to wear ill-fitting shirts and trousers that

his mother bought him at low-end retailer Sears. A stint in London when he realised that

everyone was better-dressed than him, along with a tightening up of professional standards in

the insurance industry following the 2008 recession, convinced Winston that he needed to "step

up" his dressing. For him, dressing well has nothing to do with self-expression or aesthetic

experimentation; it is about meeting sartorial expectations, and demonstrating that he takes his

job seriously: "I wouldn't say I'm into fashion, I'm just into looking appropriate for the occasion".

What he wants to project is "professionalism. That we take our job seriously".

Whereas the suit is a symbol in popular culture of repressive corporate conformity (Barry

& Weiner, 2017; de Casanova, 2015), for the white-collar forum members I interviewed,

professional dress requirements are an opportunity, not a constraint. Ronald has been wearing

suits since the beginnings of his law career decades ago. He discussed how his profession

facilitates what he sees as a "hobby":

> I consider myself fortunate to be part of a professional where that sort of dress is by and large part of the daily routine. So, I'm not finding myself looking for excuses to wear a suit, perhaps to an event where I might be the only one [in a suit] because standards of dress are so low across the board. So, I have the opportunity and do not in the least feel self-conscious about it.

Note that Ronald considers himself "fortunate" that he is required to wear a suit. This is because

he takes pleasure in it. Professional requirements to dress up eliminate any possible stigma that

might surround narcissistic concern with appearance. IT consultant Jovan is similarly

enthusiastic about suits, and he discussed how suits make him feel more confident at work.

There is not risk of his clothing interest marking him out, because he has to wear a suit for work:

> That's the thing, I don't think you can be over-dressed in a suit if you're in a normal
> business environment. You're not going to do construction work in a suit. I don't think in
> the western hemisphere anyone will think of you as overdressed if you show up in a suit
> and white shirt and tie.

The white-collar forum members' discussion of suits offering confidence and the appearance of

professionalism is consistent with other research findings on the meaning and purpose of

wearing suits as both a symbol and tool of masculine power (Barry & Weiner, 2017; de

Casanova, 2015). However, the idea of the suit as an enthusiastically-embraced "opportunity" to

enjoy clothing without stigma marks a point of divergence from the research literature on suits.

Chapter 6: Masculinity

6.1 Making Menswear Masculine

As explained in the previous chapter, a large proportion of forum users disambiguate their own interest in clothing/style/menswear from following fashion. If fashion is identified with femininity, it follows that by defining their interest as not-fashion, they are also defining it as not-feminine. In addition to positioning their interest in clothing against femininity, they also work to identify it with masculinity. In her study of sneakerheads, sociologist Kawamura (2016) argues that sneakers are a symbol of masculinity because women are excluded from the culture. This is also true of online menswear culture, but there is something more nuanced going on as well, with clothing actively constructed as masculine through positive identification with male-identified activities: hobbies, collecting, hunting and "geeking out".

6.1.1 Just another Hobby

In the last chapter I mentioned how Marx (2015), writing on the history of American Style in Japan, shows that in the early 1960s, the Japanese magazine *Men's Club* spread the Ivy Look amongst a fashion-averse populace by making it a rule-bound technical. Describing how *Men's Club* published guides to the rules of the Ivy Look, Marx writes: "Beyond spreading knowledge about Ivy clothing, this homosocial one-upmanship brought fashion – previously belittled as a 'feminine' pursuit – closer to the technical 'masculine' hobbies such as car repair and sports (p. 40)". This provides a historical point of comparison, because the term "hobby" appears frequently in the interview transcripts. Talking about clothes on the internet is seen as part of the general "geeking out" that happens on the internet, especially amongst men. Alex drew analogies between Clothes Forum and other communities where (primarily) men go online to find people with common interests. He compared it to going to model train meet-ups or posting photographs of War Hammer figurines online. Shaun discussed clothing as something

that fits neatly into a constellation of hobbies: "I do tend to go over those things more than my other friends. It's not to say clothing is my only hobby. I'm big into fitness, I'm big into video games and guitars and other things like that".

Jovan's references to clothing as a hobby are, in part, a way of justifying the expenses involved: "You know, some people play golf, or ride bicycles, and they buy equipment, they spend thousands on bicycle equipment, it's a hobby". Casey similarly disclosed how he responded to his roommate's teasing for spending so much money on clothing by telling him "It's a hobby of mine, just like you want to spend money on basketball or going to games, it's [just] another thing that I'm interested in". Jacob referred to himself throughout our interview as a "hobbyist". He has taken to heart the recommendation that everyone should develop "one hobby every year" and that is how he approaches menswear. His other hobbies are cologne, wet shaving and Scotch. Each is a traditionally masculine pursuit and each is intellectualised as a pursuit where one has to amass in-depth knowledge to succeed in it.

Describing clothing as an "interest" frames it in much the same way. Jonathan compared himself to a friend whose interest is in vintage automobiles and who spends his time on online forums for them. Richard dismissed the suggestion that there is a stigma around the well-dressed man by telling me "Everyone has their interests and I like my clothes". William compared clothing to classic cars: "It allows me a way to put out intellectual energy, to get excited about things in the same way that people who are into classic cars will buy a car". Paul has been a part of online interest-based communities since the days of UseNet and for him, clothes are just one of the many interests he pursues online. He goes online for "The Beatles, because I'm a Beatles fanatic, day trading, computers, boating, whatever I'm really interested in". He compared this to other male-identified pursuits including golf, boating and fishing. Similarly, Raymond is a long-time user of online forums relating to cars and knife-making. That is actually the reason he went looking for a menswear forum:

I had been a participant in web forums relating to subjects outside of the clothing field and it dawned on me very late in the game: "I wonder if people sit around and talk about clothes the way they talk about other things?" So, I really went looking for forums to share and join in discussions.

6.1.2 Collecting

Another way in which menswear forum users position clothing as a masculine pastime is by discussing shopping as a type of collecting. Whereas shopping has historically been gendered as feminine, the result of women's susceptibility to manipulation and hysteria (Bowlby, 1985), collecting - the deliberate and methodical seeking out of important objects - is gendered as masculine (Belk, 1995). Kawamura (2016) has demonstrated how important collecting is to the sneakerhead culture. She argues that the entrepreneurialism involved in buying and selling sneakers is used to distinguish male sneaker collecting from female shopping. Online menswear community members also engage in this kind of entrepreneurial buying and selling, a subject that will be dealt with in Chapter 8. But in this section, I will focus on her point that framing consumption as collecting, with its emphasis on the rationality of acquiring rare items of value, is used to distinguish male clothing consumption from female clothing consumption.

Consumption is frequently approached as collecting within online menswear communities. Aside from perhaps fur or high-end designer pieces, most clothing depreciates in value as soon as its tags are removed or the receipt lost, but within online menswear culture, certain items from forum-approved brands retain their value or even sell for more than their original price. This is because eBay and other online platforms, including the buy-and-sell sections of the forums themselves, have created spaces in which the owners of garments can connect with those who seek them. Collecting produces a different relationship with commodities than more spontaneous forms of consumption, because more knowledge is demanded of the consumer. One must understand why a clothing item is considered special and sought-after to know which releases to purchase and which to ignore. This reinforces the role of online menswear communities as sites of knowledge-sharing and research. If clothing

collectors do not keep up with forums and blogs to keep abreast of news, they risk missing out

on limited releases. Collecting also demands engagement with forums in order to understand

the relative value of items in the secondary markets in which they change hands online.

Many of the research participants described their wardrobes as collections. Casey

commented: "I do see my clothes as a collection, I see my boots as a collection... It does have a

value, I could sell it, make some money and leave the country or whatever". Ian has a collection

of trad staples, much of it "new old stock", and has progressed to collecting vintage flight

jackets. He discussed how the collecting aspect of online menswear culture normalises

consumption:

> Part of it is a collector's thing. You know, people collect things. People would look at it and say "well, you know, that's crazy", but people collect all kinds of junk. And a lot of people collect much less useful junk. So, I think it's really not too bad. If you think about it as a collecting thing then it sort of becomes OK because you sort of want one of everything.

Ian's statement above also echoes comments made by the other interviewees about clothing

being just another hobby. For those wearing historical styles, collecting vintage items allows

them to obtain authentic artefacts from the era that inspires their personal style. Revivalist

skinhead Anthony is part of a subculture that values vintage clothing pieces for their

authenticity. In this case, it is button-down shirts of the type worn by the first-wave skinheads of

the late sixties and early seventies. Listing the 1960s British makers' shirts he has and does not

have, Anthony told me how, in the parlance of collectors, he has a "want list":

> A twisted label Ben Sherman, I really want one. I've got a Brutus from the era, I've got a John Wood from the era but yeah, I don't have an Arnold Palmer, I don't have a twist tag Ben Sherman. I don't have a Jaytex, so yeah, I definitely have things on the list that I want to get.

Collecting involves buying for completion's sake, but it is also motivated by the

exclusivity of rare items. Alden is one of the most highly-regarded American shoe

manufacturers, known for making durable business shoes. Thanks to the brand's popularity on

menswear forums, it has developed a cult following. Alden shoes are sometimes manufactured

in rare colours or with details that deviate from standard models; for example, with a different type of sole or eyelet. To obtain these variations, forum users sign up to waiting lists or complete pre-orders as they are produced in limited runs that sell out quickly. Gary explained that the reason he has so many pairs of Alden shoes is that he is

> A little bit of a collector, certainly. There's a certain mentality. There's a certain rare quality to them; if you don't get them, they're lost. Everyone wants to have something that they can't have, so I've got pairs that might not be made again, or if they are made again they're not made for a few years, and they don't get worn everyday but they're worn occasionally.

Information about these variations is shared in the fast-moving Alden thread in Clothes Forum. Gary told me that he needs to be active in the Alden thread to make sure he does not miss out on an "opportunity" for an unusual Alden make-up:

> They generally make twelve boots or shoes in a run, so if you miss out, especially as I'm a size twelve shoe, they might make one or none, so you miss out, they're not making that shoe or boot for a few years. So, by being present, by being aware of the goings on of the forum you're able to secure a pair from someone who might have bought it and didn't want it, or has it and is looking to sell. So, there are opportunities just to acquire things that you might not otherwise have a chance to get. I got some stuff that was made and may not be made again.

The quality of Alden shoes is such that Gary has enough pairs to last a few lifetimes, but if shopping is about buying shoes to wear them, collecting is about buying shoes to own them. It is common for Clothes Forum users who own many dress shoes to refer to their shoes as a collection, and photographs of Alden shoe collections posted in Clothes Forum's Alden thread show that there are many users who, like Gary, own upwards of twenty pairs of Aldens.

Kawamura (2016) notes that sneaker culture is as much about collecting as it is about style. Sneaker culture intersects with online menswear communities, for sneakers are a big part of Brit Forum, and the Brit Forum members I interviewed go to great lengths to track down sneakers they feel they need for their collections. I also interviewed two former sneakerheads – Liam and Phillip – recruited the from Steel Soul, where members are more likely to collect shirts, jeans or work boots than they are sneakers. Liam and Phillip were both involved in sneaker forums before Steel Soul and both used to own a large collection of sneakers, most of which

they have since sold. David told me of spending his youth getting the train from his hometown into London to pick up limited releases from London sneaker stores on their "drop date" (release date). Phillip referred to himself as a "recovering sneakerhead". He was once a collector of rare Adidas sneakers, at one point owning 160 pairs of sneakers, necessitating the rental of a storage locker. Back then, he was motivated by rarity and the thrill of the chase:

> It was a collection, right? Nobody needs 160 pairs of sneakers, nobody does. A lot of them, I just got them to get them, it was kinda the thrill of getting them. Even though in the vast majority of my collection I really liked the look of them, for sure I had pairs that I just bought because they were rare, because we all decided that they were cool for a minute.

I asked him who "all" referred to, and he explained that it was the other members of a sneaker forum he was active on, collectively hyping themselves up over limited releases, normalising this extreme form of consumption. He went on to explain that he used to buy shoes that he was not sure he liked just because everyone else in the forum was buying them: "I have a few pairs that I was, like, 'Oh, I'm gonna regret those' but yeah, I view them as a collection rather than clothing". As with Gary's Aldens, minute differences in material and colour are what used to motivated Phillip's purchases of rare sneakers.

Steel Soul is a collector-oriented brand, and Liam and Phillip both apply their sneakerhead collector mentality to the acquisition of Steel Soul pieces. Liam explained that he uses the Steel Soul forum to find out about new releases before others. He told me that he approaches Steel Soul with a sneakerhead mentality: "It came from sneakers… I like to be in the know of what's coming out, staying up to date. If there's something new coming out, a lot of it is limited runs, so I try not to miss something that I'm really wanting to buy". Steel Soul forum users have a strong affective connection with the brand. A few the forum members that I interviewed do not see themselves as followers of fashion or even raw denim enthusiasts but strictly as collectors of Steel Soul. Steel Soul produces a relatively small range of items - a few different cuts of jeans, a work shirt, a western shirt and a few types of jackets – but releases them in a myriad of different materials and colours. Most items are produced in limited

quantities, encouraging customers to collect them. Garments are numbered and the publicity for the "drops" of new items emphasises their limited nature. As in sneaker culture, Steel Soul members must subscribe to newsletters and read the forum to get news of the latest releases. Graham explained how he sees his clothes as a collection, although he downplayed the size of what would seem like a very large wardrobe to those outside the culture:

> My collection's not even that big compared to a couple guys in the forum. Like my buddy, he has sixty shirts maybe, ten pairs of jeans. I have twenty, twenty-five shirts, a bunch of jackets and only a couple pairs of Steel Soul jeans. But yeah, they talk about a collection and collecting. Some of them will tell you that they have a problem collecting. But yeah, it's fun, it's a fun part of it, tracking down Steel Soul shirts in your size.

The forum has sections where users are encouraged to discuss their collections of Steel Soul and similar Japanese brands, and "collection" is the term that many of the interview respondents from the Steel Soul forum use to refer to their wardrobes. They post "want-to-buy lists" in the forum, listing past releases they are trying to track down in case anyone in the forum is looking to sell them. Tracking down past releases necessitates that Steel Soul forum users keep abreast of the day-to-day activity in the forum in case someone posts a sought-after item in the buy/sell/trade thread. They also use Yahoo Japan auctions and eBay to track down items on their want lists. Mike told me that he is on eBay "all the time". The men I interviewed know what some of the other interview respondents have in their collections, despite never having met them. This is because these men post trade lists in the Steel Soul forum. Mike explained that "It's a community where everybody knows, for the most part, what each other owns". Frank is known by the other Steel Soul respondents as the former owner of one of the biggest collections of Steel Soul shirts in the world. He used the Steel Soul forum to sell off most of his collection, with some pieces selling for as much as $1700 each.

6.1.3 "The Thrill of the Hunt"

The collector mentality is not just about having items, but also the process of locating them. Comparing the buying of clothing to record collecting, Dave discussed the pleasure of tracking items down:

> There is obviously a bit of a record collector thing where… the search is definitely part of the fun, part of the attraction. And also, the realisation that I got this and hardly anyone else is gonna have it as well, that whole record nerd thing - that crosses over fairly neatly.

As the previous chapter showed, whereas shopping has historically been gendered because it implies a loss of control whereby the shopper is overcome by irrational urges, forum users see their consumption practices in masculine terms as a rational process of acquisition. Jeremy described the pleasure of researching, tracking down and buying an item this way: "There's the thrill of the hunt. It's not only done with a bow and arrow, sometimes it's done with a computer mouse". When these men are seeking out clothes, they are not shopping, they are "hunting" – using their knowledge of quality and value to ascertain what they want, then trawling forums, web stores and secondary markets to find it.

> Phillip explained the excitement and anticipation that comes with finding an item:
>
> It's exciting when you find it, it's nerve-wracking when you commit to spending the money on it, it's too much. Then it's exciting when it finally arrives and when you put it on it's like the day after Christmas. Boxing Day is the most depressing; the day after your birthday is the most depressing.

Phillip is describing how the excitement of a purchase soon wears off, leading him to seek out the next fix. He said that "In some ways it's like an addiction, feeling that high… in a way it's one of the reasons I shy away, because it's easy to just spend so much money so quickly". Donald described using eBay to find vintage trad items as "the old-school hunting thing". He used the term "hunger" to describe his intense desire for items he seeks out:

> When I have the hunger, I go on and do it for way too much time, for about a week. Online you can search for something and be, like, "I have to get this". I'd easily spend a week, hours a night, obsessing over it until you're done with it or lose interest and give up.

He said that there is a "high of the acquisition" but soon fades. He told me about what happened when he finally acquired a popover shirt, a style of button-down shirt popular amongst Ivy Look devotees where the placket does not reach all the way to the bottom of the shirt. He explained that "The hunt was more fun. It's being able to say you have this thing, that's more fun than the daily use of it".

Where the ideal-type shopper buys clothing to follow trends, the men I interviewed have a myriad of criteria that a garment must meet before they buy it. The knowledge they derive from forums about brands, quality, history, details and so forth is used to inform purchasing decisions. When they are seeking out a garment, it has to be *just* right. They might be looking, as in Mike's case, for "a really good, perfect denim shirt". He eventually managed to find three. Ian has not had the same luck, for the items he was hunting for at the time of the interview continued to elude him: "really good" khakis and penny loafers. There is a myriad of options available for both, but none meet Ian's criteria in terms of detailing, fit and quality. Donald does not like to take risks on his purchases, he is "fastidious and cheap and persnickety". Donald explained that he only buys items that meet his specific criteria. He cited this as an example of his self-discipline and frugality:

> I could buy [an item] any time, but I'm pretty disciplined, as opposed to some of these people online who are apparently just really free-spending. Because I'm worried the money might not be there and you might very much wish it was one day, which is a very real concern.

As in the example above, for forum users hunting is not just about obtaining specific items, it is also a matter of obtaining items at what is considered to be a good price. This concern with price is a phenomenon described in Chapters 3 and 4. As George put it, the forums are about "*hunting* for deals" [my italics]. Finding a bargain involves a considerable investment of time, whether that means trawling through eBay, checking buy/sell threads, using Grailed (a curated community market-place for men's clothing) or keeping up-to-date with web store sales. This is all part of the hunt. There is also a thrill to "beating the system". Maxwell told

me: "When you use eBay you get an adrenaline rush in the last minute of something. There is a sense that you're saving money, getting something cheaper". To pay full price is to be a sucker, disempowered, a victim. That is the historical image of the female shopper, but to methodically track down a bargain is to be empowered, in control and rational, which is to say: masculine.

6.1.4 Menswear and Nerd Masculinity

The next section will explain that most of the interview respondents are not embarrassed about being deeply engaged with the feminine-coded fields of clothes and shopping. Yet they were still embarrassed by their forum participation. What they were embarrassed about is not the fact that they are interested in clothes, but *how* interested in clothing they are. In Japan, the term "*otaku*" is used to refer to someone who has a single-minded obsession with a topic (Freedman, 2009). *Otaku* behaviour is normalised in segments of the Japanese menswear market such as heritage, Ivy, streetwear and vintage (Marsh & Gaul, 2010; Marx, 2015; Sims, 2010; Vogel, 2007). Anglosphere forum users' passion for detail-oriented reproduction brands, both Japanese and non-Japanese, is akin to the *otaku* mentality. However, *otaku* behaviour is not as accepted in the Anglosphere as it is in Japan. Many of the interview participants expressed embarrassment about being obsessive, neurotic, or overly detail-oriented, which is to say: geeky or nerdy. Computer culture was in its early years a masculine domain (Colatrella, 2011), but nerd culture has an ambiguous relationship with masculinity. On the one hand, nerds exhibit traits of hegemonic masculinity. Almog and Kaplan (2015) write:

> It is associated with several characteristics of traditional masculinity that can be considered hegemonic in western societies such as rationality and technological proficiency (while lacking in characteristics traditionally considered feminine, such as emotional expressivity and aesthetic consciousness) (p. 4).

At the same time, being a nerd also suggests a lack of social skills and romantic experience that makes one fall short of masculine ideals (Almog & Kaplan, 2015; Kendall, 2000); the sociologist Anderson (2009) counts geeks and nerds among the ranks of feminised men. I found a similarly

ambivalent relationship between nerdiness and masculinity amongst the forum members I interviewed. Being "just a nerd" can be used to deflect any potential anxiety about the femininity of concern with dress and appearance. But it can also be a source of anxiety about research participants' masculinity, for the degree to which they are interested in clothing singles them out as exhibiting nerd masculinity.

Steve thinks that whereas streetwear had once been, for him, an organic passion that sprang from his participation in clubbing subcultures, "it became a lot more geeky" when he started engaging with streetwear through the internet. Dave was embarrassed when he told me about a "board war" between Brit Forum and a rival forum: "there was a board war which makes it sound incredibly geeky as if talking about clothes on the internet isn't incredibly geeky as it is". Donald said he self-identifies as a "fruitcake" and a "wacko" regarding clothing, and does not want his colleagues to think he is any weirder than they already do. Raymond commented that "it's not really a broad-based guy thing to talk about clothes", but comparing it to other masculine consumer domains, he stressed that this is not because it is effeminate but because it is geeky: "I'm not sure if it's feminine or it's perceived as somewhat geeky or nerdy, I think it's more of the latter".

Brian discussed how embarrassed he is about being seen looking at Brit Forum. I asked him why and he replied "I just guess, to the average person, how do you explain 'oh I'm looking at what a random guy is wearing on the internet?'" I asked if this is because he is concerned about his sexuality coming into question and Brian answered "I think it's more because it's unusual". Neil hid his forum use from his girlfriend but said that it was not about "sexuality at all, it's almost a bit cringe-y". He cringes with embarrassment, because like Brian, Neil sees his forum use as unusual: "When you participate in something and someone finally discovers what you're into, you're, like, 'shit', you kinda reflect on it and you're, like, 'maybe that is a bit weird'". Sports journalist Robert told me that he does not want the people he works with to know he is a clothing enthusiast. He explained that this is because his co-workers would think it is strange. I

probed to see whether he is worried about being perceived as effeminate and Robert replied "Not effeminate, and I'm not worried. They would definitely regard an interest in clothing as being 'not-one-of-us' I think". Harold feels his clothing interest is "weird", but his embarrassment is down to the amount of time and money he spends on his hobby. He is *too* deeply involved in the subject, the hallmark of the nerd. Donald feels his dandified appearance looks "suspect", by which he means "Weird, basically. Too far outside the norm". The gendering of fashion has created a cultural expectation that men should be indifferent to clothing, so these men deviate from that masculine norm. But they present their anxiety about this in terms of nerdiness - an unnatural level of interest - rather than gender or sexuality.

6.2 Masculinity and Sexuality

6.2.1 Rejecting the Stigma

Just by virtue of their interest in clothing and consumption, the heterosexual men who participate in menswear forums seem to refute the common-sense notion that dressing well implies effeminacy (Edwards, 1997; 2006). As Steele (1989) writes:

> Men and women both report that there is a stigma attached to the man who looks too beautiful or ultra-fashionable. Heterosexuals openly suggest that beautiful, fashionable men look effeminate (which is, in part, a code word for homosexuality). In a broader sense, however, effeminacy implies the quality of being like a woman, which is somehow less than a man (pp. 60-61).

Until the interventions of advertising firms, lifestyle magazines and fashion retailers in the 1980s, concern with appearance was often seen as incompatible with masculinity (Mort, 1996; Nixon, 1996). While this has been changing, most recently in the "metrosexual moment" (Shugart, 2008), the project of incorporating men fully into fashion is by no means finished, and many men are still uncomfortable with drawing attention to their appearance (Kaiser, 2012). Furthermore, the way in which forum users direct their gaze at digital photographs of other men in online menswear communities could easily be misinterpreted. However, aside from occasional jokes in the forums where humour is deployed to assuage anxieties about sexuality,

forum users are not troubled by any connotations of effeminacy or homosexuality that forum use might carry. I asked all the respondents whether they experience embarrassment at being seen looking at photographs of men on the internet. There are a few respondents who have received gentle teasing from friends or colleagues, but these men strongly rejected my suggestion that their interest in clothing might be a source of embarrassment.

For a few of the interview subjects, their engagement with clothes is so normalised that they are not even cognisant of any possible stigma, or only learned of the stigma after prolonged forum participation. Harold thinks it is bizarre that this is something that people even think about. He told me: "You know I've read so much stuff about it's OK to be into fashion, it's not effeminate and all this, there's a lot of shit about that online and that was never a factor for me, I don't give a fuck. Like, yeah, I've been into clothing, it doesn't really matter… I just wanna look good". Justin said: "That never bothered me. There have been co-workers that [would ask] 'What the hell are you looking at? A guy just standing there showing his pants?' And I [would say] 'look at these pants, they're awesome!'". While Harold and Justin did not acknowledge the existence of stigma, others recognised but rejected the stigma surrounding the well-dressed man. Dave was defiant, telling me "I'd just tell them to fuck off. It kinda sounds cliché, yeah everyone knew I was into clothes". I also asked Dave if he ever receives negative comments on his androgynous, *avant-garde* style. He replied with masculine bravado: "I do, but I don't care. I don't care what people think. But also, I've got ten years of combat sports experience, I've fought professionally, so it's not something I feel threatened by".

Jose told me that he thinks most people perceive his trad style as "less masculine" than casual clothing, but when asked if he is embarrassed about this perception he said:

> No, not really. I've never been the kind of person that lets other people's opinions bother me… I'm aware that somebody might think that it's not as manly to spend that much time looking at clothes. But that's also someone that's wearing cargo shorts, flip-flops and a t-shirt.

Kevin said he has "no kind of shame" about his love of clothing, but his statement implies that

there is something about it for which he might be expect to feel shame. These responses show

how menswear forums are an ambiguous space, where users are unapologetic about their

engagement with clothing but cognisant of the potential for their masculinity to come into

question. Kevin also discussed the "weird feeling" he experiences when looking at Brit Forum at

his university library:

> When I'm in the library for example, there's a bit of a weird feeling when I browse the
> WAYWT thread as I am just looking at pictures of random men… selfies they've taken in
> elevators, mirrors… their clothes… you know, it's very self-indulgent. And then I'm
> looking at their displays of self-indulgence.

Kevin's reference to "self-indulgence" suggests discomfort with men taking pleasure in

narcissistic self-display. Although he said nothing about effeminacy, the behaviour he is

uncomfortable with is associated with women and gay men (Nixon, 1996). Steve similarly keeps

his forum use secret from his girlfriend because he is worried about the "connotation of vanity

and narcissism" making his forum use seem "really odd". Steve added: "if your girlfriend sees

you browsing pics of blokes and what they're wearing, that's weird". So even while rejecting the

critique of the well-dressed man, both men have internalised aspects of that critique.

As gender scholars argue, homophobia is used to police masculinity, with the spectre of

being labelled homosexual preventing men from deviating from gender norms (Buchbinder,

2012; Kimmel, 1994; Reeser, 2010). The spectre of this label loomed over some of the

interviews, for even as the interviewees rejected it, they were forced to acknowledge it. William

works in fashion retail and told me: "Fortunately I live in a pretty liberal part of the country so if

someone called me a faggot, I [would say] 'OK, well I'm not' and it wouldn't bother me at all

because if I really wanted to get out if I could [tell them] 'Oh, it's just my job'". As well as

participating in raw denim forums, Casey is also involved in online communities for male

grooming. Discussing the perception of male grooming's perceived effeminacy, he told me: "I

feel very comfortable with who I am. I feel like it's weird that people in our society gay-bash

people who look good". An older Bay Area resident, Andrew, also spoke explicitly about the anxieties that a stylish appearance might provoke: "A lot of men, they look at me and seem uncomfortable and wonder why [I'm wearing a suit or sport jacket] … they think I'm gay or something. Especially, they think I'm gay". Yet he is not bothered about this, for Andrew told me: "As far as I'm concerned… they can go fuck themselves". Although it has never actually happened, William, Cassey and Andrew all see being labelled with a homophobic slur as a possibility. No matter how much forum users reject the stigma surrounding male engagement with dress and appearance, that stigma must exist in the first place for it to be rejected. While their own heterosexual masculinity is not troubled by their passion for clothes, they are conscious of the possibility for uneasiness or confusion in others. It is to masculinity's intersection with sexuality that this dissertation now turns.

6.2.2 Unmarked Masculinity

While I was able to analyse my qualitative interviews and the forum discourse to understand the role of masculinity within online menswear forums, addressing masculinity directly in the interviews was more difficult. Studies of women's fashion often approach dress as an expression of femininity, and in Woodward's (2007) study for example, her female research participants spoke explicitly about expressing gender. In most of the interviews, this was not the case. A few of the interview participants did discuss masculinity, and I will return to them. But most of the research participants had little to nothing to say about masculinity. When I asked whether their style expressed masculinity they responded with comments such as "For me, personally, no. I don't really feel that anything I wear affects my masculinity" and "It's not really born for me out of a desire to look more masculine". Many research participants wore archetypally masculine outfits, but probing on this subject was to no avail. Here is a typical exchange:

Researcher: "That's quite a classically masculine look - is that part of the appeal for you?"

Respondent: "I hadn't really thought about it that way".

I do not think that the interview participants were being evasive. It appears they have genuinely

given little thought to the subject. Masculinity's dominant place in society allows it to go

unnoticed, or as Kaiser (2012) puts it, unmarked. It is present and taken for granted without

demanding conscious self-reflection.

6.2.3 Heterosexuality and Sexual Citizenship

Just as masculinity is unmarked, so too is sexuality. In contrast with academic accounts

of fashion as a gay-coded expression of sexuality (Cole, 2000; Edwards, 1997), online

menswear forums are a decidedly heterosexual affair. Of the fifty forum users I interviewed,

forty-eight of them identify as heterosexual, one as homosexual, and one as "mostly straight".

The latter response came from one of the younger research participants, whose response

reflects his progressive politics and reflexive understanding of gender and sexuality. The point

remains that forty-eight of fifty men identify with their society's dominant sexual orientation, and

their identification reflects the norms of online menswear culture. One finds references

throughout all the different online menswear communities to wives and girlfriends, to how

members of the opposite sex might interpret one's appearance, to "hot" women and women one

would like to date. To give a few examples, Clothes Forum has a thread dedicated to discussing

hot women aged between forty and fifty while Brit Forum has threads for discussing who the

"sexiest woman" in the world is. On a less lascivious, but equally heteronormative note there is

a thread for discussing the price of engagement rings in Clothes Forum and complaining about

wives/girlfriends in Style Questions. Wives' opinions of spending and eccentric style are

recurring themes. This is not to say that gay men do not read or participate in the forums, but

that like most other forms of social life in our society (Richardson, 1996; Seidman, 2009),

heterosexuality is implicit and assumed. The way in which users address themselves to the

forum assumes a heterosexual, male audience.

Like masculinity, sexuality proved to be a difficult topic about which to solicit responses. Where scholarship on women's fashion has shown how women use clothes to express sexuality (Banim & Guy, 2001; Woodward, 2007), the interview respondents continually downplayed the role of sexuality in shaping their personal style. Only a few of them see attractiveness as a factor in the clothes they chose, and as these men are exceptions, I will return to them later. I asked all the interview participants about whether attractiveness is a factor that informs their clothing choices. The overwhelming answer was "No". A typical response came from Ian, who said: "No, it's not something I ever consciously thought about". When I asked the respondents who they dress for, over and over again the answer was "I dress for myself". Many of the men I interviewed have long-term partners, but these men rarely dress for their partners. Those who do have a public-facing rationale for dressing well described it in terms of appropriateness, courtesy and mutual respect.

Another way in which interviewees downplayed sexuality was by equating attractiveness with a more generable "likeability". This works to disambiguate attractiveness from sexual attractiveness. William started reading online menswear forums as an awkward fifteen-year-old because he wanted to find ways to get "other people" to like him, not just girls. Jacob talked about wanting to look attractive but emphasised "I don't just mean sexually attractive to women – I'm happy to be attractive to guys, as in 'I am someone that people are interested in' in some way". What Jacob meant is that he wants people with common interests and outlooks to recognise something in his clothing that will make them want to engage with him. He talked about "interesting people" to whom he wants to signal that he is also interesting. Similarly, dressing well was described as a way to gain a general sense of confidence, from which attractiveness might be the result, but not the impetus. Winston said that while women might take note of his appearance, he dresses well for confidence and professionalism: "I think I just want to present my best side. So, a professional image, I'm in business, a really old business, insurance, I just want to project that".

Some of the interview participants explained that rather than attracting women, the way that they dress actually repels women. Justin told me: "I think wearing a suit actually hurts that more than it does help it. I can honestly say that. I would probably do much better in the whole women arena wearing jeans and a t-shirt than wearing [a suit]". When I asked Dave for whom he dressed, he said: "Myself. If I dressed for girls I would just wear fucking whatever the high street trend is or just the mainstream look from Gucci and Burberry". In making such statements, these men not only stressed how their dressing practices are unfettered by questions of sexuality, they also carried out the boundary work of distinguishing their personal style from mainstream fashion. This reflects the persistent gendering of fashion discussed in the previous chapter.

The concept of sexual citizenship is a useful one for theorising the separation between dress and sexuality. It is used to study the way in which an individual's sexuality determines the degree to which they can participate in a society (Bell, 2006; Waites, 1996). Scholarship on sexual citizenship tends to focus on sexual minorities (Bell, 1995; Ryan-Flood, 2009; Richardson, 2000; Santos, 2013), but by pointing to how sexual minorities are excluded from full participation in society, sexual citizenship also reveals the taken for granted ways in which heterosexuals are accorded full citizenship. As theorists of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980) and heteronormativity (Richardson, 1996; Seidman, 2009) point out, heterosexuality is the default option in our society. Sexual citizenship challenges the binary opposition made between public and private, where sexuality is seen a matter for the bedroom, not public life. The concept reveals how heterosexuality is rendered invisible through its status as the dominant norm. And it is not just heterosexuality, but male heterosexuality that defines the default position of the "legitimate citizen" (Richardson, 2001).

Because heterosexuality is invisible, the sexuality of the legitimate citizen is nullified. As in the implicitly heterosexual ideal of hegemonic masculinity, the legitimate citizen is disembodied and rational, free from sexuality. By contrast, over the thousands of years of

patriarchy, femininity has been constructed as sexual, embodied and irrational. Because gay men are defined in terms of the visibility of their sexuality, their masculinity is also constructed as sexual, embodied and irrational. Were heterosexual men to acknowledge the role of sexuality in shaping how they dress, they would have to surrender the invisibility of their sexuality. It would feminise them in the same way that gay men's explicit sexuality feminises even the most macho of appearances (Cole, 2000). So sexual citizenship helps to explain how the interview respondents could be so oblivious to their own sexuality. Notions of sexual citizenship and heteronormativity suggest that the interviewees' sexuality is so invisible, so taken for granted, that they can compartmentalise it, making it a private matter distinct from self-identity.

I should acknowledge that there are some respondents who do dress to be attractive. Kenneth has two wardrobes - one consisting of high-end Japanese denim and western shirts of the type discussed in forums, and another consisting of mainstream "mall fashion" garments to wear in bars and clubs where he wants to look attractive to women. When on a night out he wears tank tops to better display his sculpted body, or shirts from mainstream brands such as Abercrombie & Fitch and Diesel because he feels these are more "appropriate" to the situation. Kenneth does consider his Japanese wardrobe appropriate because the obscurity of the brands means that they will not be understood as anything other than work clothes by the women he is looking to attract. Harold also discussed how he wears well-fitting clothes to attract attention, explaining that he is uncomfortable about admitting this motivation:

> I just want to be in good shape. I want to be in very good shape and I want, this sounds weird and vain, but if someone sees me I would want them to think immediately "oh that's an attractive guy". That's something I've always wrestled with.

Harold is embarrassed about wanting to look good because it "sounds weird and vain". His concern with sexual attractiveness, the making visible of sexuality, conflicts with the ideal of the sexual citizen whose sexuality is invisible. Shaun discussed how he received attention from women after he started working out and, with the aid of forums, dressing better. But he sees this as a stage in his stylistic progression that he has since moved beyond. Like the other men in my

sample who dress with little regard for sexual attractiveness, he described his style as one which has progressed beyond the goal of sexual attractiveness, telling me "Now sometimes you get looks that [seem to say] 'What is this dude wearing?' and I'm, like, 'I don't care'". In my interviews with them, Gordon, Harold and Shaun all discussed being in shape, and their toned bodies are evidence of this. Dress, for them, is part of an ongoing "body project" whereby consumer society encourages individuals to work on and define themselves in terms of their body (Featherstone, 1991; Turner, 1996).

Jovan is happily married but acknowledges the ego boost that he gets from being noticed by women. He told me that his well-fitting suits turn heads, so I asked Jovan if being noticed is something he wants. Jovan replied "Maybe subconsciously, why not? I mean, I know that when I dress up in a suit, if I go out, and I walk through the restaurant or bar or club in a suit, it helps, right [laughs]? You can see the ladies turning around and looking". Another adherent of tailored clothing, Luke, approached looking good for women in mechanistic terms that reflect the instrumental rationality discussed in the previous chapter:

> One of the reasons why I like to wear the more tailored clothes is because, I don't know all the psychology behind it, but they would see that I'm dressed well, I take care of myself and maybe it looks like I make more money than I do [laughs].

Tony acknowledged the role of sexual attractiveness in driving his initial interest in clothing, but said that this was supplanted by concerns with self-identity and commanding respect in the workplace. When I asked who he dresses for he replied:

> I guess for myself. Probably when I started it was to impress girls [laughs]. But now since I have a girlfriend it's probably just for me… I'm sort of in a manager position so maybe to assert dominance I guess. And gain respect I suppose.

It is worth noting that in all three of the exchanges quoted above, the interview participants laughed self-depreciatingly when admitting to caring about attractiveness. The invisibility of heterosexual sexuality makes it an embarrassing and thus difficult topic to discuss with a stranger.

The downplaying of sexuality by the heterosexual respondents can be contrasted with the account given by the one gay interview participant, Jeremy. Jeremy was very forthright about the role of sexuality in determining his clothing choices. As a gay man within such a deeply heterosexual culture, he offered a unique outsider's perspective. Jeremy was until a few years ago in a long-term relationship, but the death of his husband spurred on a much deeper engagement with clothing: "I discovered that being single again… was somewhat of a demotion in social status and when you're single you need to present the goods in the best possible way". Jeremy talked about his surprise at discovering that his prosperous, suited look makes him an object of desire for younger men attracted to older, wealthy, gay men. This is a reversal of the position in the relationship he had with his late husband, who was much older than him. However, while Jeremy's clothing choices are informed by his sexuality, he stressed that this is just one among many factors shaping how he presents himself. He discussed how his clothes express a professional identity, along with age and social class. He explained "I don't know where me and my sexuality, where the dividing line is. It's all sort of one and [I don't know] which piece of that comes out". He also discussed the ways in which straight men are oblivious to questions of sexuality: "In my social circle, I assume that if I walk into a bar, I'm a commodity. The proper packaging can sell anything. It's all commodification. Straight men, they don't really connect that way". Jeremy said that this perplexed the men in Style Questions: "I asked 'how do you dress to indicate that you're in the mood?' and most of the guys [seemed to say] 'What do you mean?' They were totally bamboozled by this question…"

Jeremy was a highly reflexive interview subject, and his observations of Clothes Forum and Style Questions reflect careful thinking about sexuality:

> There's this psycho-sexual anxiety underlying all of this stuff where basically these guys are style-obsessed but it's not a gay thing. So "if I don't wear certain colours it's not a gay thing" or "if only wear tailoring but I still have the same colour scheme of my Brooks Brothers circa 1965, it's not gay".

He is cognisant of how looking good and homosexuality are often confused, telling me "I think

men in this culture in this day and age don't want to bring too much attention to themselves because one of the downsides of gay liberation is now if you look too good people will assume that you're gay". Jeremy told me about gay websites where suits are a fetish item. He contrasted these with Clothes Forum:

> Shiny fabric - gay, not straight. A lot of the detailing that I wear… I will wear my two-piece suits, I wear my cufflinks, I wear tan-collared shirts, I wear pink-collared shirts, I wear a lot of detailing which really belongs in the 1930s in some ways. So very rich on detailing, so that on the gay sites is great, the more detailing the better, in Clothes Forum it makes the natives a little restless.

Jeremy's ostentatious detailing makes "the natives a little restless" in Clothes Forum because it deviates from the consensus that one should have subtle and understated style, leaving one's gender and sexuality unmarked. I asked him whether these anxieties around sexuality ever make him feel excluded, but he said that the only time he experienced homophobia in the forum, he received a great deal of support from the wider forum community.

While sexuality is downplayed in the forums in the research sample, Jeremy informed me of sites on which men look at photographs of other well-dressed men for something more than mutual stylistic appreciation. Jeremy used to post his Clothes Forum WAYWT photographs on what he described as "a website structured much like Clothes Forum except it's exclusively for gay men who are interested in clothes who want sex". These photographs resulted in "more than a few proposals of indecency of some variety". What most forum users do not know is where their pictures, posted in the public menswear forums, might end up, and to what end. Jeremy looks at Clothes Forum for the outfits, not the men, but he speculated that some lurkers have other motivations: "There is some enjoyment in seeing very good-looking men who are well put-together, as well. But am I doing untoward things while looking at it? No. But are there other people out there doing that? Yes. And god bless, they're probably really lonely". Jeremy's own photographs have been re-posted, without his permission, on a gay suit fetish site, and he speculated that other forum users' have as well. The photographs of shoes posted in a variation on a WAYWT thread, the "What shoes are you wearing today?" thread in Style Questions, also

have the potential to be used for more than mutual stylistic appreciation. Ian, who posts

frequently about shoes, told me about how his interest has been misconstrued a few times:

> I've even received a few e-mails, a couple posts from people who are [into a] shoe
> fetishist kind of thing. You're, like, "OK, while I share your interest in shoes I'm not
> interested in those other aspects that you are [laughs]". You just politely tell them to fuck
> off. But people are into these things for a much wider range of interests than you might
> imagine.

Scholars have shown how images of men's swimwear and underwear take on new sexualised

meanings when sold on eBay (Petit, 2006; White, 2010), and something similar is clearly going

on with the shoe photographs posted in online menswear communities: the commodity fetish

transformed into sexual fetish.

6.2.4 From Hegemonic Masculinity to Pastiche Hegemony

What has become evident throughout this chapter and the previous one is how online

menswear culture is masculinised against its feminine foil, fashion. However, just by virtue of

their participation in a culture dedicated to dress and appearance, forum users are part of a shift

in gender norms. Moreover, they actively reject the stigma surrounding such participation. This

situation seems contradictory. To reconcile the simultaneous regressiveness and

progressiveness of online menswear culture, revisiting Connell's theory of hegemonic

masculinity is called for, starting with the concept of hegemony. Gramsci's (1971) theory of

hegemony describes how power relations can change because of pressure from both within and

without while the fundamental dynamics of power are left intact. Social theorist Demetrakis Z.

Demetriou (2001) argues that Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity model does not pay

enough attention to Gramsci's theorisation of the dynamics of power. He is critical of the

dualism between hegemonic and non-hegemonic masculinities in Connell's model, calling for a

properly Gramscian reading that emphasises how "It is its constant hybridization, its constant

appropriation of diverse elements from various masculinities that makes the hegemonic bloc

capable of reconfiguring itself and adapting to the specificities of new historical conjunctures" (p.

12). This is to say: the particular cultural ideal of masculinity that is termed hegemonic masculinity is neither monolithic nor static. It remains hegemonic because it changes in response to challenges from alternative models of masculinity.

Following Demetriou (2001), the contradiction of online menswear community members diverging from and reinforcing gender norms at the same time can be approached as evidence of hegemonic masculinity incorporating other forms of masculinity. This makes their masculinity a form of what is known as hybrid masculinity (Bridges, 2014; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Messner, 1993), selectively incorporating non-hegemonic styles of masculinity. In this case, it is their concern with dress and appearance that is incorporated from gay and feminine masculinities. As sociologist Michael Messner (1993) argues, the softening of masculinity is not necessarily a sign of significant social progress because it is often limited to changes in the style of masculinity rather than the dynamics of power relations. Of course, any rejection of homophobic attitudes is a good thing and is evidence of the rise of inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009). It is no doubt a positive development that forum users' rejection of the stigma surrounding clothing affords them a greater range of expression than has previously been available to heterosexual men. They are part of a change in gender norms, but not on purpose. However, there is a lack of intentionality here, with most of the interviews stalling when I arrived at the subject of masculinity. One would be hard-pressed to locate that stalwart of 1970s British cultural studies, resistance.

Members of online menswear communities can also be understood as exhibiting hybrid masculinity in their aesthetics. Even though their engagement with clothes and shopping diverges from hegemonic masculinity, the appearances they use clothes and shopping to cultivate draw on well-established masculine archetypes and imagery. This can be better understood through the lens of Atkinson's pastiche hegemony. Atkinson argues that masculinity is one of the many grand meta-narratives disrupted by postmodernism, suggesting that in place of straight-forward hegemonic masculinity, men now practise pastiche hegemony, drawing ad

hoc from discourses left behind by the once-totalising system of patriarchy. It is pastiche because it is a self-reflexive imitation of what patriarchal male dominance once looked like, dispensing with the negative aspects of masculinity that draw critique while holding onto those aspects that still bring benefits (Matthews, 2014). This theoretical development comes out of critiques of the hegemonic masculinity model for having an essentialist reading of gender whereby masculine or feminine traits are seen as residing within the body (Whitehead, 2002). From a post-structuralist perspective, masculinity is not something that individuals are born with, it is a cultural discourse that they are shaped by from birth. It also a discourse that individuals draw upon to achieve particular ends.

Pastiche hegemony draws on cultural representations of masculinity (Matthews, 2014) and members of online menswear communities do so in the way they dress, modelling themselves on masculine archetypes. Section 5.1.3's discussion of the use of historical images offers several examples. So too does the wearing of styles that were codified in the middle part of the 20th century. Classic menswear's pastiche of the aesthetics of patriarch is seen most clearly in the wearing of suits. As the clothing of business and politics, the suit is symbolic of male rule (Flicker, 2013). Trad is also a pastiche of the aesthetics of patriarchy. Although its cult status comes from African-American and British working-class reinterpretations (Marsh & Gaul, 2010), the trad look originated in a time of heterosexual white male dominance and remains symbolic of old money WASPs. Furthermore, while Connell (1995) may see working-class masculinity as a "protest masculinity", the traditionally masculine aesthetic of heritage clothing also hearkens back to an era of straightforward patriarchy and conjures up images of manly men.

I am wary of the overly neat assumption that workwear's current popularity represents a yearning for a lost past when "men were men", but it is nonetheless true that these styles are from a time when men's power was more monolithic. I am not suggesting that wearing a flannel shirt or suit makes a forum user a reactionary male chauvinist, but the image projected through

these styles does require unpacking. Unlike more fashion-forward styles, these historical styles are coded as unambiguously masculine. They communicate traits such as professionalism, maturity, strength, restraint, power and discipline, traits all attributed to the cultural ideal of manliness. The representation of these clothes in popular culture has produced these agreed meanings. Barthes (1967/1983) uses the term "parataxis" to describe this process, whereby texts circulating outside of garments imbue them with paratextual meaning. For example, the styles of clothing sold by Japanese heritage brands are associated with manly bikers, blue-collar workers and soldiers. This produces paratextual meanings of toughness and ruggedness, traits associated with hegemonic masculinity. A few Steel Soul users told me that they like the brand because it is "tough". Mike said that "It looks tough… you look at a guy dressed like that and you [think] I don't want to mess with that guy I wanna keep away. Badass if you will, I guess".

As discussed earlier in this chapter, the informants were in the most part un-reflexive about masculinity during the interviews. However, there were exceptions who articulated preferences for a traditionally masculine look. When I asked Jonathan if he likes workwear for its masculine appearance, he replied:

> Yes, I definitely think that is a part of it for sure for me… I'm not a super-masculine or traditionally masculine guy - I don't work on my car, whatever, and that's definitely part of it. I mean it's weird though because [I'm] not specifically trying to appear more burly or tough because I'm aware that I don't appear that way and I tend to think of myself as a bit more bookish and withdrawn, but it's still an element of that kind of heritage, workwear thing that appeals to me, that I definitely do consciously draw on…

Robert discussed how he likes the American heritage look because it "certainly is manly, it's a masculine look, it's not feminine, it's got a sort of solidness about it." Graham explained "my idea of masculinity is a lumberjack, that's how I want to project my image" and later on in our interview also told me: "I'm gonna project that I'm a masculine dude because that's what I want to be, and offset sitting at a desk all day because that makes me feel good". When I asked Ian if part of the appeal of the Ivy Look is that it is a traditionally masculine look he replied "Yeah, it is.

Without being aggressively masculine like you'll get with some styles today, like wearing extra-tight shirts to show off your muscles or something. It's a traditional masculine look without being offensive. It looks like a male thing". Discussing the appeal of suits, Jovan told me: "I think a suit is super-masculine. After all, it's built upon army uniforms". Keeping in mind Atkinson's notion of pastiche hegemony, one can see in the examples above how forum users draw on the aesthetics of traditional masculinity.

This deployment of pastiche hegemony runs counter to the contemporary *zeitgeist* for gender subversion, androgyny and non-conformity in both the fashion industry and fashion studies (Barry, 2018; Barry & Martin, 2016; Barry & Reilly, 2017; Chira, 2017). Adherents of classic menswear, trad and heritage are as gender-conforming as can be. But with its drapey silhouette, the *avant-garde*/goth ninja style is so different from these codified styles that it seems, on first glance, to subversively challenge gender norms. *Avant-garde* dresser Alex discussed "subverting" dress norms and explained "there's a part of the aesthetic that is really appealing in a way that it turns certain expectations on their head". However, the all-black aesthetic also communicates more traditionally masculine values of hardness and menace. It does so in the way it draws its aesthetic from dystopian science-fiction, military wear and a range of youth subcultures including rockers, bikers, punk, goths and rivetheads (industrial music fans). It involves a performance of transgressive masculinity that is akin to that of spectacular youth subcultures such as punk and heavy metal (Denski & Sholle, 1992), pushing the boundaries of acceptable dress in an act of masculine bravado. Joseph embraces an androgynous look, likes to reject categories, is active within online communities for skin care and is "very conceited" about his hair. But Joseph is also a US army veteran who likes how the *avant-garde* style mixes "soft" and "hard" looks. On the hard aspects of the style he explained:

> I've had some people say that if they see me walking around and I don't see them there, they say that I look intimidating just because of my look, because it's not the standard San Francisco tech start-up business casual wear, it's, like, "Oh, this person is not the normal cut of cloth from around here". I just don't want people stopping me in the street to talk to me.

Paul said jokingly of the *avant-garde* brand Julius that it "makes me think I'd better check my make-up", whereas the *avant-garde* brand Rick Owens makes him "feel like maybe I have to get into a fight tonight". Paul prefers Rick Owens because Julius is "slightly feminine". He explained that "it's just that for myself, it's a little feminine whereas there's another brand, Boris Saberi, which is more cutting-edge like Rick, and definitely more masculine, I'm definitely more comfortable wearing Boris". Thus, it could be argued that *avant-garde*/goth ninja is also hybrid in its masculinity. It challenges masculine archetypes, but like more traditionally masculine looks, it is associated with masculine traits - in this case, toughness and aggression. This is yet another example of the use of pastiche hegemony, demonstrating hegemonic masculinity's ability to change in style but not substance.

6.2.5 Not-so-new Men

From what has been discussed in this chapter it can be concluded that while forum users' attitudes reflect consumer culture's success in redefining the boundaries of masculinity, this is a process that is far from complete. Masculinity scholars argue that this process began with the new man phenomenon of the 1980s. In this period, British designers, retailers, advertisers and journalists worked to expand the boundaries of masculinity so that men would feel more comfortable with fashion, spending more money on it in the process. There was also sexual ambiguity at work, for example in the Buffalo look with its blurring of the lines between gay and straight (Edwards, 1997; Mort, 1996). Where homosocial looks of admiration shared between men were once the provenance of gay men's cruising, Nixon (1999) argues that in this moment, homosocial looks came to be shared for stylistic appreciation, with scopic pleasure derived from aesthetic appreciation rather than sexuality. As already explained, the most popular threads on menswear forums are the WAYWT threads. Forum users look at photograph of men, men who would, most likely, look back at their own photographs – an exchange of

homosocial looks mediated through computer, mobile phone and tablet screens. Forum users

take great pleasure in looking at WAYWT photographs, which are amongst the most popular

sections of the various menswear forums. The comfort that forum users feel in this thoroughly

homosocial space, the scopic pleasure they take from looking at images of men, and their

broader participation in the sometimes gay-coded arenas of clothing and consumption, can all

be taken as evidence of declining "homohysteria": the fear of being labelled homosexual

(Anderson, 2009).

These are certainly not the ideal-type sexually ambiguous new men of the 1980s,

however. The aesthetics of pastiche hegemony, the assertions of heterosexuality and the

downplaying of those aspects of menswear culture that might make them seen less masculine

are all testament to this. These are acts of boundary work preventing their clothing consumption

from being deemed what Rinallo (2007), describes as "illegitimate". These men are more akin to

the new lads of the 1990s, assertively heterosexual but still celebratory of consumerism (Gill,

2003). Nixon (2001) argues that the rise of the new lad in lads' magazines such as *FHM* and

Loaded closed down the sexual ambiguity of new man, while ensuring the continued

participation of men in fashion. More recently, "gay male sensibilities" are said to have returned

to heterosexual men with the mid-2000s rise of the metrosexual (Shugart, 2008), but the

metrosexual classification is not one that forum users identify with. They disambiguate

themselves from the feminised appearance of dandies and metrosexuals with their scorn for the

coiffed, fashion-forward and tightly-cut aesthetic of #menswear. Such looks fall into the danger

zone sanctioned as illegitimate (Rinallo, 2017). Nevertheless, the highly-visible rise of the

metrosexual and #menswear's dandified bloggers is the backdrop against which the forum

users' more discrete shifts in heterosexual male self-presentation have occurred. The

interviewees understand male interest in appearance as something that has been normalised,

discussing how large the menswear industry has become. They also have a sense that the

sharing of digital photographs through social media has normalised narcissistic concern with

self-presentation for men in general. Rubin told me: "when social media is all about posting

pictures of yourself anyway, it's a little less taboo". These shifts make them feel more

comfortable engaging with clothes, shopping, narcissism and the exchange of homosocial

looks.

Chapter 7: Fashion Space

7.1 Fashion Cities

In the aestheticised, de-industrialised economy of late capitalism, culture and consumption are understood as driving forces. Sitting neatly at the intersection of both is fashion, an industry that makes certain fashion capitals such as London, Paris and New York the central nodes of the global fashion system. This is the most common use of the term "fashion capital", which refers to the type of city that hosts the flagship stores, fashion press and major fashion weeks for a country (Breward & Gilbert, 2006; Berry, 2012). Fashion capitals are cities that sit at the top of the urban cultural hierarchy (Zukin, 1998) and fashion plays a key role in the post-industrial economy of such cities. Second-tier fashion cities compete to reap the benefits accorded to these fashion capitals, and both types of city have been profoundly transformed by concerted efforts to turn urban areas into consumption spaces where consumption, both material and symbolic, takes place (Harvey, 1989).

While the post-industrial economy has increased the importance of fashion and consumption, there has always been a strong link between the urban metropolis, consumption and fashion. Simmel's work was strongly concerned with modern urban life, and his theorisation of fashion (1904), with its emphasis on status signification and mimicry, assumed the close proximity of social classes that could only be found in the metropolis. Another seminal theorisation of the relationship between fashion and the city came from Baudelaire (1863/1995), whose Paris was inhabited by the "painter of modern life": the dandy. Appearing alongside the dandy was the *flâneur*, the gentleman of conspicuous leisure who walked through Paris, observing the intricacies of modern urban life. He strolled through the grand boulevards and the department stores where the latest fashions and commodities were on display. In more recent decades, scholars have noted the important role of place in fostering particular fashion scenes and subcultures (McRobbie, 1998; Mort, 1996).

Fashion's embeddedness in urban space raises the question: what happens when it moves online? Online forums cross time and space - they cannot be rooted in any one city. On fashion blogs and Instagram, one finds that fashion capitals such as New York and London provide familiar backdrops (Findlay, 2017; Luvaas, 2016). But bloggers and Instagram influencers often work in the fashion business (Pedroni, 2015), so it is little surprise that they are based in fashion capitals. Online forums are an altogether different matter. On the one hand, observation of forums revealed that a great number of Brit Forum members live in London, and Clothes Forum members in New York. But these are cities with huge populations and large concentrations of white-collar professional and cultural workers, so it is to be expected that forum users are concentrated there. At the same time, I surmised from observing the forums that many of the users live in cities that are considered secondary in the global fashion city hierarchy, or in places that do not even register in that hierarchy at all. Because of the vast expansion of online shopping over the past decade, one no longer needs to live close to stores that carry stylish clothing. Where fashion was once bound up in our notions of the modern city, with its streets, pubs, clubs, bars and stores providing information, emulation and inspiration, it is now dissipated across the internet. This means that, in theory, for a menswear forum user there could be very little difference between living in a fashion capital and living in a remote rural community.

7.1.1 Living in Fashion Capitals

All the interviews with Brit Forum members took place in London, and the forum itself is very London-centric. While a few Brit Forum participants are originally from London, like a lot of Londoners, many of them moved there from elsewhere else: from Birmingham, Essex, Hereford, Manchester and as far away as Los Angeles. Most of the men interviewed there recognised London's uniqueness as a city that is fashion-conscious both in terms of what shops are located there and what people wear. For example, Steve discussed how he is influenced by

what he saw people wearing in the street. While these are not Brit Forum styles, he enjoys seeing affordable, well-put-together high street looks even if they are not found on the much more brand-conscious Brit Forum. He does not think that Londoners are necessarily better-dressed but feels they are more accepting of stylish looks. Dave is from the Midlands and explained that street style he sees in London is better than it is in his home town. He is an MA student studying geography and his response to my question about London's influence on his style reflects this. He commented: "Obviously, London's one of the international style capitals, a huge centre of the fashion industry, so you get a lot more people dressing up, whereas in an ex-industrial city in one of the most depressed areas of the country, unsurprisingly there's substantially less". He went on to speculate that most people in online menswear communities live in what he called "fashion hubs". Dave described his own *avant-garde* style as "international" and not rooted in any one particular place: "You take someone from London, New York, Tokyo, Beijing and put them in front of a white wall and you wouldn't be able to tell what city they're from".

Neil spoke of how he felt isolated when he was growing up in the Channel Island of Jersey, disconnected from any kind of underground culture. Discovering Brit Forum in 2004 before the rise of style blogs, he relied in the forum to learn about the street style brands people were wearing in London. Brit Forum brought together his interest in music, streetwear and skateboarding, showing him what things were like outside his isolated island:

> You suddenly saw how these worlds intersect, what people were wearing. Previously you though a brand Dior Homme was all the way in the air - I don't understand, it's too fashion, I'm just a kid who skates - and then all of a sudden you see the people in London wearing Dior jeans with a pair of Nikes and then a Supreme t-shirt.

When he was living in Jersey, Neil's engagement with London music and style was mediated by the internet, but after moving to London for university, he was able to experience at first hand London's overlapping music and streetwear cultures. Neil described how this brought about a shift from an internet-determined look to a more authentic London streetwear look based on

what he was seeing at clubs and raves at the time. Neil tries to buy all his clothes at brick-and-mortar shops and expressed an intention to spend more time in the "real" world, taking inspiration from living in London.

As in Robert, Neil and Dave's account above, London interviewees compared the city's style culture to that of the cities they are from. Tony is from Los Angeles and discussed how London's urban density makes clothing more important to those around him, but also to his sense of self: "Here you're constantly travelling with people and basically clothes are the only thing that you are outputting. So yeah, that interest is maybe part of the reason I like it here, I'm walking around just portraying myself as 'this is me', this more direct thing". He also stated that in London "You can tell people are more into putting in effort". This is a theme that came up a few times in my interview with Robert, who told me how:

> [Londoners] just make an effort, and that's what's good about London. And I do get satisfaction from when you see someone very well-dressed. It's rare but you do see people and its much less what they wear, it's how they've done it, they put things together and yes, that works. You have a feeling of admiration of that.

Robert described how his move from Bristol to London when he was younger led to him 'smartening up' his style: "People, as a rule, make more of an effort in London… And I've got the access to the brands now".

As Robert's comment about access to brands indicates, for many of those interviewed, their sense of London as a fashion capital is down to its preponderance of clothing stores. I interviewed Liam in New York but he is originally from a provincial city in the UK. When he was younger, Liam used to travel into London twice a week to see punk and hardcore bands. He told me about how he and his friends sometimes booked the whole day off work so they could access London's sneaker shops with their limited-edition sneakers. Clothes Forum member Tom has been travelling into London from his home town in Essex since the late 1960s. He explained that despite the mod and skinhead styles he wore as a youth being available on his local high street at the time, London has always been a style mecca for him. He travelled to

London in the 1960s because it offered better-quality items, and that is still the motivation today. While Tom's tastes have changed in the intervening decades, he still travels to London frequently for both business and leisure. He fits his shopping in around business trips and gets the train to London a few times a year specifically for buying clothes from traditional English clothiers in the Jermyn Street area and Ivy Look clothes from John Simons, a shop that has cult status amongst British devotees of the Ivy Look. Londoner Noel discussed how he likes to travel into central London where the city's menswear stores are concentrated, describing a circuit involving Liberty London, Nike Town, Harrods, Harvey Nichols and Dover Street Market. He told me: "Even if I don't buy anything I will go into those shops and have a browse… If you want to go the shop and see the item, feel it, then this is definitely the city. You've got access to all the stores".

While Neil enjoys the shopping opportunities afforded by London, he does not see it as having a distinctive style culture. When I asked him about London style, he told me about a recent trip to Southampton: "I didn't see anything too different from what's happening here. Not much difference in look. Maybe before, but now you've got online forums, Instagrams, so I don't think there's really a London look that I can see right now". Even London's primacy as a consumption space has little appeal to some of the London research participants; these men are completely indifferent to living in London. Barry lived in Manchester and Liverpool before moving to London. He sees online menswear communities and e-retailers as much more important to his style than the city he lives. He explained that because he was active in Brit Forum and shopping online before his move to London, little about his style has changed since the move. Kevin is originally from Cambridge and while he commented that people are better dressed in London, he stated that this has no bearing on how he dresses. He finds shops in London to be too expensive, so he seeks out cheaper alternatives online.

As mainstream fashion is of little interest to most of the research participants, it is understandable that in the discussions of London none of them mentioned the usual markers of

fashion capitals such as fashion weeks, flagship stores or fashion magazine headquarters. For some research participants, London's fashionableness is something that annoys them. Brian is not impressed by what he sees as the East London look, and he criticised it for being what he saw as a scruffy, dressed-down style for middle-class pretenders:

> London at the minute, it is quite distinctive in the trendier areas of London, the girls are layered, people dress in rags, lots of layers. East London girls probably from rich families, good families and they're dressing down. For guys it's the same as well, over-fitted, bad fitting bomber jacket, scruffy jeans and then [dress] shoes.

If we look beyond the assumptions made about people in East London and pay attention to the look Brian is describing, we can see that his issue is with those who follow mainstream fashion. He is discussing, for want of a better word, "hipsters" – a group mostly detested for its slavish devotion to trends (Hill, 2015). A few years ago, Anthony worked as a Christmas shop assistant at the famous department store Liberty London. Liberty is known for having one of the best menswear sections in the city, but Anthony was derisive of the fashionable London look worn by his colleagues to represent the wares: "They were all about the top-bun, samurai haircut and just wearing streetwear shit and they were terribly dressed. [I was thinking] I can't believe they work in this department and they look like shit, this is really pissing me off".

Comments made during the London interviews were echoed in the New York interviews, with a handful of respondents praising the city's openness, but most seeing it mainly as a space of consumption. Jessie lives in a small New Jersey town an hour's train journey away from Manhattan. He explained that while he feels a little out of place wearing a tie and blazer in his town, he can "get away with wearing more" in New York and "see people dressed any which way they could", making him feel like he can wear whatever he wants in the city. Jeremy discussed the role New York plays in shaping his style, speaking explicitly about identity and citing the openness and expressiveness that New York encourages:

> When you live in the 'burbs everyone wants to look like everybody else. When you live here, you do that, you get crushed. So, you develop your individual style and you become somebody more. The streets of New York are full of people, some of whom have really thought about what they put on their bodies when they walk out the door and

that's really interesting to watch. And they're talking about themselves visually in ways so that you know how you're supposed to react to them.

Because all of Justin's clothes come from a tailor, he has little interest in what those around him wear. He described New York, however, as an escape from the drab, dull New Jersey suburbs where he grew up. New York means the freedom to be oneself and in Justin's case that means wearing a bespoke suit even on hot summer Saturday evenings such as the evening I interviewed him in Williamsburg. His inspiration is "Just the energy of being in the city. The architecture, the feeling and meeting people, doing things".

As is the case in London, being able to get to bricks-and-mortar shops is important to the New York interview respondents. Liam told me how his interest in heritage clothing has grown because of the access he has to it New York, which is host to stores such as Self Edge, Double RL, Real McCoys and Blue in Green. He spoke enthusiastically about the New York branch of Self Edge: "Self Edge is probably one of my favourite stores, the staff there are great and everything they sell is great". Jeremy does most of his shopping in-person and buys his clothing either while travelling or on New York's Madison Avenue at stores such as Brooks Brothers and Paul Stuart. During sale season he also shops at famous upscale department stores such as Barney's and Bergdorf Goodman.

As with the interview participants in London, there are interviewees in New York who feel their personal style has nothing to do with the fashion capital in which they live. It has already become apparent how Justin, with his bespoke suits, has little interest in New York's fashion scene. His cues come from Clothes Forum, which is where he gets inspiration for ideas to bring to his tailor. I interviewed Donald in New York, but he lives less than an hour's train ride away in New Jersey. He explained that he only comes into the city every two or three years, and since all his shopping is done online, he has no need to access the city's clothing stores. He relates much more to the internet culture of online trad dressers than anyone he might see on the streets of New York. As a die-hard collector of a handful of Japanese heritage brands, Graham

has little interest in anything sold in New York stores. Even though there are New York shops that sell the brands he likes, Graham does 90% of his shopping online simply because it is cheaper and easier. Even though Graham's style – beard, beanie hat, flannel shirt, denim, work boots – has much in common with the fashionable "lumbersexual" look seen frequently on the streets of New York, he defines his style in terms of his wearing of the Steel Soul brand. Because he does not see that brand worn anywhere in the city, he feels his style relates more to the online culture of Steel Soul collectors.

7.1.2 Living in Second-tier Fashion Cities

While not fashion capitals, some second-tier fashion cities appeal to the niche interests of the forums. Boston is associated with trad because it is known for Harvard University, old-money WASPs and the Andover Shop, one of the few remaining retailers of the Ivy Look. These are amongst the factors that initially attracted trad dresser Rubin to the city. Boston provides Rubin with the backdrop for photographs that he posts to his prep blog, where he cultivates an image of spending time in what he describes as "preppy settings" such as Boston's harbour. San Francisco is by no means a fashion capital, but it is the birthplace of Levi's jeans and one of the epicentres of raw denim culture. The site of the annual Denim Bruin denim festival, it is the home of the original Self Edge location, as well as several other menswear shops specialising in raw denim and heritage-wear, such as Unionmade and, in nearby Oakland, Rivet and Hide. While the interview subjects most frequently shop online, several them see Self Edge's presence in the city as important to them. It provides a physical anchor for their denim interest, a place to go and feel the wares and chat with the owner Kiya, who would share his in-depth knowledge of raw denim with them. Denim Forum member Jonathan explained Self Edge's importance: "I think that they had a big, big role in establishing that raw denim, reproduction workwear look around here. I feel like that's definitely a San Francisco look for guys that are into clothes". San Francisco is a focal point for the Denim Forum community, with many of its

members located there. William sees this connection as so strong that if he saw someone wearing raw denim in the Bay Area, he would assume they read Denim Forum. As discussed in Chapter 3, the Bay Area has been a site for many meet-ups and lasting friendships within the Denim Forum community.

The Bay Area research participants who are into styles other than raw denim and heritage are less enthusiastic about the city. Andrew is a devotee of classic menswear and complained that San Francisco is "one of the poorer cities in terms of people dressing well". He also complained about San Francisco's preponderance of "hipsters", who he sees as overly beholden to trends and lacking in their own sense of style. Joseph explained that his *avant-garde* aesthetic is predominantly inspired by what he sees online, as he rarely sees people dressed like him in San Francisco. Joseph is one of the few fashion-forward respondents, and his aesthetic takes many of its cues from East Asian fashion; it was only when he spent a summer in Taipei that Joseph felt at home:

> And so, I was able to see a lot more diverse style over there with people going full force, not feeling confined to what the norm was because there wasn't really a norm, and a lot of people do dress in the goth ninja or all-black aesthetic. A lot of them were able to just not have any confidence issues, just go full-force with it.

While Toronto aspires to be a fashion capital with its failed attempts at fashion weeks and its "Mink Mile" of luxury shops, the Toronto respondents feel that their city lacks style and complained of its clothing retailers' high prices and poor selection. Wilson was oblivious to style until a secondment to London, blaming his earlier sartorial shortcomings on Toronto's general lack of style. He sees his style as having much more to do with the internet than the city in which he lives. He also said that in Toronto, he does not have to try as hard to dress well because the standards are set lower. Toronto's lack of style and retail options was cited by all the Toronto forum members as amongst the reasons they are so engaged with online clothing culture, something that gives them access to the style traditions of other, more stylish, places. Gordon originally came to Clothes Forum because he was looking for shoes and a suit for his

wedding, but found the options in Toronto wanting. Gary does most of his shopping online and told me: "menswear in Toronto, it's not at the level where it should be". Jovan complained that "There are good places to buy clothes here in Toronto but they are expensive. Mostly very expensive".

Online forum use is the source of these Toronto interviewees' disappointment with the style options in their city. The forums made them aware of styles and makers that they would not have contemplated otherwise. Because of participating in Clothes Forum, Jovan has "developed some very specific style choices" that would not have developed in Toronto otherwise. Raymond's high-end shoe habit came from exposure to British shoemakers in Clothes Forum. For Gary it was American-made Alden shoes and for Phillip it was Japanese denim. Awareness of the prices paid by Americans and Brits comes from the forums, and this is what lies behind Toronto interview participants' complaints about pricing. Import duties, customs charges and high postage costs all make clothes more expensive for Canadians and these factors are the subject of much online discussion amongst Toronto-based forum users. Tips are shared on what delivery companies are least likely to charge processing fees for import duties, what sellers are willing to under-declare the value of goods to customs and so forth. Some of my Toronto respondents have friends or family in the United States to whom they have their internet purchases delivered, helping them get items cheaper by eliminating shipping and customs charges. This is part of the bargain-seeking mentality described in Chapter 4, where effort is taken to get items cheaper, and where satisfaction comes from "beating the system".

7.1.3 Living in Fashion Hinterlands

Because they do not follow what would commonly be understood as fashion, living in *un*fashionable places is a source of stylistic inspiration for a few of the Steel Soul research participants. Their taste for heritage styles comes from their rural backgrounds. Karl explained that his love of flannel, western shirts and denim stems from his upbringing in rural

Pennsylvania. New Jersey resident Donald's rejection of the stylistic influence of nearby New York has already been discussed. He embraces his identity as a suburbanite, rejecting the overly fashionable sensibilities of those on the other side of the Hudson River: "I may be a little dandified for suburbia but you drop me in New York, I'm a rube. I'm not slick and polished". Others feel restrained by where they live. Ian lives in a rural area outside Toronto and explained that he does not feel comfortable wearing the more eye-catching aspects of the trad look there, such as his Nantucket Reds, a type of salmon pink trouser. In Toronto, though, he feels he can wear them without getting a second look "just because nobody is gonna give a damn". Poor retail selection is an even greater issue in small towns and cities than it is in Toronto, again forcing users to shop online. Shaun affirmed that "Ottawa isn't a good city for men's clothing, let's be honest. They don't have a lot of higher-end stuff that's made really well. Most of it is either fast fashion or just meh quality. I do a lot of research online".

7.2 Pilgrimages to the Commodity Fetish

7.2.1 Consumption Spaces

The last section indicated how first and second-tier fashion cities are described by forum users primarily as spaces of consumption. In this section I digress from my empirical findings to explore how this relates to the ways in which spaces of consumption are theorised. I do so by way of Walter Benjamin. In his esoteric collection of ruminations on the Parisian shopping arcades of the 19th Century, the *Arcades Project* (1982/2002), Benjamin thinks through the relationship between fashion, consumption and urban modernity, positioning the Parisian shopping arcades as the ultimate symbol of early capitalist modernity. The arcades brought the architecture and building materials of the industrial age together with the mass-produced goods of that era. Benjamin describes the arcade as both a fairyland and a "phantasmagoria" - both terms referring to 19th century forms of theatrical spectacle in which illusions were made to appear real. As a mesmerising dreamland of consumption, the arcades were chosen by

Benjamin as the central image of 19th Century modernity because he saw them as a sort of "material replica of the… *unconscious* of the dreaming collective" (Buck-Morss, 1982, p. 39). Phantasmagoria was intimately connected with the rise of the market economy which, according to the early sociologist Max Weber (1905/2002), was part of modernity's disenchantment of the social world through rationalisation and abstraction. Benjamin argues that Victorian capitalism's phantasmagoria, with its dream-like appeal to the unconscious, worked to re-enchant that which had been disenchanted with the loss of traditional forms of consciousness derived from religion (Buck-Morss, 1989; Cohen, 2004). Fashion is one of Benjamin's phantasmagorias, an irrational and ephemeral part of the modern urban experience (Steiner, 2004).

All this talk of fairyland, phantasmagoria, enchantment and dream worlds sounds rather appealing, but Benjamin was not practising an early form of "cultural populism" (McGuigan, 1992) celebrating consumer capitalism's potential to fulfil our innermost desires. Rather, Benjamin's aim was to de-mystify capitalism, and in his use of the supernatural language of Marx's *Capital* (1867/1990), Benjamin was developing Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Marx had argued that capitalism separates the commodity from its use-value through the system of exchange-value, divorcing the commodity from its material basis and thus bringing it into the realm of the fantastic. This works to obscure the social relations that produce the commodity. Benjamin's use of phantasmagoria is a somewhat idiosyncratic interpretation of commodity fetishism that focuses on the unconscious, irrational processes hinted at by Marx. Benjamin was more concerned with the historical and experiential aspects of capital than its economic character. In Benjamin's phantasmagoria, display, rather than exchange, transform the commodity.

What is most important for the purposes of this chapter is Benjamin's emphasis on places of consumption. In his template for the *Arcades Project*, his "Paris, Capital of the 19th Century" essay, he describes the 19th century's world exhibitions as "places of pilgrimage to the

commodity fetish" (p. 17) that "propagate the universe of commodities" (p. 8). Benjamin

(1982/2002) wrote:

> World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it… World exhibitions thus provide access to a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted (p. 18).

Benjamin saw the exhibitions as a sort of folk festival of capitalism (Buck-Morss, 1989). The

historian Rosalind Williams (1981) recounts how while the 1851 Great Exhibition held in

London's Crystal Palace was a celebration of new scientific and technological triumphs, by the

time of the 1889 Paris exhibition, many of the objects on display carried price tags. Benjamin's

work describes how the exhibition was replicated in both the arcades and the department stores

that followed them. Drawing on Baudelaire's notion of the fashionable *flâneur* who wanders the

city as a symbol of urban modernity, Benjamin (1982/2002) wrote that the department store

"makes use of *flânerie* itself to sell goods. The department store is the last promenade for the

flâneur (p. 10)". The department store, with its glass windows putting fashionable shoppers and

goods alike on display, turned consumption into spectacle (Harvey, 2006; Laermans, 1883).

Williams (1981) describes the Victorian department stores as "dream worlds" where abundance

and exotic design worked to dazzle customers. Breward's (1999) study of London's menswear

shops in the Victorian era found that even smaller shops replicated the spectacular modes of

display developed at the Great Exhibition. As Benjamin and the sociologist Richard Sennett

(1976) point out, the modern city was laid out in such a way as to place consumption at the

centre of urban life. To offer two examples, Haussmann's Parisian boulevards and London's

Victorian public transportation system were arteries facilitating the movement of commodities

and people in and out of shopping districts.

7.2.2 Post-tourism and Postmodern Spaces of Consumption

A line from how the Victorians experienced their cities to how forum users experience the cities of today can be traced. The interview respondents see their cities, in the geographer Sharon Zukin's (1998) words, as "landscapes of consumption" (p. 825). The city has changed greatly since the Victorian era, but this has only made consumption an even more important aspect of the urban experience. While Benjamin thought mass-production would strip the commodity of its aura, advances in advertising and display have instead imbued the commodity with, as Shields (1992a) puts it, "an aura of symbolic values" (p. 99). Shields' auras of symbolic value operate in postmodern spaces of consumption such as shopping malls and re-purposed heritage shopping districts that work, like Benjamin's arcades, to re-enchant the commodity. Scholars of consumption and the city have noted the similarities between the department stores of the 19th century and the malls and postmodern urban shopping districts of today. Lash and Urry (1994) argue that stripped of their role as centres of production, cities and towns have been re-constructed as centres of consumption, leisure and entertainment. Featherstone (1998, 2007) describes a convergence between city centre and shopping centre; his de-industrialised postmodern city is a site of both cultural and material consumption.

With the postmodern blurring of the line between leisure and consumption, scholars have come to see the shopper as a sort of tourist engaged in practices of exploration and sightseeing as he or she wanders through the mall, shopping district or department store. At the same time, shopping plays an important role in "post-tourism" (Lash & Urry, 1994; Urry, 2002); the presence of fashionable boutiques is now sold as part of the allure of a city break. Landmark department stores such as Selfridges in London and Saks in New York have long been tourist attractions (Edwards, 2000), while provincial malls such as Canada's West Edmonton Mall and England's Gateshead Metrocentre, with their spectacular design and entertainment offerings, are also tourist destinations (Chaney, 1990; Hopkins, 1990; Goss, 1993; Newby, 1993; Shields, 1992a). With the transformation of formerly industrial areas into consumption spaces,

postmodern shopping districts such as London's Brick Lane or New York's Williamsburg join the department stores and upmarket shopping districts as sites of tourist leisure. They are, to use Benjamin's turn of phrase, sites of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish to which individuals travel to be surrounded by consumer goods. As in the 19th century, techniques of display make these dream worlds (Williams, 1981), but unlike the 19th century, the masses are not excluded. In the consumer society (Baudrillard, 1970/1998), everybody is a consumer. And while it is only the most spectacular retail displays that can dazzle us today, upmarket clothing stores continue to invite the dream-like identification of subjects with objects by presenting imagined use values (Haug, 1986), encouraging consumers to imagine themselves as the owner of the goods on display. That is why Campbell (1989) describes shopping as a practice based more on the consumption of images than material objects, a process of day-dreaming about the ideal, imagined self that the commodity, once purchased, will bring about.

7.2.3 Menswear Pilgrimages

I found that the research participants experience the cities they visit in much the same way as they experience the cities in which they live: as landscapes of consumption. They talked extensively about making trips to particular stores, in what could be understood as a contemporary version of the pilgrimage to the commodity fetish. Because these forums bring people together across time and space, and because online shopping produces familiarity with other cities' consumption spaces, the line between shopping and tourism is often blurred for menswear forum users. This is evident in the threads on menswear forums for discussion of individual cities, where users who are planning trips to cities ask those who live there or have visited before to give them tips on where to shop. The discussions in these threads demonstrate how planning where to shop is part of the process of planning for a trip. Users express excitement about the stores they are going to visit, particularly ones they are already familiar with from e-commerce sites. They frequently reference and link to the downloadable city guides

on superfuture.com, a site that started in 1999 to help tourists locate hard-to-find streetwear and denim shops in Tokyo, redesigning the official Tokyo map into one that maps out of Tokyo as a cutting-edge consumption space (Berkowitz, 2018). Superfuture also has a discussion forum with extensive discussion of shopping options in cities. This forum is not in the research sample because activity there has declined in recent years. Nevertheless, the Superfuture forum acts as an archive of knowledge about cities and the threads there are frequently linked to in the online menswear communities that are part of the research sample. Some of the raw denim and streetwear-interested men I interviewed look at this forum from time to time as well.

The responses of the research participants to my questions about tourism are consistent with what was observed in the forums. Around half of them have used trips (business or leisure) as a chance to visit stores they learned about through forum discussions and online shopping. Jeremy likes to combine shopping with tourism. Shopping-while-travelling is a way for him to gain access to the international offerings to which Clothes Forum has introduced him. For example: taking inspiration from English tailoring seen in Clothes Forum, on a trip to London he sought out a suit from the Jermyn Street clothier New and Lingwood in a style that is not available in the United States. On his trips abroad Jeremy has also purchased shoes from the Hungarian shoemaker Vass, the Spanish shoemaker Carmina and the French shoemaker Septième Largeur.

Casey is very well-travelled for a twenty-year-old and budgets both time and money for clothes shopping on trips to cities such as London, New York, Paris and Portland: "In Portland I worked in an entire day just to go to shops. When I go to New York I work in an entire day or two days or whatever. Anywhere I go I like to work in time and money for the shopping". For Casey, clothes shopping is an essential part of any trip. He looks through a range of forums to draw on the knowledge archived there and figure out what shops he should check out. Richard told me how he used Superfuture maps to track down stores in Japan that he read about in

Denim Forum. Google's mapping tools helped him get to the more out-of-the-way stores that would otherwise have been elusive:

> In Japan a lot of these stores are not on the main street. They're usually off onto some side street or in some neighbourhood where you wouldn't expect to find a jeans store at all. I don't know how people find the stores, or are able to get into this thing, maybe it is just this cult, so you have to do your research on how to find the store. I would go onto google street view and walk myself from the [train] station to the store to prepare to get to the store and even then, I still missed a couple stores.

Matt discussed how his choice of holiday destinations is influenced by where he can buy clothes. He used a trip to Los Angeles to visit Mr. Freedom, a store that is well-known for its heritage clothing, and to visit stores that sell brands that are difficult to find in the UK such as Tellason and Gitman Vintage. He told me about how a trip to San Francisco had been partly motivated by the opportunity to visit Harputs, a sneaker store there that is "like an Aladdin's cave".

Tony also comes back from city breaks with new clothes. For him, the clothes he buys on holiday are imbued with a sense of place, making them souvenirs. Like Richard, Josh uses the Superfuture city guides when travelling. He also goes to Brit Forum to ask for recommendations from other members. For Josh, one of a minority of men in the research sample interested in fashion, visiting flagship stores in Europe is a way of getting closer to brands he has a strong affective connection with, even when he cannot afford to buy anything at them. He described his visit to Damir Doma's flagship store: "I travelled to Paris to go to Damir Doma's flagship store. More the coveting idea. Just to be in his flagship store, just to appreciate the store layout and the items themselves in their home environment". This can be understood as a contemporary pilgrimage to the commodity fetish, with Josh consuming the spectacle rather than any material objects.

Jonathan also visits stores without being able to buy anything, as when he goes on holiday he budgets all his money towards travelling expenses. He simply wants to "see what's out there, especially internationally, go see some different brands and just to see the

merchandising and how things are displayed". He uses Denim Forum to ask for advice on what stores to check out, knowing that people in the forum have similar tastes and will be able to help. Tom discussed shopping in Italy and Hong Kong, explaining that for most cities, there is already a thread about it in Clothes Forum. Paul similarly told me: "you don't need to ask, any information I need is there, I search". When he was in Berlin, Paul sought out a store called Darklands, a mecca of sorts for the *avant-garde* look. This is the same store that Alex was looking forward to checking out on an upcoming visit to Berlin:

> There's a store called Darklands which is famous as one of the biggest, most long-running, most well-stocked stores where you can buy the *avant-garde* look in the world. It's in an old warehouse in Berlin that is almost impossible to find and it really plays up the mythos around it. I'm really excited to check it out.

The heritage and denim stores that Liam frequents in New York are ones he first went to as a tourist visiting from the UK. He discussed how on one of these trips he sought out the Japanese import store Blue in Green. Echoing Benjamin's writing on the phantasmagoria of the arcades and department stores, Liam described how he was dazzled by the volume of its wares: "So much stuff around you it's, like, taking it all in, wow, it's just as awesome as it looks like online and there's a whole store!" It is note-worthy that Liam mentioned the store looking as good as it did online. He was already familiar with Blue in Green's website and its offering, but the experience of engaging with the clothes' materiality was something else altogether. The clothes at Blue and Green are piled high and Liam was excited to be able to see, touch and try on exotic Japanese clothes not available in his home town: "I first went with my wife and I was, like, 'Ohmygod look at this! Look at this!' A whirlwind of showing her things, so much stuff I wanted to buy".

Manchester's Oi Polloi is to the retro scally look what Blue in Green is to the American heritage look – a store whose reputation looms large because it has such a prominent website and was one of the first to curate the look. Robert told me that when visiting his brother in Liverpool, he visits nearby Manchester just for Oi Polloi. Matt also arranges trips to Manchester

just to shop at Oi Polloi. He makes sure he has enough time to make the most of the visit:

"When you go to that kind of store where you know you're going to love stuff, it's nice to take

your time and have a good look round". Matt and Robert's experiences of having their

anticipations met by their consumer pilgrimages contrast with the disappointment that other

research participants described. Mike told me that Self-Edge's New York branch was not what

he anticipated: "It was definitely a let-down how small that store is. It's tiny. Tiny, tiny, tiny. I

thought it would be bigger, have more stuff out. It's very much, here's the store, four pairs of

jeans, one more pair in the back". Neil told me how excited he was to visit his favourite

streetwear brands in New York: "I remember when I first went to New York it was Nom de

Guerre, Supreme, all these places and I was [inhales rapidly] sweating when I went into them".

Disappointingly, the stores did not live up to his expectations: "It's almost like meeting your

idols. It's, like, 'Fuck, it's just another shop'. Just dissolving that film, it's, like, 'this is real-life'."

Trips abroad are particularly important for Canadian members of online menswear

communities, allowing them to buy clothing in a way they could not at home. Jacob uses visits

to foreign cities to seek out brands that are discussed in the forum but cannot be found in

Canadian stores. Shaun does the same thing, explaining: "Whenever I go somewhere I'm on

the lookout for stores that might have cool stuff. If not to buy but just to look at, to check out".

These pilgrimages are also ways to connect with the brands they love. Jimmy told me how he

incorporated shopping into a visit to his brother in New York. Like others I interviewed, he came

prepared with a list of stores he wanted to check. This list was based on what he had seen

discussed online. First on this list was the Brooks Brothers flagship store on Madison Avenue.

Long before conceiving of this research project, I made my own pilgrimage there. The Madison

Avenue store is a cavernous, three-story building with piles of clothes from all of Brooks

Brothers many ranges. The visual merchandising makes use of leather and wood to imbue the

wares with the commodity aesthetics conjuring up notions of wealth and tradition. Like

Benjamin's arcades, the flagship store enchanted me with its techniques of display and plenty. I

asked Jimmy what it was like to visit this store and his response summed up my own feelings: "It was, like, 'Wow!' I was just, like, 'Yup, this is the mother-ship'."

7.3 Digital Landscapes of Consumption

7.3.1 Online Fashion Space

The discussion of the relationship between space, consumption and clothing thus far is complicated by online shopping, which has disrupted the primacy of fashion cities, and indeed physical space itself, as the favoured site of consumption. Crossing time and space, online clothing stores are de-territorialised, yet these stores can retain the phantasmagorical character of the exhibitions, arcades and department stores that Benjamin wrote about. Starting with Campbell's idea of the postmodern consumer as window-shopper, consuming images instead of things, we can see how online shops operate in much the same way as the department stores of old. Building on this, consumption scholars Janice Denegri-Knott and Mike Molesworth (2010b) argue that online shopping offers a seemingly never-ending procession of windows to stare longingly through. Following Campbell's suggestion that the pleasure of consumption is derived from access to an endless stream of new images that facilitate the imagining of the ideal self, Denegri-Knott & Molesworth (2010a) describe eBay as the ultimate source of scopic pleasure. This notion can be expanded beyond eBay to other online stores that replicate the visual pleasure of "just looking" (Bowlby, 2010). Product photography and site design turn the fashion commodity into spectacle, inviting day-dreaming and distraction. The symbolic properties of the commodity, the imagined use-values produced by commodity aesthetics (Haug, 1986), is what online shoppers visit web-stores to consume.

As with Benjamin's phantasmagorias, individuals travel to these online fairylands without necessarily having any plans to make a purchase. Postmodern consumption is, after all, a process whereby symbols or signs, rather than goods, are consumed (Barthes, 1957/1973; Lash & Urry, 1994). Drifting from image to image, lingering on items that take their fancy,

individuals extract the imagined use-value of a fashion commodity, day-dreaming about how

they would look in it, without ever trying on or even holding the garment. Like those who loiter in

shopping malls (Presdee, 1986) or wander through department stores (Bowlby, 1985) they

consume images rather than things. Just as Benjamin's *flâneur* wanders the department store,

what Featherstone (1998) terms the "virtual *flâneur"* drifts from image to image, until they find

the image that captures their attention, day-dreaming about owning the material object that the

image is a visual representation of. So even online, sites of consumption are a type of

phantasmagoria, sites to which individuals travel to be dazzled and distracted by commodities.

Online stores use product photography, site design and descriptive text to imbue their wares

with commodity aesthetics. Following Shields' (1992a) argument that new, spectacular shopping

spaces such as malls and heritage districts have worked to re-enchant the commodity, I suggest

that online shopping has also worked to re-enchant consumption, although this does not

encompass all forms of online shopping. I recognise that like most forms of consumption (Miller,

2010), online shopping is often routine and banal. When Benjamin deployed his supernatural

language, he was writing about the spectacular modes of consumption found in the arcade and

the department store, not the mundane consumption of the market stall.

7.3.2 Digital Pilgrimages to the Commodity Fetish

It is my contention, then, that as phantasmagorical sites that individuals visit to be

dazzled and distracted, online clothing stores act as sites of *digital* pilgrimage to the commodity

fetish. The online journey metaphors of early internet research leave something to be desired in

an era when the internet is not so much a place that we go as somewhere that we are. Yet in

anthropologist Victor Turner's (1974) classic account, pilgrimage is not just a journey, it is a

liminal experience between two states of being. This is the reason why Shields' (2003) notion of

the digital virtual conceives of the internet as liminoid[6] space, somewhere between the material and the imaginary. Turner's theory is also used by media scholars to look at fan pilgrimages as liminoid experiences (Couldry, 2000). Communications scholar Roger C. Aden (1999) builds on this notion of fan pilgrimages to argue that the consumption of media texts can be understood as a sort of symbolic pilgrimage, opening possibilities for looking at technologically-mediated experiences as pilgrimages. This is exactly what film scholar Will Brooker (2007) does in his study of websites used by *X-Files* fans*.*

Members of online menswear communities spend hours researching their purchases online, much of which involves looking at online stores both for product details and price comparison. Interviewees divulged that they frequently browse web stores with no immediate intention of buying, carrying out what they call "research. Like Denegri-Knott and Molesworth's eBay users, they treat online stores as sites of scopic pleasure, consuming images of clothing commodities. Their various motivations - looking for the next thing to buy, imaging themselves in the clothes they see, distracting themselves, coveting items they cannot afford, figuring out what they are going to buy in the future, seeking inspiration or simply looking for the fun of it – all involve the pleasure of "just looking" (Bowlby, 2010) at fashion commodities. That is why I approach the interviewees' browsing habits as digital pilgrimages to the commodity fetish. All but a few of them divulged that they spend time looking at clothes online, usually for a few hours a week. There are also those who, like William, spend "hours and hours and hours a day". Many found it difficult to disambiguate the time they spend doing this from the time they spend in forums, as so many of the forum posts feature images from, and links to, online stores.

None of the men I interviewed described their online window shopping in terms of imagining an ideal self, as Denegri-Knott and Molesworth's (2010) work suggests they would. But as Wilson (1985) argues, fashion is fundamentally about the pursuit of an ideal self. In

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[6] Liminoid as opposed to liminal because it is liminal-like but does challenge or transform existing social relations.

searching for inspiration and contemplating choices, these men are looking to improve their wardrobes and, by extension, themselves. The process of making online shopping decisions requires them to imagine themselves in the clothes they are looking at disembodied images of. Jose deliberates over purchases by imaging what it would be like to own the garments he is looking at: "I'll definitely go back a few times and look and imagine if I could use it and if I would fit in it". Josh explained the way in which he visualises potential purchases: "There is definitely visualising how you look in it and visualising what you could wear it with, visualising what other purchases you need to make or what in your wardrobe does it currently sit with". Mike imagines what something will go with, but also has an ideal look in his head with which potential purchases need to fit in, described as "when you close your eyes, what you want to look like".

Some of the respondents were explicit about the role of online window shopping as distraction. Matt told me that looking at online stores is part of his daily routine: "Oi Polloi in Manchester and this shop End in Newcastle… I'm parked at their website way too much, probably several times a day". Matt likes those sites for their product photography and their blogs, which offer style inspiration by showing items from the shop assembled into outfits. James recently went back to school to complete an MA, and when I asked him if he looked at stores just for fun, he explained how online window shopping serves as a distraction:

> Yeah, it works quite well as a distraction. I've been sitting in the library today trying to write an essay for six or seven hours, it's nice to have a little breather. It could be literally just five minutes, a way to clear your head before you start the next part of your essay. You can do it sometimes and not be that engaged, it's just a distraction.

Joseph referred to his use of Grailed as "window shopping" and when I asked him how much time he spends on that site, he told me: "On a weekly basis probably six to eight hours. Because I usually go back and forth between that and the fashion blogs, it'll just be multi-tasking or multi-procrastinating, doing both of those things at the same time". The indexical knowledge of various web stores' offerings observed both within the online menswear communities and in the interviews bears testament to the huge amount of time users spend being beguiled by the

phantasmagoria of e-commerce menswear stores. This demonstrates the continued lure of the commodity fetish as a site of online pilgrimage.

      While Benjamin set out to expose the workings of commodity fetishism and de-mystify the machinations of consumer capitalism, my ambitions in this chapter have been rather less grand. In my admittedly playful reading of Benjamin's already idiosyncratic interpretation of commodity fetishism, I have looked at how the discourse found in online menswear communities reflects the continued enchantment of consumption. I have described how fashion cities still serve as *actual* sites of the pilgrimage to the commodity fetish, while clothing stores' websites often serve as sites of virtual pilgrimage, with menswear forum users "travelling" there to be dazzled and distracted. Unlike Benjamin, I do not expect my analysis to have any bearing on the continued viability of consumer capitalism. My interest here has been in the ways in which consumption and day-dreaming about consumption are employed by today's painters of modern life (Baudelaire,1863/1995), in their pursuit of the ideal self through clothing. I agree with the political theorist Jane Bennett (2001) that enchantment brings joy and wonder to the world. She argues that in a society in which the existence of the commodity-form is a given, we should look at how commodities' ability to enchant allows them to "function as tangible and public elaborations of, and experimentations with, personal and collective identities" (p. 114). That has been my goal throughout this dissertation.

Chapter 8: Fashion Capital

8.1 Fashion Capitals

This chapter concerns another use of the term "fashion capital", this time derived from the work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Because of his focus on the cultural nature of consumption, Bourdieu's (1984) work has been widely taken up by fashion scholars (Entwistle, 2009; McRobbie, 1998). Of particular relevance is his notion of "cultural capital", a term that describes how an individual's cultural knowledge and cultural possessions form a repository of non-financial wealth reflecting their class and social status. Bourdieu describes how cultural capital can be transformed into economic capital, leveraged along with social capital to improve career prospects. Struggles over what forms of capital are and are not valued take place in cultural arenas that Bourdieu refers to as "fields". Turning her attention to the field of fashion, Rocamora (2002) uses the term "fashion capital" to describe the form of cultural capital "at play in the field of high fashion" (p. 343). She goes on to explain that high fashion is, in fact, a *sub*field of fashion. In this chapter I look at online menswear communities as another subfield of fashion[7], a subfield in which members express three different forms of fashion capital: discursive, embodied and objectified. Each of these dimensions of fashion capital will be explained before proceeding to describe how they bestow status on users within the subfields of the various forums, making these forms of fashion capital akin to sociologist Sarah Thornton's (1996) "subcultural capital". This chapter will conclude by explaining how members of online menswear communities turn their fashion capital into economic capital.

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[7] For consistency with the academic field of fashion studies, the term "fashion" is used in this chapter despite the fact that many forum users reject the label. As argued at the end of chapter 5, their styles are still products of the fashion system.

8.1.1 Discursive Fashion Capital

As ever-growing archives of textual interactions between individuals, online menswear forums blur the boundaries between the textual and the social (Hine, 2000). The most straightforward way in which forum members' fashion capital is displayed is through their textual demonstration of fashion knowledge. As discussed in Chapter 3, much of the activity in online menswear communities involves the giving out of advice or recommendations in response to questions. Being able to reply competently or express an opinion demonstrates a forum user's knowledge. This performance of style expertise in the forums is what I term "discursive fashion capital" – fashion capital expressed in textual discourse. Responses often refer to first-hand knowledge and experience of owning the clothes under discussion. For example: "My last several shoe purchases have all been Vass. When purchased from a European seller such as Shibumi, you can get a hand-welted shoe with lasted trees and free shipping for $550 which is a pretty amazing price". Forum members can help other members and contribute to the ongoing discussion because they own or once owned the brands or garments being discussed. Bourdieu examined how cultural capital is expressed in the naturalness with which one is able to express opinions on art or music. Fashion capital is expressed with similar naturalness – a forum user's ability to comment authoritatively on a subject indicates the kind of fashion knowledge and possessions they have.

8.1.2 Embodied Fashion Capital

In her study of fashion buyers, Entwistle (2009) describes how buyers rely on their feel for clothing. Entwistle explains that buyers have "a *sensual* knowledge, formed through sensual encounters with the material objects themselves" (p. 13, her italics). As with Bourdieu's cultural capital, this feel for clothing deploys a cultural sensibility that cannot be learned from textual descriptions. It is an embodied form of knowledge that can only be learned through engagement with clothing's materiality. This feel for clothing is an example of what I term "embodied fashion

capital": a form of fashion capital internalised in bodily dispositions. Discursive and embodied fashion capital are intertwined, with much of the textual discussion in forums placing an emphasis on the sensual, material dimensions of clothing. Members of online clothing communities draw on their embodied fashion capital as they demonstrate their sensual understanding of garments as material objects. This is seen most clearly in raw denim forums, which are host to detailed discussions of subtle differences in the textures of various types of denim. Asked why they like raw denim, the interviewees repeatedly referred to the feel of denim. As in the forums, they emphasised texture and weight. Other materials used by heritage brands such as flannel, tweed, duck canvas and waxed cotton were discussed in similar terms.

Chapter 4 examined how members of clothing communities source information about the quality of garments from other members of their online communities. In this sense, they are relying on abstract knowledge about construction techniques, but also on their fellow users' embodied fashion capital. The advice shared comes from experience with material garments: the sensual experience of shopping for and owning clothes, of touching clothes in shops, of feeling how clothes move with the body, of washing and ironing them and, finally, seeing how they stand up to wear and tear over time. We can see this in Phillip's explanation of his dedication to Steel Soul:

> I have Steel Soul shirts that I'll wear two or three times a week and they still look good, they still hold their shape, they haven't fallen apart, whereas I have a crummy button-up that somebody gave me but I wore it a lot because I liked that shirt and the elbows went six months in, there were lots of problems with the build.

As Entwistle (2000; 2009) notes, fashion is by nature an embodied practice - bodies give clothes meaning. She describes embodied style as a performance of fashion knowledge, for the putting together of outfits is a way in which an individual's understanding of fashion is put into practice. The way that people dress demonstrates the degree to which they have internalised knowledge of fashion as bodily sense and sensibility. Put another way: dressing well is a way of embodying fashion capital. Within the high fashion milieu that is the subject of Entwistle's

research, individuals' embodied fashion capital is on display at a variety of places, such as clothing stores, fashion events, or fashion magazines. Online menswear communities, however, are dispersed across time and space, meaning that most members of these communities will never cross paths offline. For other users to see how a forum member's style is embodied, i.e. what they are wearing and *how* they are wearing it, they need to see that outfit in a photograph posted in their forum. This is the role of the WAYWT threads where users upload photographs of their outfits. Wearing the clothes that are valued within an online community, but more importantly wearing them the "right" way (regarding both co-ordination and fit), is a visual way in which members of menswear communities embody the fashion capital that is otherwise expressed textually in online discussions. Those who dress to the aesthetic tastes of the forum receive praise, while those who fall short in approximating the forum's aesthetic receive critiques. Those who either fail to or refuse to abide by the forum's aesthetic receive a range of responses from suggestions that they post elsewhere to outright derision.

Photographs are posted for feedback, but also to get recognition for skill in dressing. Shaun put it this way:

> I admit to a certain degree of, not quite narcissism but... it's nice to hear praise, it's nice to get good feedback. Let's put it this way: in one of those "What are you wearing today?" threads, most of the things I'm going to upload are things that I'm sure of, things that I'm confident in.

Alex looked for the same mix of feedback and kudos:

> I think it's partly because you can take criticism from it and learn to do something better and incorporate other people's ideas more directly and then, honestly, there's a part of it that's, like, "Look at me. Here's what I got, what do you think?"... Clothes Forum uses a thumb system [to give feedback]. If you get twenty people who seem to like what you're doing, you're, like, "Oh OK, I guess I did good".

Justin described a similar mix of motivations for posting outfit photographs, explaining it is sometimes for feedback, sometimes for "Look how awesome this looks". He summed up his visits to the forum as "Sometimes advice, sometimes showing off".

A recurring theme both online and in the interviews is how little the general public understands forum users' style. Instead, members of online menswear communities turn to their peers for recognition. Harold put it this way: "Sometimes I put on some clothes and [I think] 'Wow I look really cool in that!' And you know that no-one on the street is going to give two shits about you, that you look cool, but people in the forum will". Jeremy was the most prolific WAYWT poster interviewed, a well-known face in Clothes Forum and Style Questions who posts a photo of his outfit almost every day. Asked about his motivation, he explained:

> I post for positive reinforcement because if I go to the office [they'll say] "OK, yeah you look nice", it's like background noise after a while so you need a little feedback, whether it be positive or otherwise, you need feedback from somebody who might actually be interested in the subject matter which you're talking about, which of course, is clothes.

Similarly, Jose told me that if he feels his outfit is "exceptional" or "great" he will "share it with the world" because "It may not be appreciated by someone that I saw out in public today".

Users tend to post only their best outfits and many of them will only post these if the quality of the photographs is high. Jessie explained that "generally the biggest thing that stops me posting pictures of something I'm wearing online is not having the twenty minutes to take a couple good pictures and the light to do it". Sebastian has only posted photographs that were taken semi-professionally for a friend's photography portfolio because he does not think the photos he takes himself are of high enough quality. Interview respondents cite poor lighting conditions, the lack of a tripod and poor-quality cameras as disincentives for posting photographs. They were not just making excuses, as I observed how forum users post negative comments when the picture quality in WAYWT photographs is poor. Some of the research participants are photography enthusiasts, and taking photographs of outfits is a way to mix both hobbies. Luke, a professional photographer, explained how he takes his WAYWT photos: "the way I would prefer to do it is set up my SLR on the tripod and take a shot, get it focused correctly, shoot and treat it as if I was photographing somebody else for work". Technological improvements such as mobile phones' ability to take good-quality pictures and forums making it

easier to upload photographs have also encouraged users to post WAYWT photographs, because it has become easier for them to upload good-quality photographs.

The feedback on WAYWT threads works to transfer embodied fashion capital, a type of knowledge that can only be gained from experience with the materiality of clothing. This feedback allows less-experienced users to better embody their clothes. Take Rubin's testimony for example:

> In Style Questions if you post a photo of a jacket and the sleeves are too long by half an inch, the shoulders look too wide or it's too tight or too baggy someone is going to say "Hey your suit needs to be changed" and in most cases they'll be fairly blunt about that. Whereas if people said "Oh you look so good" in general life, people might not be willing or able to offer such specific critique, so I think those are things that were most striking to me and initially most called-upon. And even combinations of colours, for example, learning what goes with what, what textures and things can be paired with each other, that was a trial and error process, having people online posting stuff has definitely helped with that.

Using the forum to verify fit is a common practice. Users seek fit advice to see whether they should return items or get them tailored. Fit advice is especially useful to those who purchase online made-to-measure clothing, as it helps them to tweak their measurements to achieve a better fit on the next order they place. Lacking the embodied experience of how a made-to-measure shirt should fit, users turn to their more experienced peers in the forums for advice.

8.1.3 Objectified Fashion Capital

The third form of fashion capital found in online menswear communities is objectified fashion capital. Bourdieu's work shows how by objectifying tastes, personal possessions such as books, antique furniture and art can act as forms of cultural capital. This concept can be extended to the contents of a person's wardrobe, and I use the term "objectified fashion capital" to describe how individual clothing items objectify fashion taste and knowledge. In my analysis of discursive and objectified fashion capital, I have already demonstrated how these forms of fashion capital are based on the clothes that forum members own. In this sense, the clothes worn in WAYWT photographs demonstrate objectified fashion capital at the same time as they

demonstrate embodied fashion capital. Clothes are also displayed in the forums with bodies absent, as users post photographs of their shoes and clothes either individually or laid-out in an outfit. The wardrobe is an intimate space, usually located in the bedroom and seldom seen by visitors to the home (Woodward, 2007). But forum users bring their peers into their wardrobes by sharing photographs of what they own. For example, users in Style Questions and Clothes Forum post photographs of all the shoes they own neatly arranged together. There are also discussion threads in which users are invited to share photographs of their actual wardrobes. This includes everything from walk-in-wardrobes to rails of tweed jackets to the contents of tie drawers. Where wardrobes are treated as collections, as in the case of the Steel Soul forum, members post photographs of their collections of shirts or jeans, laid out in an aesthetic and orderly fashion.

Online menswear communities are organised around consumption, so members' closets are constantly changing and growing, with users posting both photographs and textual descriptions of their most recent acquisitions. Because it maintains users' anonymity and does not open them to critique, posting such photographs is seen as less risky than posting outfits. Many of the research participants who avoid WAYWT because they do not feel confident enough, or who feel awkward posting photographs of themselves, still post photographs of garments in threads dedicated to recent purchases. They are so accustomed to looking at images of clothing commodities, particularly through internet shopping, that posting photographs of what they call "pick-ups" comes naturally to them. While discursive fashion capital is a sort of accidental by-product of giving advice, this kind of objectified fashion capital reflects more intentionality. Steve explained that "It was about validation, that perceived validation in that community. I probably thought in the past if I found an item which is rare or hard to find I'd get props by posting it". In Brit Forum, the title for the "latest purchases" thread specifies that no stock photographs are to be posted – users must prove that they really own the garment they claim to have purchased. But as with advice and fit pics, the practice of posting "latest

acquisitions" is not just about bragging, and is often described in terms of communality and mutual aid, sharing photographs of clothes to satisfy other users' curiosity or helping them make decisions about their own purchases.

8.2 Fashion Capital, Subcultural Capital and Distinction

In her study of the UK's 1990s clubbing subculture, Thornton (1996) explains how subculture members acquire subculture-specific forms of cultural capital through their involvement in youth subcultures. She refers to these forms of cultural capital as "subcultural capital". Subcultural capital involves knowledge, tastes and dispositions that are valued within the confines of any subculture, and it is expressed through things like musical taste, musical knowledge, artistic sensibility, dancing ability and subcultural fashion. As illustrated in Chapter 4, online menswear communities are not quite subcultures in the Birmingham School sense of the word, but they are subculture-like. Moreover, they are subcultures in the sociological sense of the term insofar as they are sub-groups with distinctive norms and values. What distinguishes subcultural capital from cultural capital is that it involves tastes that are not necessarily valued within the wider culture. Because the type of fashion capital under discussion in this chapter is specific to online menswear forums, menswear forum users' fashion capital can be understood as a form of subcultural capital.

Two examples will serve to illustrate this. As discussed in section 8.1.1, Harold and Bruce both post their outfits in forums for recognition that they cannot get from the people around them. Like everybody else in Steel Soul, Harold dresses in what, to the undiscerning eye, looks like clothes designed for manual labour. By the standards of the wider culture, he looks unremarkable. But in Steel Soul he gets kudos for his outfits, which are made up of high-quality, Japanese-made items that other forum users recognise. Bruce works in a senior role in a corporate environment and dresses in suits from Brooks Brothers and Paul Stuart, a style that unlike Bruce's heritage style is understood in the wider culture as expensive. At first this would

seem like a clear-cut example of cultural capital, a boon to him in both his corporate

professional life and his Manhattan social life. But like Harold, Bruce looks to his forum

community for recognition. The people around him can recognise that he is well-dressed, but

they cannot appreciate the details of his garments the way that menswear forum users do. Just

as Harold posts in Steel Soul so that others can appreciate the quality of the Japanese heavy

denim and flannel work shirts he is wearing, Bruce posts in forums where the subtle details of

his outfits are appreciated.

Clothes Forum has something called "The Friday Challenge" where a theme such as a

colour, garment or film is selected and users are challenged to dress to that theme. Every

Friday, members vote to select a winner. John complained that success in these challenges is

based on how the items worn and the styling conform to the tastes of the forum:

> More often than not the guys who win it conform to a certain style. They're not
> necessarily well-dressed, but they conform to a certain look. And I think that kind of look,
> if you can dial that in, then you're going to do well on those threads and that's about
> achieving a Clothes Forum look.

This level of orthodoxy is a common complaint about Clothes Forum. Jessie rejects such

orthodoxy, declaring "I could spend what I've spent on loans for college and I would have a

Clothes Forum-approved wardrobe, and I just don't care to do that". The ways in which certain

sets of tastes are so closely associated with certain forums leads to the emergence of what

many forum members refer to as the "hive mind" or "groupthink". Taken from George Orwell's

novel *1984,* the term is used to describe how everyone in a forum thinks the same way about

certain cuts, styles, types of garments, stores and brands. This is what produces the rules,

coherent forum looks and forum-approved brands. This forum consensus shapes purchasing

decisions, with George telling me he likes "to go to pre-approved things".

The term "groupthink" is used disparagingly, and many of my informants stressed that

they, unlike those who follow the groupthink, can make up their own minds and do not need to

have a forum-approved wardrobe. Users also joke about the phenomenon of "dressed-by-the-

internet", where individuals dress to the advice of a forum without developing their own individual dressing competency. What humorous expressions like "hive mind", "groupthink", "forum-approved" and "dressed-by-the internet" indicate is an awareness amongst users of how very particular, narrow sets of tastes reign in the forums they use. The process of accumulating fashion capital that has been described in this chapter thus far involves accumulating knowledge, tastes and dispositions specific to forums. In other words, this fashion capital is subculture-specific, a form of subcultural capital.

This extends beyond clothes to site-specific forms of behaviour. All the men interviewed described a slow process of getting acclimatised to both the tone and the content of the forums they use, eventually making the jump from lurking to posting. Josh explained: "There's an unwritten etiquette… I think every forum has a different style, tone, different participation, likes, dislikes". New users are welcome, but expected to earn their dues, taking on forum knowledge and etiquette by reading archived discussion threads. Obvious questions in forums are frequently met with negative remarks suggesting that a new member should make use of the search function. One ten-year veteran of Brit Forum told me:

> If they're coming up with a stupid question using text speak, which has been asked 5000 times already, they'll get flamed. It's the same with every internet forum, probably since 1998. If they ask something vaguely intelligent, in the correct place, they'll get an answer. If it's stupid, they haven't got the style of the forum.

I have already described how users' language expresses fashion capital, but much of this language is forum-specific, constituting as sort of subcultural argot (Hebdige, 1979). To participate competently in the discussions, one must lurk long enough to become familiar with terms such as "BiG-style" (a way of measuring jeans that follows the examples of the online denim retailer Blue in Green), "stacking" (the lines that appear on raw denim because of folding along the back of the leg) and "peacocking" (wearing attention-grabbing clothes).

This discussion of differences in users' subcultural capital brings us to the second crucial insight that Thornton's work offers: subcultures, like high culture spaces, are hierarchical

Bourdieusian fields characterised by struggles for distinction. She argues that the Birmingham School's canonical work on subcultures overlooks the degree to which subcultures are hierarchical. Whereas Bourdieu's fields are organised around class, Thornton demonstrates how the 1990s clubbing subculture she researched was ordered around subcultural capital. Those in her study who put on club nights, wore the best clubwear, DJed or released records possessed more subcultural capital than those who did not, with subtle gradations in between. The same applied to embodied knowledge and dispositions: those who were stylish dressers, good dancers or accomplished DJs possessed higher high levels of subcultural capital. My research on an online forum used by late 2000s members of the mod subculture found a similar dynamic at work, with their online community organised hierarchically around levels of subcultural knowledge, commitment and engagement (Weiner, 2013).

Online menswear forums are equally hierarchical, with users' fashion capital operating as subcultural capital. To be taken seriously within online menswear communities, one must have sufficient levels of fashion capital. A common feature of online forums is that a user's post counts appear next to their user name. This, along with the length of membership, is used as a measure of their standing. My informants told me how they look at post counts or whether a user is a known "face" when evaluating how much stock to put in that user's opinions. For Luke, this is a way of filtering through the general noise of the forum:

> I'm looking at post counts, you have a kind of consensus of who's who. You spend so much time talking to these people and you get a sense of their style. I would pick and choose who I take advice from and would actually act on that, rather than someone just randomly just throwing something up there.

Jacob looks at past posts to see if a user is "credible": "Sometimes I'll see a poster share an opinion and I'll open up their profile to read some of their posts, to get a sense of them. This person's saying something very specific, let me just double-check if I think they're credible or not". Ian goes by users' WAYWT photographs as a measure of their authority, telling me that "unless they post pictures of themselves, you can't really determine whether they actually know

what they're talking about". Jessie also goes by users' embodied fashion capital: "If it's somebody who's got some credibility by having pictures of what they wear that look good and they've given good feedback in the past that isn't just their opinion, then I'm more likely to listen to them".

The men I interviewed also quantified their own credibility in terms of post count and demonstrated fashion capital. Luke is cognisant of how his 700 posts might put some weight behind his opinions, but also feels that being a relatively new member might mean his advice is taken less seriously. Justin is a long-time and frequent poster in Clothes Forum, known for his bespoke suits. He told me that he would be listened to about suiting because he has demonstrated his competency in that respect. A good reputation is seen as "Nice to have", as frequent WAYWT poster Jeremy put it, but during the interviews none of the participants wanted to appear too hung up on their online reputation. Jeremy played down his reputation, telling me "I've had people write me to say 'You really taught me so much about how to dress.' And I'm, like, 'I did?'. But there it is, we share an internet and we learn things from each other I guess". Dave similarly told me how his reputation is such that strangers approach him in public and tell him they recognise him from his WAYWT photographs. But when I asked him about whether he feels that his posts earn him respect, he said they did, but downplayed this, adding "it's like any community, it's the same with any forum". Just as users' knowledge is on display when they are helping other members with their queries, users' perception of their forum status is tied to their sense of being able to help others effectively. Shaun told me how he prides himself on being seen as 'trustworthy' within the Denim Forum community:

> I'm a respected user, people trust me, so as a result of that trust I do my best to provide accurate and reasonable information that isn't necessarily proscriptive, that doesn't say "this is the only way" but "here's what is the consensus here, here's what I think… here's some evidence that someone has brought up before on this issue", but if it's a subject that I don't know much about, I just don't comment.

I also found that many users feel unsure of their status, and do not post opinions or photographs of their outfits because they feel they lack fashion capital. Steve has been a

member of Brit Forum for ten years so I asked him if this translates into status and he responded "No, because I don't post pictures". A large proportion of the interview respondents do not post photographs in WAYWT threads. When I asked why, I received a range of answers from not having a good camera to poor lighting at home to not being bothered to thinking it is silly. But what is interesting and says much about the internal social dynamics of the forums, is that many of the informants feel their outfits are not good enough to post. Some stated that there is no point in posting because their outfits are underwhelming or unremarkable. Jacob told me: "I didn't do so many fit pics because I knew they were wrong or they were off, or I was at a basic enough level where I'm not really pushing the boundaries so I don't really post because I don't think I'm adding much to the forum". For Josh, his shift from the streetwear brands loved by the Brit Forum to ones that are less in line with its users' tastes means that he no longer feels like posting. When asked if he posts in WAYWT, Josh explained that because he no longer wears forum-approved brands such as Visvim, he does not expect to receive the kind of positive feedback he used to.

For some interviewees, a lack of economic capital, or a lack of willingness to spend it on clothing, prevents them from acquiring the kind of objectified and embodied fashion capital that others display in the forums. They tend to lack funds and have smaller wardrobes because of their youthfulness. Neil explained why when he first joined Brit Forum, he did not feel confident posting WAYWT photos: "I was quite young when I got into it, most of my income wasn't going on clothes, that came later, so I never felt I had the right mix of brands and stuff to show off". Joseph explained why he has only posted outfit pictures in forums a small number of times, and that he eventually took those photographs down: "Some of the forums are very label-oriented and a lot of my stuff isn't the thousand-dollar coats that most of them would be wearing in their WAYWT pictures, so there's some economic self-consciousness to it".

Some of the research participants feel that status is not always accorded fairly, particularly in Clothes Forum. They complain of cliquishness, with those who post in the WAYWT thread getting undeserved kudos. Luke explained:

> [In] those forums, it's hard to please people and you basically have to be a popular member, it's almost like a popularity contest in high school. If you're a popular user, people are going to be way more forgiving and give you the thumbs up and say you look awesome. If you're just a new person, they're going to rake you over the coals.

The presence of a Facebook-style "thumbs up" system in Clothes Forum accentuated this dynamic, with posts from frequent posters getting more thumbs up than others. Luke and Donald both prefer the smaller Tailored Forum to Clothes Forum because they feel Clothes Forum members fail to give fair assessments of the outfits posted by popular members. As subcultural capital is forum-specific, users with tens of thousands of posts in Clothes Forum will get praise for outfits posted in Clothes Forum only to have their photographs re-posted and harshly critiqued in Tailored Forum. There is a long-running and popular thread in Tailored Forum dedicated to mocking WAYWT post from Clothes Forum.

8.3 From Fashion Capital to Economic Capital

While cultural capital is intangible, Bourdieu details how it can be used to gain social capital which, in turn, can be used to attain economic capital. For example, an individual's cultural knowledge - the marker of their class and education - can help them impress their employer, leading to promotion at work. In Entwistle's (2009) research on fashion capital, she describes how fashion buyers use their embodied knowledge of fashion to do their jobs effectively, while relying on their fashion capital to "look the part". Entwistle speculates that fashion capital is important to the recruitment process, as fashion buyers are expected to communicate the aesthetic of the stores they work for. This turns fashion capital into economic capital for those who work in the fashion industry. Although it happens in different ways, in the

subfields of online menswear communities, fashion capital can is also transformed into

economic capital.

Retail work may be precarious and relatively low-paid, but the chance to work in

menswear is nevertheless seen as a great opportunity by some of the younger informants, who

have used their fashion capital to secure employment in this sector. Jessie was able to get a

summer job at Brooks Brothers, a retailer of the type of traditional American menswear

discussed in Style Questions, because of his fashion capital:

> Well I had the clothes, I liked the kind of clothes they sold and I liked the advice-giving side of the forum. Once I had finished asking questions, I started answering them and one day I realised I needed a summer job and I didn't want to be taking tickets in an amusement park on the boardwalk anymore, so I walked into a Brooks Brothers outlet near here and I asked for a job. I went in dressed a little too formally, and I got it pretty easily because they could tell I knew a little more about clothes than most twenty-year-olds at the time.

Clothing Forum member Luke similarly found employment at the Ralph Lauren concession of a

department store in a Toronto suburb based on his knowledge of both menswear and the brand.

This is knowledge developed through forum use.

Heritage clothing enthusiast Jonathan is a sales assistant at a menswear store in the

Bay Area. He explained that because he was already spending all his time "going through

forums and blogs and stuff," he though "I thought I should be around this stuff in my day job"

and responded to an ad for job at the store where he now works. As Jonathan lacked previous

retail experience, his knowledge of the brands they were selling at the store was what got him

the job:

> I knew the brands that they had, I was already very interested in the brand stories of a lot of the made-in-USA stuff. We carry, in terms of denim, Taylor Stich [jeans] and Red Wing boots, I already knew all that stuff and I think based on what I was asked, [they preferred me to] someone who would have to be educated and trained more with the product stories.

William's passion for clothes gave him the opportunity to be hired at the San Francisco branch

of a major mid-market international clothing brand. His indexical knowledge of menswear, which

he attributes to forum use, led to him being given the role of "lead menswear specialist", an

appointment-only position that he described as being "like the holy grail" of jobs at the store. Liam had worked in the UK office of a major international sneaker brand before his move to New York – a job he was hired for based on his knowledge of sneakers. After moving, Liam found back-of-house work at a streetwear company in New York thanks to the experience he had acquired working for the sneaker company in the UK. Steel Soul member Mike, a chef at a pub in a small town near Toronto, has done some side work as a brand representative for a denim company. He had no experience or interest in sales when he got the job – his only qualification was his embodied style and knowledge of raw denim. The company's director frequented the pub Mike worked at and was so impressed by his outfits that he offered him the job. Brit Forum member and streetwear enthusiast Neil works as an account executive at a well-known streetwear magazine. He explained that "in the interview, my passion and interest, because obviously I'm interested in everything [the magazine] covers, came through. So yeah, of course, it helped me, massively".

Others utilise their fashion capital to work in more creative roles within the fashion industry. Brit Forum members Dave and George both told me about friends who successfully used Brit Forum to launch careers in fashion marketing and styling. One prolific Brit Forum poster is now a professional stylist with a major public profile. George has a degree in fashion design and when I interviewed him he was in the process of starting a menswear label with another Brit Forum member. They were about to launch their first item, a dark grey suede jacket, and were drawing on their forum reputations in making industry contacts and locating potential customers. In the subfield of classic menswear, Clothes Forum member Kent Wang's "online haberdasher" is one of the most successful examples of a business launched from a clothing forum. His clothes are popular with Clothes Forum members, who appreciate that Ken Wang is one of them, with the same tastes and values.

Two of the interviewees have paid work as style consultants. Jacob, after corresponding with a fellow Toronto Clothes Forum user whose WAYWT photographs were receiving severe

criticism in the forum, arranged to act as a personal shopper for him. This was based on a realisation that his fashion capital has monetary value: "I thought this could be a fun experience and I needed a job and I thought this could be an interesting way to get paid. I'll drop some knowledge and that knowledge has value. I've earned it. I had enough knowledge and information that I could sell this as a service". While his primary source of income is working at a clothing store, William also has his own business as a "private style image consultant". Both men and women come to him for help in dressing to their body type:

> I'll teach people how to dress for their body and take them around for a half day. As far as long-term clients who want me to go with them all the time, I only have six people who have ever booked a second appointment but five of them, I see often.

Joseph is studying Chinese translation but aspires to become a stylist. Discussing the fashion shoots he had done so far, he explained that they were based on fashion capital accumulated through forum use: "A lot of the way I go into the work is influenced by the way a lot of the people on [the forum] discuss clothing, they discuss the tiny details and how the structure of articles are made and then a lot of it just adds onto my reading of tailoring and suiting". Joseph described his dressing as being "70% for me, 30% for the chance opportunity of me bumping into someone who works in the fashion industry". This is a use of embodied fashion capital to secure job prospects.

In Chapter 3 the role of buy-and-sell threads on menswear forums was examined. While most of the informants only use these threads to sell clothes they no longer like or no longer fit them, a few the research participants use these threads to earn an income. They use their knowledge of what clothes are sought-after and what prices they will fetch to buy clothes specifically for selling them online. This turns their fashion capital into economic capital. Dave supplements his income by selling garments purchased from TK Maxx, a clothing retailer that sells out-of-season brand-name items at deep discounts:

> I made just over three thousand pounds in one year purely from re-selling stuff from TK Maxx on American forums because often stuff is more awkward to get in America and

then also TK Maxx prices, if you stuck 100 quid on top it would still be 60% off the price it would be in America.

Dave's knowledge of clothing, his fashion capital developed by means of online forums, means that he is better able to recognise the value of items than TK Maxx staff are. Another user from the same forum, George, also makes money re-selling clothes from TX Maxx. In one instance, he and his friend bought ten pairs of Rick Owens boots for £100 each and sold them for £550 each. On another occasion, he funded a three-month internship in New York through eBay sales of Rick Owens leather jackets purchased from TK Maxx. With findings at TK Maxx drying up, George has turned his attention to French, German and Italian eBay for 1990s Helmut Lang, which thanks to his understanding of what is popular in the UK, he is able to re-sell for a profit in the English language section of eBay. George told me about others who make money selling in Brit Forum: "One guy has a sneaker business; I think he sells ten pairs a week. A guy does a bit of Supreme and he got a mortgage deposit off that". Discount codes and sales are shared as part of the mutual aid ethos of the forum, but sometimes users take advantage of this to buy clothes cheaply and re-sell them for a profit on eBay. George has done so himself, but complained of the feeding frenzy that occurred when the Common Projects Achilles, an expensive sneaker very popular in Brit Forum, went on sale at a deep discount: "[The online clothing retailer] Yoox had them for forty-nine Euros and I couldn't get a pair because people were buying ten pairs but then everyone put them on eBay and I was, like, 'What pricks' - I couldn't get a pair".

Others sell in smaller quantities, but take the opportunities to make some money off clothing when they present themselves. Matt told me about how delighted he was to chance upon two SNS Herring cardigans in TK Maxx, buying one for himself and the other to sell on eBay at a fifty-pound profit. Steve uses his fashion capital to recognise which Nike shoes will make him money when sold in Brit Forum:

> Brit Forum is slightly ahead because it's so niche, so because of that, Nike was sending stuff to an outlet which was actually cool, so I could try and sell it on eBay and no-one

would buy it, but I could sell it to people in Brit Forum and then they'll buy it because to them it's cool but it's not quite hit the mainstream yet.

When scouring sample sales to find bargains on brands he likes, such as CP Company, Stone Island and Paul & Shark, Robert carefully selects items that he knows will sell well on eBay: "Things like caps and scarves, you know the low-price items, if you get a high-end brand and a low-price item, you sell them and they'll fly out the door".

These occasional sellers see these side-lines as a way in which to fund their own clothing habits. The money they make from reselling helps them rationalise new purchases. Josh told me: "I used to sell a huge amount, I think I probably sold over 100 items in Brit Forum and then I probably sold about fifty items on eBay. Buying and selling used to be fantastic when I first started doing it, it was absolutely fantastic, I used to fund my wardrobe by buying and selling". Josh made most of his proceeds from sales of streetwear brand Supreme to people in the United States: "They didn't have an online store then and there were people who wanted Supreme items and I could go on a bus journey to the Supreme store, pay retail then sell for more than retail plus shipping, it was a win-win for me". Josh's participation on blogs and forums gave him a good sense of what would sell:

> [The online streetwear magazine] *Hypebeast* would release the editorial two days before anything dropped and you would see the clamour online. You'd see on the comments and you'd see when you went onto the forum and you'd see on Facebook people [writing] "This item is going to be great, I really like the look of this", and I'd be like that's the one I'm gonna go and buy and I'm going to make some money.

Another occasional re-seller, Jacob, was quite explicit about the way in which he turns his fashion capital into economic capital:

> I was, like, "Alright, I've really spent a lot of time and energy on this and it's sitting at home on my computer reading so it's not like it's social, I'm only spending money on it, it's not like I'm making money on it". So, I realised that it's a drain on my time, a drain on my money, and I wanted to change that. So now it's become a business source where I make money on that.

Savvy thrifting is another way to make money in menswear forums. Style Questions places a heavy emphasis on thrifting / shopping at charity shops and the forum has a thread

where members can sell on thrift "scores" that do not fit or suit them. Since forum users are already searching for bargains and rarities for themselves at thrift stores / charity shops, some of will pick up items they know command a decent price in Style Questions or eBay. This is again a matter of deploying knowledge about clothing - fashion capital – to gain economic capital. Rubin explained: "This comes back to the economic thing – when I'm in a thrift store I'm always conscious of what the estimated re-sell price on eBay or a forum would be for anything in the store". Denis' engagement with forums occurs primarily through thrifting, with Style Questions providing the knowledge and guidance he needs to dress well in clothes found at thrift stores. Using skills learned in Style Questions, he purchases clothes from makers he knows are valued in the forum, such as Alan Edmonds and Brooks Brothers. Some of these thrift 'scores' he then sells on eBay, others in the forum. The motivation of financial reward mixes with the forum ethos of mutuality; while making a very modest profit, Denis can help another forum member get their hands on a desirable item. The transfer of fashion capital into economic capital in Denis' and others' cases is also consistent with the mutuality of menswear forums. Users share knowledge to help their fellow forum users, but in the process gain subcultural capital in the hierarchical subfield of individual online menswear communities. The defining feature of online menswear forums – the sharing of knowledge – benefits forum users in several ways such as saving money, making better consumer decisions and wearing better-fitting clothes. The ability to turn fashion capital into economic capital, whether it is by working in retail, starting a business or selling clothes on the side, is another way in which forum users benefit from the sharing of knowledge in online menswear communities.

Chapter 9: Conclusion

9.1 Limitations

Because this dissertation looked at a wide range of forums to produce a more general understanding of online menswear culture, there is still much to be learned about individual online menswear communities. As explained in the introduction, this project was originally conceived as an online ethnography because I had anticipated difficulty in recruiting interview participants. Recruitment was more successful than expected, and the resulting richness of interview data meant that the ethnography had to be scaled back. The result is a piece of research that is more focused on the perspectives of those who participated in the research setting than it is on the research setting itself. There is still much to be learned through a deep focus on a single community, as Lellock's (2018) study of Reddit's Male Fashion Advice subReddit demonstrates.

I have mostly looked at those men who set themselves apart from fashion, for they offer unique insights into male attitudes towards clothing. But as has already been acknowledged, these men do not speak for the entirety of online menswear culture. More research is needed on those men who are enthusiastic about fashion. How do online menswear communities help them keep up with fashion, and what motivates them? Another fashion-forward offshoot deserving of more attention is the sub-section of *avant-garde* dressers encountered during this research. While the designers favoured by this group have a large following outside of forum culture, there is something distinctively internet-oriented about the goth ninja look. The very high prices that brands such as Boris and Rick Owens command and the very "out-there" appearance produced by the flowing, layered silhouette means that this style tribe diverges markedly from the ones that are the focus of this dissertation. I have scratched the surface in the three interviews I conducted with adherents of the style, but there is much more to investigate.

9.2 Onward to Instagram

Online menswear communities pre-date Instagram by some years, yet have survived competition from social media in a way that not all online communities have been able to. The way in which forums archive specialist knowledge in searchable textual form seems to have secured their longevity. It is much more difficult to find out the difference between a half-canvassed and a fully-canvassed suit jacket on Instagram, a platform designed mainly for sharing photographs, than it is on a text-based forum. The respect in which forums have given ground to Instagram is in the sharing of images of both clothing commodities and outfits. There are communities organised around hashtags on Instagram that reflect many of the same interests discussed within online menswear communities. As of mid-January 2019, there are approximately 357,000 posts for #alden and approximately 481,000 posts for #rawdenim. When describing their forum-browsing habits in interviews, many of the research participants spoke of looking at Instagram as part of their forum-browsing activity. The line between forums and Instagram is blurred as they follow the Instagram accounts of users and shops they know from their participation in online menswear communities. Newer forms of online sociability such as those found on Instagram are geared towards mobile phones whereas online forums were designed for personal computers. However, in recent years the web platforms the menswear forums are built on have been revised to make them easier to look at on mobile phones. Some have been optimised for forum reader apps such as Tappatalk. So, just as forum users move seamlessly between forums and webstores, so too might they glide between their Tappatalk app and other mobile phone apps such as Instagram, Grailed and eBay.

Teaching cultural studies to fashion students in their late teens and early twenties has given me insight into just how "last-gen" forums are. Most of my students have never heard of an online forum, let alone participated in one. Forums, and even blogs, are to them what magazines are to the men I interviewed. Instagram is where these young people consume fashion media. Yet as I discovered when trying to support students wanting to write essays or

undergraduate dissertations on Instagram, there is a dearth of critical work on Instagram,

particularly regarding fashion and clothing. With Instagram having become one of the dominant

mediums for not just fashion in general but also the specific types of menswear discussed within

online menswear communities, it is the logical next step in the research progression from this

dissertation. My next research project will examine how Instagram acts as a vehicle for

nostalgia, looking at how images of the past are shared on Instagram as style inspiration,

building upon this dissertation's insights into mediated memory.

9.3 Contributions to Scholarship

This dissertation advances a project that began with attempts to chart how 1980s

developments in men's fashion reflected changes in contemporary masculinity (Mort, 1988,

1996; Nixon, 1996, 2001; Edwards, 1997). If the new man and metrosexual moments were

pivotal junctures in the history of consumer culture during which designers, marketers and

journalists worked together to more fully integrate men into consumer culture (Nixon, 1996;

Shugart, 2008), the heyday of the online menswear community will perhaps be remembered as

a period in which men worked to integrate *themselves* more fully into consumer culture. It will be

remembered as a time in which a critical mass of men worked to assure one another that it was

OK to spend $500 on jeans, provided they were made in Japan of denim weighing a minimum

of fourteen ounces.

Men's clothing may have been the focus of this dissertation, but its findings contribute to

scholarship on consumer culture. The sense of community and collective support found within

the "cultures of consumption" studied here nuances notions that consumption is a purely

individualising act. The online menswear communities bring individuals together, acting as a

collective resource for identities - identities formed through consumption. These are not

identities articulated in terms of group-belonging, but in terms of individual consumer

preferences for high-quality, craft-produced items. Those shared preferences reflect shared

values and aesthetic tastes generated in the discourse of online menswear communities. They

are the basis for distinctive forum user lifestyles oriented around consumer research and craft

consumption. This supports sociological theories associated with the concept of reflexive

modernisation (Giddens, 1990), demonstrating how individuals exercise choice in seeking out a

sense of identity though voluntary, temporary membership in reflexive communities (Lash,

1994). My analysis of the role of craft consumption (Campbell, 2005) and production fetishism

(Appadurai, 1990) in this process also contributes to the emerging field of critical luxury studies,

identifying objects of luxury consumption that are closer to the ideal-type of luxury than those

produced by many of the best-known luxury brands. Finally, this dissertation offers new insights

into the experiential dimension of online shopping, using Benjamin's (1982/2002) notion of the

pilgrimage to the commodity fetish to capture the distracting, enchanting nature of the e-

commerce sites that members of online menswear communities spend their time on.

I am not the first researcher to look at how men discuss clothing online. However, the

few scholars who have addressed this topic have done so in respect to the ways in which men

use online discussion forums to succeed at *fashion* (Barry 2015; Lellock, 2018). What is unique

about the research reported in this dissertation is that it discusses a new type of clothing

consumer, one who is neither fashion-averse nor metrosexual. This is a man who eschews

fashion, but loves clothing. In an episode of the 2008 BBC documentary series *British Style

Genius*, Rolling Stones drummer Charlie Watts exclaims: "there are a group of people that are

clothes-mad, without being fashion-mad" (Condie, 2008). Watts is speaking of the mod

subculture from which his own clothes-madness sprang. Being clothes-mad without being

fashion-mad was once the preserve of the subculturalists who put me on the path to

researching menswear in the first place. With the emergence of online menswear communities,

it is now a more generalised phenomenon. This dissertation contributes to the subcultures vs.

neo-tribes debate, by identifying distinctive style groups that have a common look and set of

consumer interests, but lack deep, sustained commitment, making them neo-tribes rather than true subcultures.

The style groups identified in this dissertation are also different from canonical subcultures in that they are neither young nor spectacular. They are spread out across time and space, and while some cities may serve as focal points for members of some online menswear communities, these groups are not embedded in any one geographical location. The coming together of men with shared tastes and the emergence of distinctive styles within these groups was undoubtedly facilitated by the internet. One can recognise that digital technologies have discernible effects without being crudely technologically determinist (Slack & Wise, 2007), and this dissertation has shown how male consumption and dress practices have been profoundly transformed by both online communities and e-commerce. It demonstrated how online menswear communities operate as archives of knowledge, producing a type of collective intelligence (Lévy, 1997) that democratises expert knowledge. The archiving of knowledge in textual form allows dressing - a practice more commonly associated with *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1984) – to be studied and learned. This leads to menswear being treated as a "system" that can be mastered with online research. A unique insight of this dissertation is its articulation of how this video game logic is reflective of the same kind of instrumental rationality found in online seduction communities (Almog & Kaplan, 2017).

Forum users' emphasis on rationality in their approach to menswear is reminiscent of the way in which men approach other masculinised consumer interests such as cars and barbeques (Belk, 1995; Holt & Thompson, 2004; Otnes & McGrath, 2001). To be considered rational, clothing purchases must be research-informed, of excellent quality, attained at the best possible price and perform a specific function within the wardrobe. Clothing is frequently described in the language of hobbyism or geek culture. The problem is, no matter how much forum users compare their interest in clothes to knives, cars or model trains, their participation in online menswear communities is still haunted by the spectre of fashion's association with femininity

and therefore homosexuality. One of this dissertation's original contributions to the literature on men's fashion is its identification of the myriad of ways that members of online menswear communities work to distance themselves from fashion, making a rhetorical distinction between style and fashion. Making comparisons to masculinised hobbies and emphasising the rationality of purchasing decisions are just two examples of the distancing techniques discussed throughout this work.

Granted, the rejection of fashion in favour of style is, in part, a result of the exclusionary nature of fashion, which is seen as catering only to young, slim men. This discovery supports the findings of previous research on men's perceptions of fashion (Barry, 2014; Barry, 2015; Barry & Phillips, 2016; Barry & Weiner, 2017; Elliott & Elliott, 2005; Rinallo, 2007). As Lellock (2018) notes in relation to the Male Fashion Advice subReddit, the move away from fashion media reflects how the internet has eroded the authority of men's fashion magazines. Online menswear communities offer their members something more inclusive, participatory and democratic than men's fashion. They are a place where men of different ages and sizes can see men like themselves wearing stylish clothing. They are also sites on which men can receive support and advice in finding clothes that fit their bodies well. The men interviewed for this dissertation have little interest in the youthful, cutting-edge styles that are on-trend, choosing clothes over fashion. Forum users' self-proclaimed resistance to marketing manipulations, critiques of fashion's temporality and preferences for classic styles have produced an online discourse that encourages men to buy better-quality clothes that they are less likely to throw away as trends change. There is a contradictory anti-consumerist ethos to this particular form of consumerism, but considering the well-documented environmental and social impacts of fashion, it is nonetheless a step in the right direction.

My findings are consistent with previous studies on men's aversion to cultivating a fashionable appearance (Bakewell et al., 2006; Galilee, 2002; Green & Kaiser, 2016; Kaiser et al., 2008; Noh et al., 2015). In these studies, the research participants espoused antipathy to

fashion based on a preference for less expressive, more practical clothing. Scholars attribute this to the way in which fashion's association with femininity and homosexuality can make the fashionable man fall short of hegemonic masculine ideals. The forum users I interviewed also dislike the expressive appearance of fashionable clothes, preferring the understated appearance of more conservative or classic styles. They avoid tight or cutting-edge styles because such styles would draw attention to their dressed appearance. This supports Kaiser's assertion that heterosexual men dress to leave their gender and sexuality unmarked. In heteronormative societies, the assumed nature of heterosexual masculinity means that men's sexuality is invisible until they call attention to their appearance.

However, unlike the men in the studies cited above, the research participants interviewed for this dissertation are *very* interested in clothing, fitting the historical archetype of the vain dandy as they dedicate large amounts of time and money to their wardrobes. While not cutting-edge fashion, the (mostly) expensive clothes that the interview respondents wear fall outside the category of affordable, practical clothing preferred by the fashion-averse men in other studies. Furthermore, they have no qualms about being known to care about their appearance. If not for the distinctions made between fashion and clothing, my findings could be taken as proof of a loosening of the gender norms governing fashion consumption. Forum users' simultaneous rejection of fashion and embrace of behaviours associated with fashion consumption is contradictory, and fashion's association with femininity remains the issue. At no point did the research participants articulate an explicit critique of fashion as feminine. But their denigrations of fashion's frivolity and temporality, and thus its perceived irrationality, reflect fashion's persistent gendering.

Fashion's temporality means that the ideal-type follower of fashion is a feminised victim who makes irrational decisions, buying an item of clothing not because it is good or because they need it, but because it is on-trend. This reflects Victorian notions of women as weak and easily-manipulated (Bowlby, 1985; Wilson, 1985). Just as conservative/understated style is a

way to avoid the femininity of fashion's expressiveness, timeless/classic style is a way to avoid the femininity of fashion's temporality. Baudelaire (1863/1995) wrote of the Parisian dandy that he "makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory" (p. 12). The menswear forum user is engaged in a similar pursuit. Yet as was explained in Chapter 5, timeless style is somewhat of a conceit, for no style can be truly timeless. Timelessness is hugely subjective, and forum users' sense of timelessness reflects an ever-shifting consensus produced in the day-to-day textual discourse of the online menswear communities in which they participate.

Moreover, any look considered timeless today has emerged from the fashion system. During the time periods in which they originated, the styles worn by the research participants were mainstream mass fashion - not a cult subcultural interest but fashions worn by large numbers of men, introduced by clothing manufacturers as the latest style, sold on high streets and promoted through advertising and the fashion press. While some of the styles may have originated in military clothing or workwear, the popularity of garments discussed within online menswear communities, garments such as selvedge jeans, flannel work shirts, crewneck sweatshirts, sack jackets, three-button suits, oxford-cotton button-down shirts, cap-toe shoes, knit ties, cagoules, chinos and canvas sneakers, is a product of artificially introduced change. That is to say: they would not be popular if not for fashion. The difference is that the garments favoured by forum users have remained popular for much longer than most fashion items. They are not truly timeless, but they *are* "fashion classics" - what Carter describes as "those clothing forms that have not succumbed to fashionable destruction" (Carter, 2003, p. 78).

By defining their supposedly timeless and understated style against fashion, the research participants are involved in the kind of boundary work that Rinallo (2007) found in his study of heterosexual Italian men. Rinallo's research participants set themselves boundaries to avoid the illegitimate appearance that Rinallo labels effeminate/homosexual. The difference is that Rinallo's participants identified as followers of fashion, whereas fashion-oriented looks fall

outside the boundaries that my research participants set themselves. What falls within the boundaries is that which is classic, timeless, conservative or understated. This can be partly attributed to cultural differences between Italy and the Anglosphere countries in which I carried out my research, but the consensus generated in online menswear communities play a significant role in shaping forum users' ideas about fashion, clothing and style.

They distance their dress practices from the feminised irrationality of fashion, presenting them as rational activities taken towards the masculine goal of achievement at dressing well (Otnes & McGrath, 2001). Informed shopping and dressing decisions can be made by using menswear forums to better understand menswear, ensuring that there is no danger of becoming a feminised fashion victim. With his emphasis on knowledge and research, the forum user can see himself as a rational, masculine, man-of-action hero seeking out clothes that will stand the test of time (Holt & Thompson, 2004). This is reminiscent of Barry and Philips' (2015) fashion-as-labour, with dress understood as something that one works at through research and practice. But a large majority of the research participants have gone a step further by steering clear of fashion altogether. Where Lellock's Redditors use Male Fashion Advice to achieve a fashionable appearance, the interview respondents use their forums to achieve the impossible ideal of timeless style.

This rhetorical distinction between fashion and style is significant, because it again reminds us how deeply-gendered fashion is. Fashion is not derided for being womanly or gay, but that gendering underlies the disdain for fashion's expressiveness and temporality. Style, by contrast, is constructed as timeless and understated. Fashion's irrationality perplexes many of the research participants, but style's rationality means that it is something they can learn and master. As something that is not fashion, the social construct that is timeless style has made it safe for men to take pleasure in consumption, narcissistic concern with self-presentation and the material culture of clothing, pleasures typically perceived as feminine, and thus effeminate when associated with men. Style has trumped fashion by allowing an engagement with clothing

whereby clothes-mad heterosexual men's masculinity does not come into question. In its in-depth analysis of the rhetorical distinction fashion and style, this dissertation advances the field of fashion studies by demonstrating the persistent, and very subtle ways in which fashion remains gendered.

Male interest in clothing is certainly no longer considered a "secret vice". What, then, does this mean for contemporary masculinity? Throughout this dissertation I have shown how rather than engaging in some sort of resistance to the imposition of dominant gender norms, participants in online clothing communities are actually bringing their otherwise deviant dress and consumption practices into line with said gender norms. As a heterosexual culture that embraces fashion and rejects notions of fashion's femininity, these forums certainly represent an opening up in the styles of masculinity deemed acceptable for heterosexual men to perform. Furthermore, the absence of homohysteria (Anderson, 2009) in online menswear communities is without a doubt a positive development. However, the lack of intentionality here, along with the occasionally sexist, discourse of the forums and forum members' deployment of the aesthetics of pastiche hegemony (Atkinson, 2011), have led me to conclude that the online menswear community member's masculinity is hybrid (Bridges & Pasco, 2014). This is testament to the porousness and elasticity of hegemonic masculinity, of its ability to incorporate changes in the style of masculinity without troubling the more fundamental structure of gender relations upon which it is based. Such findings, along with this dissertation's emphasis on masculine aesthetics, contribute to the field of masculinity studies by offering empirical evidence of both hybrid masculinity and pastiche hegemony.

9.4 Concluding Thoughts

The purpose of this dissertation's critique is not to condemn the menswear forum user. Unlike many of the scholars in fashion studies and marketing studies who have carried out research in this field, I do not think that resistance to fashion is something that needs to be

overcome. Nor do I think that the men who participate in online menswear communities are somehow reactionary just because they, like most men, draw on the most dominant models of masculinity available to them (Whitehead, 2002). With the privileges accorded to heterosexual men simply by unreflexively conforming to gender norms, it seems unrealistic to expect them to embody more subversive styles. They have been raised in a culture in which the aesthetics of masculinity are mediated through films and images of decades past. Whether their model is their father, grandfather or Steve McQueen, the repetition of images of mid-20th century male style has produced a rich and uncomplicated repository of styles already codified as masculine. It is much easier to produce a cognitive map of well-codified menswear styles than it is to get a grip on the much more ephemeral phenomenon that is fashion.

The forum user's instrumental rationality and recourse to expert knowledge make the rule-governed field of style an easier choice than fashion, with its emphasis on innate creativity and expressiveness. Late modern individuality involves a self that is an ongoing project, often constituted through consumer culture (Giddens, 1990). The menswear forum user defines himself in terms of his taste for well-made clothing commodities assembled into outfits in accordance with the codified styles of the online menswear communities in which he participates. He rejects the cheaply-made garments and fleeting looks promoted by the fashion industry. Constantly researching clothes and putting his outfits up for critique, he seeks out the masculine ideal of achievement (Otnes & McGrath, 2001) in the field of fashion. At the danger of romanticising him too much, I would suggest that in this sense the menswear forum user is comparable to Baudelaire's (1863/1995) dandy, with his "taste for the ideal which floats on the surface of all crude, terrestrial and loathsome bric-a-brac that the natural life accumulates in the human brain" (p. 22). The shopping arcade where the Victorian dandy displayed his fastidious style was one of the representative cultural forms of the Victorian period's emerging consumer capitalism (Chaney, 1983, 1990). Perhaps, then, the online menswear community where the

menswear forum user displays his own fastidious style is one of the representative cultural

forms of our own historical period's digitally-mediated, late-stage consumer capitalism.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Example of Research Solicitation Posted in Online Menswear Community

Hello,

Apologies in advance if this seems spammy. I'm in communications studies and currently research online menswear forums. While I'm based at York University in Toronto (Canada), I'm looking to interview forum users in the London area over the course of December. The interview would involve an open-ended discussion about menswear, your use of online forums and online shopping habits. The results of this research will eventually be published in a scholarly book or article and your identity will be kept anonymous. This is not market research and no-one stands to profit from it. Interviews will take around an hour and I can travel to anywhere in Greater London. I am able to offer an honorarium of £30/$50 for your time. If interested please PM me or e-mail me.

Appendix B: Summary of Online Menswear Communities

Community Name*	Styles Discussed	Number of Participants Recruited
Brit Forum	*Avant-garde/Goth Ninja* Football Casual Heritage Retro Scally Scandinavian Streetwear Streetwear	12
Clothes Forum	*Avant-garde/Goth Ninja* Classic Menswear Heritage Scandinavian Streetwear Streetwear Traditional Skinhead Trad	12
Denim Forum	Heritage Raw Denim	8
Steel Soul	Heritage Raw Denim	7
Style Questions	Classic Menswear Trad	8
Tailored Forum	Classic Menswear Trad	3

*The names of the online menswear communities have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

Appendix C: Summary of Research Participants

Below is a chart of relevant information about the research participants. The information here is based on what the participants provided me with, so there are some inconsistencies in how occupation and ethnic origin are categorised and described.

Name*	Occupation	Age	Metropolitan Area	Ethnic Origin	Sexual Orientation	Forum recruited from
Alex	Journalist	27	Toronto	White	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Anthony	Line chef	23	London	White: Italian	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Barry	Academic librarian	29	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Brian	PR	27	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Carl	Metal-worker	37	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Casey	Undergraduate student	20	Bay Area	Hispanic/White	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Conrad	Undergraduate student	22	Toronto	Asian: Chinese	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Dave	Graduate student	31	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Denis	Lawyer	48	Montreal	White: French-Canadian	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Donald	Draughtsman	41	New York (New Jersey)	White	Heterosexual	Tailored Forum
Edward	Finance	31	Toronto	Asian: Chinese	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Eugene	Project manager	34	New York	Asian	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Frank	Farmer	39	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Gary	High-school teacher	32	Toronto	White: Greek	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
George	Intern	24	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Gordon	Economist	41	Toronto	White/Asian: Japanese	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Graham	Photo retoucher	31	New York	White: Greek/Irish	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Harold	Researcher	23	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Ian	Research consultant	42	Toronto (Burlington)	White: Polish/German	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Jacob	Fragrance sales	31	Toronto	White: Jewish	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Jeremy	Computer Programmer	59	New York	White	Homosexual	Clothes Forum
Jerry	Contractor	50	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Jessie	Retail assistant	22	New York (New Jersey)	White	"Mostly straight"	Style Questions
Jimmy	Communications strategist	47	Toronto	White	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Jonathan	Retail assistant	29	Bay Area	Asian/White	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Jose	Sales representative	29	Corpus Christi, TX	Hispanic: Mexican	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Joseph	Undergraduate student	24	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Josh	Undergraduate student	20	London	White: Irish	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Jovan	IT consultant	38	Toronto	White: Serbian	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Justin	Utility analyst	29	New York	White	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Kenneth	Customer service agent	26	Albuquerque, NM	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Kevin	Undergraduate student	21	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum

Liam	Warehouse manager	30	New York	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Luke	Photographer	26	Toronto (Hamilton)	White	Heterosexual	Tailored Forum
Matt	Graduate student	41	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Mike	Kitchen manager	34	Toronto	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Neil	Account executive	27	London	Asian: Hong Kong Chinese	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Noel	Market research	33	London	Black: African	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Paul	Day trader	53	Toronto	White	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Phillip	Advertising	42	Toronto	White	Heterosexual	Steel Soul
Raymond	Lawyer	50	Toronto	Mixed race: Jamaican	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Richard	Software engineer	28	Bay Area	Asian: Chinese	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Robert	Journalist	47	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Rubin	Engineer	22	Boston	White	Heterosexual	Style Questions
Shaun	Graduate student	23	Ottawa	White/Asian: Chinese	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Steve	Negotiator	29	London	White	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
Tom	Management consultant	63	London (Essex)	White	Heterosexual	Clothes Forum
Tony	Creative director	29	London	White: Italian/Jewish	Heterosexual	Brit Forum
William	Retail assistant	19	Bay Area	White	Heterosexual	Denim Forum
Wilson	Insurance (management)	34	Toronto	Asian: Chinese	Heterosexual	Tailored Forum

*Names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.