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## **Uncertain Masculinities**

Hyperpolymediation and the Advent of (the) Post-Particular Man among Well-Dressed Men on Instagram

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**Abstract:** In an increasingly digitized modernity, traditional societal tropes are vulnerable to rapid and substantial change. Social media platforms such as Instagram allow for digital selves to be constructed in a landscape made up of networks of like-minded individual actors. This article examines how traditional Western notions of masculinity are beginning to change through this enactment of digital relations. Built on 24 months of digital ethnographic fieldwork with sartorially inclined men on Instagram, this article examines how the consumption and production of digital images can alter notions of self, and what this means for those of us who compulsively use social media. This leads to a call for a radical reassessment of masculinity by asking whether the concept of specific forms of masculinity has begun to shatter. If, as this article claims, masculinity has lost specificity in the digital age, then a new type of man has been born: the post-particular man.

**Keywords:** digital anthropology, hyperpolymediation, Instagram, masculinity, post-particular man, social media

This article draws on a 24-month period of digital ethnographic fieldwork to question how new technologies allow for notions of masculinity to be altered and influenced by the digital images that we actively consume and by those that exist subliminally in the digital ether all around us.

Much existing work suggests that masculinities are simply reinscribed onto a digital landscape, with the dick pic often held up, figuratively, as a prime example of this process (see Dietzel 2021; Paasonen et al. 2019; Waling and Pym 2017). This body of work currently delineates the dominant way of understanding digital masculinities and the performativity of masculinity in a digitally saturated world. Yet, the research conducted for this article identifies an alternative reading of masculinity in the age of social media (see also Bluteau 2022: 78–80).

At the root of this disparity lies a simple question. Do men bring their pre-existing social and cultural repertoires to the digital field, or are they erased, subverted, reinterpreted, or in some other way manipulated and performed anew? Such a question could (and indeed must) also be asked of other social categories such as race and sexuality. Masculinity clearly does not operate in isolation, and instead sits in an interconnected web of various social tropes constituted via the interwoven strands of social loci that make up our digitized modernity. Other scholars have noted how social media platforms such as Instagram allow for traditional models of masculinity to be challenged. Indeed Kayla Marshall and colleagues (2020) talk of a “hegemonic masculine negotiation” when the bodybuilders they work with engage in crafting their Instagram selves. The “negotiation” mooted here offers a glimpse into the potentialities offered by social media platforms for reframing and reinterpreting offline constructs, yet my research suggests that we can go even further.

The “post-particular man” is a term I have coined to describe a phenomenon observed during the course of ethnographic fieldwork that I conducted with the social media platform Instagram (Bluteau 2022). For anthropologists, this new term may evoke echoes of Franz Boas’s historical particularism, yet the comparison only holds as far as the definition of particular goes. This idea borrows from the philosophical lexicon, implying a juxtaposition with the abstract, as

metaphysically a particular is concrete. For Sybil Wolfram (1989: 55), this includes “individuals of a certain kind,” with the implication being that individuals can be classed or grouped in some way.

Raewyn Connell (2005) identifies four types of masculinity: complicit, subordinate, marginal, and hegemonic. Masculinity studies, following Connell (2005: 76), uses the notion of hegemonic masculinity and gender order theory to argue for a dominant form of masculinity that varies through space and time, yet in each of these temporal spaces masculinity has a particularity characterized by a specific form. Where these forms are violated or subverted, they are termed “subcultures” by Connell (2005: 188) and often confined (at least intellectually) to their own specific spatiotemporal location such as “the Molly houses of early eighteenth-century London.” In cases such as these, the term “alternative masculinity” is defined by opposition, much in the same way that Don Kulick (1998: 120–124) frames the gender relations between the transgendered prostitutes he works with and their boyfriends. Definitions of maleness here are still constituted through a relationship with an overarching cultural stratum, with both the visitors to the Molly house and Kulick’s (1998) participants most likely being framed as subordinate by Connell (2005). Historically, this has been inescapable, but in an increasingly digitized world, where social media ingress, smartphone usage, and technologically advanced homes are becoming the norm, this has begun to change (consider the “power bottom” discussed by Johns and colleagues [2012: 9]), as socially constructed notions of identity, rather than culturally constituted ones, are allowed to blossom in the digital ether. It is this brave new postdigital world that provides the primordial soup for a new form of masculinity. The post-particular man is an individual who does not fit neatly into historic notions of masculinity and lacks any specific

notion of a set masculinity. Rather, he builds for himself his own version of masculinity, which he lives alongside other like-minded individuals online.

This article investigates how networks of individual actors, set in a digital landscape, cast doubt on fixed notions of masculinity through their self-portraiture and internal structures of reciprocity and affirmation. The notion of a network builds on actor-network theory (Latour 2005: 46–50; Law 2009: 141–158) but also takes its cues from the work of Bruce Kapferer (1969: 216) and Jeremy Boissevain ([1974] 1978: 176) to highlight the importance of the connections and loci between individual actors. The way in which I conceive of this notion of network and the digital networks I describe (see Bluteau 2022: 63–64) is subtly different from this previous work (pertaining to actor-network theory), in that the digital networks made up of offline users present online digital selves that communicate and interact through an image-based discourse—in the case of my interlocutors, digital selves primarily displaying clothing (see also Bluteau 2019). Despite this specificity, the web of loci that the digital researcher is able to draw on after long-term fieldwork in the digital fieldsite shows that the interaction and reciprocated gazes between members of this digital network are an “enactment of . . . relations” (Law 2009: 141).

Below, the work of Guy Debord ([1967] 2012: 12–34) will be used as a lens through which the digital landscape can be viewed. This will aid an analysis of the digital space by considering it as part of Debord’s (2012: 12–24) “spectacle,” where images are a tool for mediating social relations. However, and crucially, this work pushes Debord’s ideas further by setting his ideas within a digital modernity with a truly vast number of images constantly being produced and consumed online. This will be used to support my assertion that many online users now inhabit a digital landscape of uncertain masculinities.

## **Background**

Instagram is a social media platform accessed primarily via smartphone, and was designed as a medium to share digital images. I conducted fieldwork with Instagram for 24 months in tandem with a 12-month period of offline fieldwork with London-based bespoke tailors and a network of clients who surround them. This fieldwork, which was initially concerned with the presentation of the self through the dressed male body, expanded and led me to radically reassess the nature of masculinity in the digital space. I contend that in the digital space there is no one particular form, or set of forms, of masculinity but instead infinite possibilities of masculinity. This assessment is the product of the discovery that within digital social media there sits practically infinite networks of like-minded individuals who are able to develop, self-regulate, and enforce strict notions of self that are specific to their particular digital network. This means that within the digital space individuals who may feel isolated in the offline world are able to find like-minded individuals who share and validate their own specific form of masculinity.

But what of those who want to replicate existing tropes within a digital space? These actors also exist within the digital landscape, and social media can enable pre-existing masculinities to proliferate. Yet such digital performances are rarely identical to their terrestrial counterparts, and although often comparable are frequently hyperbolic or driven by algorithm and functionality to exaggerate a particular performance of masculinity (Davis 2018), align it with other like-minded individuals (Bluteau 2022), or allow a subtly modified form to develop (Marshall et al. 2020). Indeed, while the fieldwork that this article builds on focuses on research conducted with a specific network of Instagram users (Bluteau 2022), the research also noted users outside the network (or on its fringes) who replicated various other forms of masculinity (see also Rahbari 2019).

During the period when I conducted my digital fieldwork, I developed a methodology that built on the work of Ladislav Holy (1988: 13–34), Loïc Wacquant (2004: 4–11), and Brent Luvaas (2016: 9–13). This allowed me to function as an observing participant in the digital landscape, conducting a form of research termed “immersive cohabitation” (Bluteau 2019), and as such the ethnographer’s gaze fell upon more than the just smartphone screen. This methodology included mimicking the digital efforts of the users I followed, and I began to produce images and self-portraits of myself, which I published to an Instagram account under the name @anthrodandy. In addition to this practice, I engaged with the digital space, conducting hours of online research every day, looking through others’ content, liking and commenting on their posts, and slowly forming relationships with other users who would become my informants. This was a slow process, and necessitated a long period of fieldwork; indeed, after the first 12 months of daily interaction I was only just beginning to make serious online relationships as my digital self gradually became coherent. A part of this slow process was the need to learn the language of semiotics and aesthetics associated with producing an image that was pleasing—and therefore generated feedback and interaction—to the network I was working with, as well as understanding how to use text and emojis in the place of Erving Goffman’s (1971: 166–167) nonverbal “overlays” to enable meaningful interactions to occur in the digital space. Furthermore, the kinds of objects and garments that the network was interested in viewing were expensive and exclusive, and had to be painstakingly acquired and photographed.

@anthrodandy, my digital self, began as a research tool, but bloomed into a fully-fledged ontological entity, with the ability to exert agency over my nondigital offline self. This process was achieved by daily interaction and the process of creating a digital self through the publication of a vast number of digital images. In my case, 850 images were published over the

24-month period of my digital fieldwork. This allowed me to conduct research with other digital selves as well as employing a reflexive methodology to appreciate the difficulty and stress the development of such a complex digital form can have on the offline self. Throughout this process, I observed the development of other users' digital selves (and intellectually built on the work of Dorinne Kondo [2009]), and heard whispers of the psychological and financial stress involved in this process: a further suggestion of a digital self's agency. However, the most profound element of this research for this article is the manner in which a digital landscape can provide the possibility for infinite masculinities. The men whom I interacted and worked with online are prolific Instagram users, typically posting at least one image every day, and often many more. While there is typically no offline link between these users, they are bound together online in a network sustained by a shared set of aesthetics and a shared interest in tailoring, menswear, and sartorial matters. This is the basis of this network's notion of self, identity, and the shared construct of masculinity. These men are not necessarily London-based like the tailors my offline fieldwork began with, but rather are situated internationally. Despite this situation, this fieldwork cannot be considered multi-sited, because the fieldsite itself is a singular digital entity.

### **Hyperpolymediation**

It was within this multidimensional digitally saturated landscape that I first began to notice how various digital technologies intersected. This began with an appreciation of the theory of polymedia described by Daniel Miller and Mirca Madianou (2012), but my ethnographic experience of using a smartphone as a research tool—a portal to a digital landscape—on a daily basis for hours at a time provoked questions as to the finite nature of polymedia. Such queries have already been raised by scholars such as Art Herbig and colleagues (2015), but the reality of



the landscape within which my fieldwork was conducted in the United Kingdom was a world beyond these previous definitions. I have therefore proposed that the experiential reality of conducting my fieldwork should be defined by a new term: “hyperpolymediation.” This is not only constituted explicitly through the communication choices made by individual actors but implicitly through the media-saturated landscape in which the fieldwork was conducted—think of digital humidity, an inescapable closeness all around.

There is a tangible link here to well-established anthropological discussions on atmosphere, most notably from Tim Ingold (2015: 73–78; see also Schroer and Schmitt 2018). Instagram, as I have noted elsewhere (Bluteau 2022), is both sensorial and phenomenological for heavy users, beyond a merely haptically rendered relationship between user and smartphone screen. The Instagram selves that are crafted into existence in this space are affected by an atmosphere that can be at times akin to “ocean currents” (Bluteau 2022: 31, 57): they are invisible to the eye, yet one can feel their movement.

To clarify, there are two atmospheres at work here—a pair of landscapes to inhabit. The first is a digital landscape that Instagram selves inhabit. This is constituted by three basic elemental structures: landscape, individual actor(s), and atmosphere. The second landscape is the more familiar terrestrial one you are perhaps inhabiting now as you read this article. In this terrestrial landscape, the atmosphere is more familiar (in line with Ingold 2015: 73–78), but the profusion of digital selves acting agentially on their terrestrial masters (see Bluteau 2022: 154–156) and the ever-growing means to access the digital landscape lead to hyperpolymediation: a phenomenological closeness ahead of a gathering storm.

It is within this terrestrial (yet digitally humid) landscape that I found myself on one day during my fieldwork, sitting on the sofa of my rented apartment, smartphone in one hand,

casually browsing. The television was on quietly in the background to keep me company, and through the thin walls I could hear the occasional ting or rumble as neighbors' smartphones tried to attract their owners' attention. As I continued to scroll through Instagram, liking new posts, commenting on informants' latest images, and thinking about my next post, I glanced up, over the top of my smartphone screen, to find my eyes confronted with a familiar image. On the screen was a topless man sitting down on a sun lounger doing exactly what I was. Suddenly, I recognized the program, which was that season's summer televisual phenomenon, "Love Island" (2015–, ITV Studios).

This popular UK reality-television program consists of a number of young singletons being marooned in a sun-drenched villa and forced to couple up, complete challenges, and ultimately try and find their perfect partner. They are banned from social media during their incarceration, but they still use smartphones extensively to communicate with one another while inside the villa. Furthermore, social media posts concerning them (which they cannot access) become prolific, and the voting system for removing a contestant is through a smartphone app that also includes additional features. Even in this brief vignette, gleaned from a few seconds' glance, I had already established how digitally saturated such a program could be, with hyperpolymediation stretching far beyond the program, contestants, and even viewers.

During the 2018 iteration of this program, the advertisements that were played during the commercial breaks received heavy criticism. Adverts for companies offering loans for cosmetic surgery including breast enlargement and others promoting appetite suppressant products were lambasted by commentators for manipulating notions of acceptable body image (Waterson and Sweney 2018). Such criticism was primarily focused on the manner in which the female body is portrayed by this program; however, the male Adonises who feature in the show, sculpted like

gods from Greek mythology, are no less guilty in manipulating the viewers' notion of acceptable body image. The consumption of digital images, ranging from television to social media (and those which overlap) is, at least in part, responsible for rapidly evolving notions of body, self, and, in the case of my participants, masculinity (Kleemans et al. 2016; Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz 2016; see also Murray 2008). As established, these images are not confined to a single spatiotemporal location, and can spread seemingly exponentially all around us.

### **A Society of Spectacles**

As noted in the introduction, this article takes Debord's ([1967] 2012) work *The Society of the Spectacle* and asks how this conceptual construct, first published in 1967, might be pertinent to a digitized modernity, a world that is fundamentally different from Debord's, full of social media, smartphones, and internet-mediated global telecommunication.

Yet in such a digitized modernity, I have suggested (2022: 56–58) that the spectacle has shattered, and made way for not one society of the spectacle but a society of spectacles. This is the basis for a whole raft of post-particular men who define their own specific form of masculinity socially through the loci of interactions they make with like-minded digital users and the objects they covet and display—essentially, digital performance becomes hyper-real, and this allows digital performance to agentially act on social media users to modify their behavior and alter their performance of self. This includes understandings of masculinity, but the number of potential performances, infinitely enacted, reproduced, and codified in the digital landscape awaiting consumption allows for infinite potential concepts of masculinity to take place concurrently. This can be as gentrified as the sartorially inclined men I worked with, or as concerning as the involuntary celibate or incel men described by Debbie Ging (2019), but nevertheless this article moves for a shift in the discourse by identifying these gatherings of

digital like-minds as networks and not subcultures. To reiterate, a network is here taken to mean a series of individual online actors bound together by a reciprocal enacting of certain relationships; in the case of my interlocutors, it is the sharing, commenting, and producing of images of their clothing (see Bluteau 2022). As such, individuals who might not have been able to share their notion of self or who might not have encountered the images necessary to change their sense of self in the offline world can enter into a digital landscape and interact with other like-minded users.

The atmosphere within a digital landscape with a “post-scarcity” of images (see Slater 2000) and infinite amorphous networks means that there are infinite masculinities that these networks can perform. Here, I use “post-scarcity” following Don Slater (2000; see also David 2017; Hoskins 2014), where there is simply such a vast amount of media (in the case of Instagram, digital images) available for consumption that any niche activity, desire, or fetish can be viewed instantly and engaged with in such considerable quantity (and quality) that the content (and therefore by association the activity being performed) becomes normative (see Bluteau 2022: 153–154).

This performance can proliferate with the assistance of curated content drawn from a post-scarcity environment to reinforce a particular performance of masculinity through the obliteration of any content that does not reinforce it. Digital self-making is reliant on a Debordian reading of spectacularism, one where the spectacle is a metaphor for the environment of hyperpolymediation. Debord (2012: 23–24) suggests that we are at the mercy of the spectacle and the images contained within it; however, this statement was made long before the advent of digital media. When we consider the current digital landscape with its post-scarcity (Slater 2000: 123) environment of effectively infinite images, Debord’s (2012) notion of spectacle vacillates.

Yet, Debord's (2012) idea still acts as a poignant lens, as while the post-scarcity of images gives inhabitants of the digital landscape the ability to take control over which spectacle they want to view, they are still viewing a spectacle. I therefore suggest a new reading of Debord (2012) for the digital age, one that is not a single society of the spectacle but a society of spectacles.

We may be free to choose which one of these spectacles we inhabit, a feat enabled by the algorithms present in the filtering of content on social media platforms such as Instagram that provide us only with the images the platform thinks we want to see, yet how free this choice truly is may be contested, particularly when we consider the regulation of choice through neoliberalism. Despite this issue, the content presented to the Instagram user is based on that user's specific activity. It therefore allows us to select, through our digital interaction, who we want to align ourselves with online. This phenomenon can be felt in many areas; however, notions of gender and masculinity online are keenly felt, and it appears that there is always space for a network with a rewritten idea of how masculinity should be performed. This is a Debordian step, where "the real consumer becomes a consumer of illusion" (Debord 2012: 32). Essentially, this illusion is the coherence of the images viewed and the performances enacted by the network. This allows for any interpretation of masculinity to be coherently performed, and as such masculinity as a concept loses particularity; it lacks a homogeneous specificity, yet it is not abstract. Rather, it has become so fluid that it is post-particular.

### **The Post-Particular Man**

The key to constructing a specific notion of masculine self is not a process of picking from a list of pre-existing binary societal tropes regarding actions, objects, and endeavors considered masculine or feminine. Rather, we must consider the proliferation of digital images that digitally active men consume. These images are open for interpretation and manipulation within a digital

landscape; they can be shared, reshared, captioned, and reframed. This phenomenon has been noted by a number of scholars including Daniel Miller (2015), but fits into a wider discourse in the anthropological corpus considering the nature of the photograph as relational and affective (see Edwards 2015). Roy Dilley (2019: 6) describes the manner in which photographs can be manipulated prior to publication to enhance their impact, and he notes the employment of “strategic invisibility” in photographs to create a certain effect or political discourse. The digital images I worked with are intellectually no different; however, the sheer number of images and the ease with which alteration and manipulation can occur makes the image an increasingly powerful tool.

This notion that the consumption of images alters one’s perception of self and that digital users may feel drawn to consuming a particular type of image that they admire, associate with, or subscribe to is easy to understand. However, within the world of Instagram a big part of the interactions users complete is not simply consuming images but also producing them too. Within the network I worked with, these images were primarily self-portraits featuring the outfit that a user was currently wearing, as well as close-up photographs of particular items of clothing and accessories that were thought to be pleasing and that the rest of the network might enjoy. This may sound as if the individual users function in a utopic digital isolation, simply sharing what they are wearing and items that please them; however, I postulate that it is far more involved than this, and indeed when I was conducting research through immersive cohabitation (Bluteau 2019) and working as an observing participant it became far more involved for me. The nature of Instagram with its cycles of affirmation and digital reciprocity means that a user heavily entrenched within a particular network learns what form of images are deemed to be especially pleasing to the rest of the network and endeavors to replicate this form. This means that, far from

digital freedom, the process of photographing, editing, and posting images becomes an exercise in pleasing the group and being rewarded with affirmation in the form of likes, comments, and follows. The set of unwritten aesthetic rules that the group collectively subscribes to, therefore, is the basis of a collective notion of identity, self, and, of course, masculinity.

### **A World of Multiple Selves and Infinite Masculinities**

This assertion that we now live in a world of infinite potential masculinities existing across numerous online networks occupied by digital selves is a development of the work on hegemonic masculinity and gender order theory carried out by Connell (2005: 76). Connell suggests that there are multiple masculinities that vary across time and that human practice is “onto-formative . . . [in that] It makes the reality we live in” (2005: 65). It is this idea that I will push here by questioning what happens to this notion of onto-formativity in the context of an ever-more digitized world where the boundaries between online and offline space bleed into one another. I suggest that there has been a fracture in collective practice as a means for constituting notions of masculinity, a fracture that will continue to degrade over time. This is the logical conclusion to Connell’s (2005: 76) work in a digital age, where there is no longer simply multiple masculinities existing across time but rather infinite masculinities existing in the present. The median point between Connell’s (2005) work and my own is Eric Anderson’s (2009) inclusive masculinity theory—a natural stepping stone—but we must go further. The key evolution in my work from Connell’s (2005) is a shift from a cultural rendering of masculinity—with anything not fitting into this cultural frame being defined in opposition to it as a subculture—to a social rendering, unique to each network, that performs a manifestation of masculinity. This is key to my assertion that masculinity has lost specificity and my declaration of the advent of the post-particular man.

## **Metrosexuals, Hypersexuals, and More**

The digital landscape offers the potential for multiple selves and infinite masculinities, and I will use this section to think more critically about what some of these performed post-particular masculinities might look like. Some of them are already common within the vernacular; “incel” (see Ging 2019), as I have already mentioned, sits alongside terms such as “metrosexual” as a possibility for various performances of maleness. As Shaun Cole (2000) notes in his work on “gay men’s dress in the twentieth century,” the notion that various levels of maleness and femaleness can be performed through dress—an idea naturally drawing on Judith Butler (1990: 190; 2004: 214)—is well established in the gay community, with categories ranging from clones, punks, fairies, and bikers all discussed in depth. This is a foreshadowing of the post-particular man, who intellectually draws on Mark Simpson’s (2014) “second generation” metrosexual whose sexuality is “immaterial because he has clearly taken himself . . . and pleasure as his sexual preference” (Simpson 2002). To a certain extent, this is inescapable in a digital space where the notion of the gaze needs to be constantly reassessed, as the production of content, whether directly featuring an image of the user or not, adds a narcissus-like quality to all interactions.

The very fact that Simpson chooses to demarcate the metrosexual into various generations highlights the rapidly shifting nature of these variously performed masculinities. Even more crucially for this article, he goes on to clarify that “their own bodies (more than clobber and product) have become the ultimate accessories, fashioning them at the gym . . . they share and compare in an online marketplace” (Simpson 2014). The link Simpson (2014) makes here between the offline activity and the sharing of online content is an important one. However, the date of this publication is equally important to recognize. Since this was written, the



digitization of the lives of many has increased exponentially, driving the advent of the post-particular man.

Simpson's (2014) description of digitally produced male selves, which are well-groomed and concerned with beautification, is comparable to what I have observed within the network I worked with, an apparent self-obsession fostered by the intimacy the digital lens can provide (Horst 2009: 107; Miller and Sinanan 2014: 48–81). However, I do not see the single form of masculinity that Simpson (2014) does; rather, I see his concept of the self-objectifying, sexually immaterial self as a mode for seeing infinite possibilities of masculinity—one that grows through the production of content that mirrors the other members of the network one gravitates toward, with the long-term possibility that the online self begins to be reflected in the offline world as the online self acquires an ontological agency of its own. If anything, Simpson's (2014) notion of masculinity is an apt depiction of the characteristics displayed in the television series "Love Island" that I discussed above—just one of an infinite set of post-particular masculinities.

Simpson's (2014) comments on bodies being commodified in an "online marketplace" are reminiscent of earlier work by Michel Foucault (1980), as digital bodies become objects of desire in their own right. Foucault's (1980: 57) description of the "exploitation of eroticism" found in the advertising of products such as sun-tan lotion is a precursor to this, but in a digitally saturated modernity the male body is being used to sell like never before. However, in order for this commercialization of the male body to be employed as fully as possible, it needs to appeal to as broad a spectrum as possible. Consequently, in a society of many spectacles, and a world of infinite masculinities, we can observe the male body being employed, in an equally wide range of ways, to sell.

Despite this commercialization and fetishization of the digital body as a commodity, post-particular bodies resist any specific cultural meaning, remaining defined socially by the loci of interaction that take place in a succinct digital network rather than culturally by more general view arising from beyond the network. Part of this ability to resist stems from the international makeup of many of these networks, which can span continents and, as such, begin to subvert any geographically local cultural context from their inception. This is also the reason why micro-influencers can be so successful in marketing products and brands within networks they are already established in—they understand the form of masculinity being promoted by the network and are able to employ their digital bodies accordingly.

This is not to say that global forms of masculinity (see Kulkarni and Jain 2019; see also Edwards 2006) cannot be replicated in the digital landscape. As noted above, the digital offers the opportunity to replicate tropes that are found offline too, but I suggest that unless this online content (both produced and consumed) is regulated (both literally in law and socially or culturally) by a coherent offline group, there will be the same potentialities for the crafting of increasingly extreme versions of these masculinities via an algorithmically shaped post-scarcity landscape.

Beyond incels and metrosexuals, another category of performance of maleness could be the hyper-real maleness that Jukka Jouhki (2017) discusses (see also Roberts 2017). Drawing on the specific way in which men are depicted in advertising for gambling websites, particularly those focusing on poker, Jouhki explores the exaggeration of traditionally male characteristics and the use of “masculine fantasies” (2017: 96). Defining the hyper-real male as “a lucid and powerful compensatory model,” Jouhki suggests that adverts including this depiction of

maleness appeal to those men “who acknowledge that being ‘a gamer’ might . . . go against traditional images of masculinity” (2017: 96).

Jouhki (2017) is here juxtaposing the image of maleness presented in these adverts—typically an aggressive, tuxedo clad poker player with an attractive woman on his arm surrounded by various trapping of wealth—with the reality of many online gamers. The hyper-real male does not only appear in gambling spots, however, but is also to be found in the world of fashion on both catwalks and in advertising. Here, as in the poker adverts, there is a juxtaposition between the hyper-real male wearing the clothes and the type of man who might be interested in fashion. Cole reminds us that for many men an “interest in dress is [seen as] frivolous, and . . . feminine” (2000: 2). Yet the images used to sell men’s fashion are often hyper-masculine, displaying topless models with exaggerated muscular torsos. This appeals to the sexual or aspirational desire of those gazing at them, offering the widest possible set of masculinities a chance to demonstrate an interest, but also demonstrating that while broad notions of masculinity are culturally constructed, the specific readings of these tropes can be constituted through the social loci of interaction in online networks that allow network-specific socially realized understandings of post-particular masculinity to flourish.

These comprise a succinct set of possible performances of masculinity. They might once have been considered subcultures, but in the digital space on platforms such as Instagram these alternative masculinities can be propagated by the images consumed digitally, shared and digested, reproduced, and reconsumed by members of a like-minded network. There is an element of “bulimic consumption” in this situation, following Stan Frankland (2009: 95), but being part of one of these many Debordian spectacles I have outlined, they are defined by the consumption of a curated set of digital images over an extended period of time. This can alter the

particular notion of masculinity, allowing a post-particular notion of masculinity fostered by the network to flourish.

These post-particular masculinities are not always visible. Indeed, the clandestine nature of many online networks—either by design or due to the fact that their shared interest is suitably obscure—means that many flourish in the digital shadows, known to a scant few beyond their members. However, one way in which juxtaposed post-particularities can be observed is by their differing content when discussing objects, artifacts, or members who exist across multiple digital spheres. A good example of this is the tailors whom I have worked with and, due to the nature of their business, often present themselves digitally in a number of networks, with their designs and personal aesthetic raising comment from an even greater number. This is the case for a specific tailor I worked with named Joshua Kane.

### **Dandies versus Gentlemen**

Joshua Kane is a bespoke tailor based in London, but unlike most of his contemporaries he also operates his business as a successful fashion brand. This places an emphasis on a design-led aesthetic rather than on one that is production-led, although there is still a very high level of production in the garments produced. This approach has won him many acolytes and a set of followers (both online and off), but for those who prize the craft-focused approach of traditional British bespoke, centred on Savile Row in London, this preoccupation with a fashion-focused aesthetic comes as an anathema. In the offline world, this would matter less, and it would be a question of taste. Walking past Kane's shop windows on Great Portland Street, one would instantly be able to judge from the elegant mannequins clad in exotically patterned tailoring whether this brand was to one's taste. Online however, the networks that exist allow for ideas and opinion to be aired among those with similar interests, a process that is often described in the

vernacular as an “echo chamber” but that is closer to Frankland’s (2009: 95) “bulimic consumption” that was already discussed above. Ideas are presented, consumed, and represented to the network in an endless cycle, with the content degrading or morphing over time so that the opinion of the group evolves slowly over time. This is the case in a consistent network. In the case of Joshua Kane, his digital persona inhabits an Instagram network that has grown up around him and provides almost exclusively positive validation of his aesthetic.

In contrast, the nature of Kane’s brand as both tailor and fashion-house has drawn considerable comment from networks on other platforms beyond Instagram. This is where juxtaposed notions of masculinity highlight the post-particular nature of maleness and identity within the digital space. In a now unavailable 2015 blog post by Trepanier, concerning the tailor, his various attributes are discussed in an engaging and friendly way. However the comment stream that was published following this post from readers of the blog was notably different. A wide variety of views concerning Kane’s appearance and perceived notions of his associated masculinity were present alongside attacks on his skills and taste. The images that accompanied the blog, showing the tailor in a number of outfits, can be found reproduced in my previous work (Bluteau 2018: 119–129) accompanied by a full transcript of the comments following the blog post (Bluteau 2018: 271–277).

The negative comments drew into question Kane’s identity as a tailor and a heterosexual male. The fundamental basis of these accusations is that his aesthetic, being reproduced in the images consumed by the commentators, does not subscribe to or validate their own conception of masculinity. However, it is important to remember that within the Instagram network that I worked with Kane’s form of masculinity is seen as highly polished, desirable, and influential. It is clear then, that there are many forms of masculinity, and that an investigation of the digital

landscape offers us the opportunity to explore how diverse views can germinate, be nurtured, and propagate within networks of like-minded digital individuals.

### **Conclusion: Post-Particular People?**

I have suggested that the digital landscape where I conducted research is made up of an ever-growing number of networks of individual actors (Bluteau 2019, 2022). These networks are self-regulating, semi-permeable, and constantly evolving. I have centred this article on the network that I worked with, one concerned with men's bespoke tailoring and high-end fashion. However, the theoretical concepts I have developed appear from my broader research to be more generally applicable. Indeed, they may in due course serve to contextualize the rapidly changing landscape of contested sexual identities (Robards 2018), elastic notions of sexuality (Carrillo and Hoffman 2018) and changing sexual practices (see Branfman et al. 2018: 122 for a comment on pegging), discussed by other contributors to this journal, within an increasingly digitized world.

I contend that the images that are consumed online by members of these networks, and other digital users, over time alter one's notion of aesthetics and masculinity. The consumption of images in vast numbers alters our notion of self, our aspirations, and what we think is normal. This is the principle that Debord (2012: 17) postulated; however, in an increasingly digitized modernity the quantity of images that we consume, and the manner in which they are tailored by the platforms we interact with for our personal consumption, suggests to me that there are many spectacles, perhaps even individual spectacles for individual digital actors. It is this suggestion that I use to cast doubt on any notion of a fixed masculinity. In a digital landscape that has a "post-scarcity" of images, one can choose what to view; indeed, the volume is simply too great for any alternative, and the rapid evolution of the current raft of smartphone technologies means that we are displayed the images our previous interactions suggest we would like to see (Slater

2000: 123). Therefore, it appears that the interface of technology and our increasingly digitized selves has fractured Debord's (2012: 13) single spectacle and ushered in a world of infinite possibilities.

This notion of infinity is a complex one, and I do not use it here in a strict mathematical sense, but rather as a means of expressing an amorphous and constantly changing multiplicity of digital possibilities that lack any clear finite bounds. There are now so many digital networks that one can join, it is easy to find one with members who share one's views, sense of self, and, in the case of this article, notion of masculinity. Connections that would be difficult to make in the nondigital world are now instant, and even if one cannot find a network that one finds appealing, it is easy to create one, starting with just oneself and one's own content, which others will soon join. It may sound as if this is a utopic situation; however, I am not so sure. The danger of such interaction is that the further one invests in the digital space, and the more one perceives their digital self to be a more accurate representation of themselves than their offline self—something which Jean Baudrillard (2003: 37–42) warns against in his work on hyper-reality—the more illusory the notion of self becomes. However, the question remains as to what value judgment can be applied to this phenomenon, and perhaps it is too early to tell.

This article has concentrated on notions of masculinity and the post-particular man, focusing on a network of individuals fostering a specific concept of masculinity. However, it may be the case that this post-particular man is too gendered—despite the assertion that such a concept shatters notions of masculinity holding any specificity. Therefore, I suggest that further work needs to be conducted to establish whether there is a post-particular woman, or even post-particular people. It may be that a post-particular world gives men the opportunity to make their genders in new ways without masculinity. Are we to see the end of masculinity itself? I predict

that, in an ever more digitized world, categories of gender, sexuality, and identity will continue to fracture as individuals seek like-minded digital selves online.

Masculinity is what one's digital friends decide that it means, a decision that is supported and upheld by the members of one's network. The truly interesting aspect of this is what this means for the broader offline society. The networks I have described online have begun to shatter pre-existing societal tropes, and with an environment where any view or idea can find support online to normalize and foster it, we have now entered a post-particular world. It will differ to a greater or lesser extent across every individual network, as will many other societal tropes. It may even be the case that these digitally rendered notions become more powerful than their corresponding beliefs in the offline world, which is a form of digital hyper-reality. The question to now ask is whether these ideas can hold their strength or whether they will be rendered mere illusions in the fullness of time.

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