Beauty and the Tumblebeast: Tumblr, Self-Portraits, and Depictions of Masculinity

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Abstract:

184 self-portraits of straight men posted on 11 Tumblr blogs were examined in this qualitative content analysis. The contents of images and the associated texts from the blogs were analyzed for depictions of masculinity. Straight men are caught between the urge to attract attention (to be gazed at) and to align their presentation of masculinity with the hegemonic norm. In particular, this content analysis examines strategies that straight male Tumblr bloggers use to align their online gender performances to the norm by engaging in strategies of active resistance to the feminine and ironic homoerotic posturing.

Keywords: Tumblr, Masculinity, Heterosexual, Straight Men, Social Media, Gender Presentation

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Tumblr, Otoportreler ve Erkeklik Tasvirleri

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Özet:

Bu nitel içerik analizinde, 11 Tumblr blogunda yayınlanan 184 heteroseksüel erkek otoportresi incelenmiştir. İmgelerin içeriği ve bloglardaki ilgili metinler, erkeklik tasvirleri için analiz edilmiştir. Heteroseksüel erkeklerin, dikkat çekme (seyredilme) ve erkeklik sunumunu hegemonik norma uydurma arzusunda oldukları tespit edilmiştir. Özellikle bu içerik analizinde, heteroseksüel erkek Tumblr blogcularının, kadınsı ve ironik homoerotik pozlara yönelik aktif direnç stratejileri geliştirerek, çevrimiçi toplumsal cinsiyet performanslarını normlara uygun sergilemek için kullandıkları stratejiler irdelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tumblr, Erkeklik, Heteroseksüel, Heteroseksüel Erkekler, Sosyal Medya, Toplumsal Cinsiyet Sunumu

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Introduction

In *The transparency of evil: essays on extreme phenomena,* Jean Baudrillard (1993) describes how mass media distorts figures like a porn star and Italian parliamentarian Ilona Staller (La Cicciolina) and pop star Michael Jackson. Their performances of sexuality and gender become exaggerated and their authenticity seems to lose coherence. Baudrillard explains the phenomenon, thusly: "Since it is no longer possible to base any claim on one's own existence, there is nothing for it but to perform an *appearing act* without concerning oneself with *being*—or even with *being seen*. So, it is not: I exist, I am here! But rather: I am visible, I am an image—look! look!" This prescient sentiment anticipates much of the identity performance seen on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, or Tumblr. These platforms create an electronic space in which participants can "see and be seen" in an effort to appear to others (van Dijck, 2013).

Posting self-portraits (or selfies) is one way to perform such an "appearing act" for one's social network whether that includes family, friends, or anonymous followers. This act more easily inscribes gender and sexual performances since it focuses more on surface visibility. For many, it is a semi-public, semi-private[1] display of identity and a way to assert adherence to gender and sexual norms. For men, posting a selfie that can be viewed online threatens to destabilize heterosexual masculinity and feminize straight men (Dyer, 1992; Gill et al., 2005). Men post self-portraits to attract attention and thereby risk an inversion of looking privilege. This privilege gives men the freedom to look at and objectify others (in particular women and queer men.) In this electronic

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[1] Social media injects a new strain inquiry into the discussion of mass media. In the 20th century many critics and theorists including Jean Baudrillard, Marshall McLuhan, and Alvin Toffler focused their attention on the broadcast in which a message is produced by a small group and disseminated to a wide population. Social media relies on a wide population produce messages and narrowcast them to a focused population. Narrowcasting creates a situation, which is semi-public because it is disseminated in public, but which is also semi-private because the people receiving the information usually belong to a specific social network (often they are either followers of producer or at least members of the social media site platform.)

environment, straight men must perform masculinity in such a way that compensates for their willful self-objectification. For this reason, social media sites provide a unique vantage to study the performance and assertion of straight masculinity.

This study focuses on strategies straight men use to sustain their masculinity when sharing self-portraits on Tumblr. This social media site was fertile for research for several reasons. Its popularity was waxing at the time of the study (2013-2014). It provided users with more flexibility in choosing interface design and types of content that users can post. Users can post individual content, but they can also re-post and re-blog content from other bloggers. Tumblr also allows users to decide whether or not they will identify the images they post as selfies. This choice of self-identification requires users to be more active in their performance. It also makes Tumblr distinct from Facebook, which automatically identifies and labels people in posted images. The personalization provides the opportunity to examine how straight men actively perform their masculinity.

R. W. Connell (1995) presents her idea of hegemonic masculinity as a shifting ideal. Essentially, culture is in flux, and the social characteristics needed to maintain masculine social rank must also change. Men find methods for aligning themselves to this ideal. The strategies are multifarious because different masculinities develop in different communities and social contexts. This content analysis explores the strategies of active resistance to the feminine and ironic homoerotic posturing straight men use when sharing selfies on Tumblr.

Data Collection and Analysis

In addition to the literature reviewed for this essay, a content analysis of Tumblr blogs was performed. The images selected for this content analysis have been posted on personal Tumblr blogs (in contrast to fan blogs or special interest blogs). I identified 11 personal Tumblr blogs created by English-speaking men who can be identified as straight or

heterosexual. Selected bloggers are men who have either explicitly or implicitly identified as straight or heterosexual. This decision to include bloggers who have implied their heterosexuality has been made because the assumption of heterosexuality often seduces explicit declarations. I used personal information (including sexuality) provided in the sidebar, FAQ (Frequently Asked Questions) page, and/or About page of the blogs to determine if the blogs were appropriate for this study. Blogs devoted to the fetishization and/or objectification of men, humor or satirical blogs on male behavior, or blogs that are non-personal were not considered in this study.

These blogs were discovered using the Tumblr search box. Initial search terms included: man, dude, bro, straight, male. These terms had been selected through pre-coding exercises that included using potential search terms to see which produced relevant results. These blogs were the top search results that were clearly the personal blogs of straight men. Searchable blogs are important for this study on public expressions of masculinity because the bloggers are conscious of their public performance whereas private blogs (that can only be followed through invitation) permit bloggers to perform offstage.

On these 11 selected blogs, all of the photographic posts tagged #selfie and/or #me posted between May 2012 and May 2014 have been analyzed. I initially examined 184 images, making modified field notes on the content of each of image. Additional information was also found in subsequent tags of the images since some bloggers used these tags as a way to comment on their self-images and guide viewers in interpreting images. After the initial examination, I reviewed these images and culled several that represented larger trends. These images were subjected to close reading that emerged both from the initial modified field notes as well as a closer examination of these specific images. The results of both the close reading and the relevant previous analysis have been thread together to explore the ways these men have depicted themselves and the strategies they engaged in to protect their masculinity on Tumblr.

Literature Review
Impression Management on Social Media

I n his examination of information technology and its implications, *Open Sky*, cultural theorist Paul Virilio (2008) analyzes the implications of technology and its ability to negate the experience of actual distance through speed. From Virilio's perspective, the natural speed for humans is the speed in which the human body without mechanical aid can move (dromosphere.) He reminds the reader that electronic communication spreads literally at the speed of light. The innate impact of technology informs the communities that I am examining since these communities arise from the collapse of distance through social media. This shift in socialization through technology has implications for the way all aspects of identity (including masculinity) are projected.

Men (and women) reinscribe masculinity through the repetition of behaviors and attitudes (Butler, 1990/1999; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Such performances are complemented by Goffman's (1959/1990) argument that everyday interactions function much the same way as a staged drama. The field of social interaction acts as the stage, while areas away from the public view can operate as a dressing room in which performers can prepare themselves for acceptable public roles. Those individuals who occupy the spaces off stage with performers find themselves in tacit or explicit conspiracies to engage within the frame of the same play. The distinction between onstage and offstage is useful in explaining occasionally contradictory yet still legitimate variants of performance.

The scale of time and space Goffman (1959/1990) explored in *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* has been constricted by what Virilio would term the pollution of the dromosphere by media technology. This constriction accentuates the partially public and partially private nature of social media sites. If a user can share an image of themselves across the room and across the globe with the same relative speed, then the

shift in scale breaks down the distinctions between Goffman's on-stage and off-stage. The technology that permits instantaneous social engagement over vast distances essentially breaks down the barriers between spaces (Virilio, 2008; Yang et al., 2014).

Thus, the interaction membrane has been stretched into once-private areas. Spaces that were once considered off-stage sanctuaries like bedrooms and bathrooms have been converted into stages for social media site interactions. Such a conversion of private space into public space is not surprising. Goffman (1959/1990) indicates that performers sometimes engage in public behavior off-stage for an imaginary audience. Social media sites replace the imaginary for an actual but distant audience.

Tumblr

Tumblr offers its users more control than some social media sites like Facebook or LinkedIn. Tumblr users have greater control over their presentation and performance of identity. Users can opt to identify themselves or representations with a hashtag[2] or they can post images without acknowledging themselves (or others) in contrast to Facebook's feature which automatically labels images. In general, Tumblr offers users more control over what and how they post. David Karp, Tumblr's founder, offers feint praise for long-form blogging platforms like Blogger or Wordpress and image-based platforms like Flickr and YouTube; however, he was "constantly frustrated by the limitations imposed by all of them"(as cited in Alfonso, 2013). This frustration led to the development of Tumblr, a more versatile platform—capable of easily sharing text, pictures, GIFs and videos (Alfonso, 2013). Tumblr was developed based on previous tumblelog platforms like anarchaia and Projectionist. These early iterations of the

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[2] A hashtag or tag is graphically represented by a hashtag (#). The tag allows users to archive and catalogue posts on a common theme. Users can create whatever tags they want or they can use accepted community tags to make their posts part of the public searchable archive as well as a blog specific archive. Some bloggers will even use tags as a way to add additional commentary to their images.

tumblelog were designed to distribute short blog posts (not more than a paragraph), which might seem incongruous on longer blog platforms. Tumblr hosts its services for free and offers smartphone integration allowing for real-time blogging (Zuk, 2010).

Users primarily access Tumblr through the dashboard. The dashboard allows users to make posts, manage their interpersonal communications (questions, posts and fan mail submitted by others), view activity (notifications of "liked" posts and new followers) and customize their blog. However, most of the dashboard's space is devoted to displaying a chronological stream of posts from the Tumblr blogs the user follows. Posts often consist of visual, textual or audio material reblogged from popular, political or aesthetic sources. In addition to reblogged material, posts include personal posts (self-portraits, short narratives, exclamations). Essentially, Tumblr users can choose to build their online identities, synthesizing it from a variety of personal, political and popular content. At the time of this study, researchers had not written much on Tumblr, yet studies on other social media sites provided insight to online gender performance.

Masculinity

In *Masculinities*, R. W. Connell (1995) argues that there are many variations of masculinity, but these variations align themselves to idealized, hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is itself a shifting concept that incorporates contemporary practices that insure that men can legitimately dominate women. Ideas about masculinity are also in flux. In particular, cyberspace provides an environment in which "…multiple masculinities compete with one another for hegemony over time and in conjunction with sociocultural change" (Manago, 2013). These variations of masculinity challenge the definition of single, ideal masculinity.[3] Some studies argue the presentation of alternate

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[3] This ideal masculinity is often portrayed as heterosexist, misogynist, emotionally repressed, and sexually transient.

masculinities conform to and react against the imagined and idealized formulation of masculinity (Kendall, 2000; Manago, 2013). In these studies, we see some of the ways masculinities evolve in online environments. One example of a shift in masculine ideals is the affectionate comments that men share on social media sites (DeRidder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Public affection contrasts some expected traits of masculinity including Halberstam's (1998) assertion that male masculinity is marked by a lack of concern for the self and others.

Melissa Joy Magnuson and Lauren Dundes (2008) conclude that men are less reliant on others to create their identity in their analysis of how men and women present themselves on MySpace. These researchers examine the social connections that users of the MySpace platform opt to make public. In particular, they look at references to "significant others." They find that men are less likely to reference the people that they are in relationships with. This tendency is in keeping with the general male trait of compartmentalizing different aspects of their lives. These findings are in keeping with traditional gender roles with men seeing themselves as less reliant on relationships for personal definition.

Magnuson and Dunde's findings are consistent with those of Michele M. Strano (2008), who uses an open-ended qualitative survey to analyze the decisions people make when selecting images for their Facebook profiles. The results reveal that men and women "are equally likely to display images of family and romantic relationships." However, the reasons for posting these images are different for men and women. According to Strano (2008), posting images with others is about relationships for men while it is about identity for women. Yet men were more focused on selecting images that made them seem "unique." This assumption of uniqueness perhaps is an attempt to align the display to the hegemonic ideal. The implication of consistency in online and offline gender performance other studies reveal that the uniqueness of social media site engagement can challenge modes of gender performance.

A frequently cited researcher in the presentation of gender on social media sites, Andra Siibak, touches on one such challenge. Siibak (2009, 2010) has explored the way images on the Estonian Rate.ee can be used to manage impressions and in some cases reveal a potential inversion of masculine behavior. In "Constructing the self through the photo selection – Visual impression management on social networking websites", Siibak (2009) uses Goffman's theories about self-presentation as a frame to study the Estonian social media site. She surveyed 713 Estonian students aged eleven to eighteen about their use of selfies for impression management on Rate.ee. The study indicates that girls are more deliberate in their choice of images, but that both young women and men carefully select images for self-presentation. Siibak also indicates that boys (more so than girls) focus on looking good and sexy, which contrasts with the masculine assertion of looking at what is good and sexy. Siibak continues her examination of image construction on rate.ee in her 2010 essay "Constructing masculinity on a social networking site." In this study she narrows her population, looking at young men in the "Damn I'm Beautiful" community of Rate.ee. In this study, she acknowledges the increasing objectification of men in media. Men on these sites have also adapted strategies from mainstream society to portray themselves in "metrosexual ways," a trend that returns to the finding from Siibak's previous study that suggests that men strive to look good and sexy. As a historic phenomenon metrosexuality allowed men to display a sense of self-care in grooming and appearance while insulating their heterosexuality (Ervin, 2011). According to Siibak, this type of self-representation is in part an attempt to gain positive attention from viewers. She found that men have different strategies for portraying their masculinity. More importantly the importance of photographs in impression management was stressed. Siibak's investigation of the prettiness of men reflects a trend of male iconography in advertising that emerged in the 20th century.

Deana A. Rohlinger (2002) explores how activism has influenced the depiction of men in 20th century American advertising. In particular, men have faced increased objectification since women's liberation and

gay liberation have started to erode the cultural dominance of heterosexual men (Dyer, 1992; Buchbinder, 2004; Siibak, 2010; Manago, 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Van Doorn, 2010). These alternate modes of perception eroded the ubiquitous dominance of the male gaze. Ervin (2011) notes that by the end of the 20th century the figure of the metrosexual signaled to straight men that they would need to think more about their appearance in ways traditionally considered feminine if they wanted to keep their status. The act of gazing at the male body is arguably a way to resist normative power structures that privilege straight men. Rohlinger uses this as a point of departure to analyze the presentation of sexualized masculinity. According to her study, advertisers try to attract a gay male audience through multiple modes of presentation. These attempts represent an elasticity to the masculine ideal that bleed from advertising iconography into normative US culture.

These attempts to gain attention through male imagery are carried into the often visually fecund online world. As Siibak (2009, 2010) has noted, the depiction of sexualized masculinity is evident in many social media sites. In posting images of themselves, men potentially undermine their subjectivity and therefore their masculinity by presenting themselves as objects (Dyer, 1992; Gill et al. 2005). Importantly, these depictions recall the typical presentation of sexualized women (Siibak, 2010; Manago, 2013). Some masculine postures are feminized to make more favorable to viewers (Siibak, 2010; Manago, 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Such eroticized presentations reveal dynamic masculinity that includes objectivization that is hard to reconcile with the presumptive agency of hegemonic masculinity. Yet on social media sites, some straight men demonstrate a desire to be looked at in order to capture the interest of friends and followers. Although Caruso and Roberts (2018) suggest that utilizing feminine language can destigmatize the adoption of concepts associated with femininity, their study focuses on a Tumblr blog that incorporates straight, Queer, and Transmasculine participants. The heterogeneous subject of their study allows them to explore "inclusive masculinities", but they acknowledge this theory does not replace hegemonic

masculinity theory. Being gazed at might objectify straight men; however, their desire to be seen makes the public display of these "pictures task-oriented" and competitive, which are perceived as masculine traits (Haferkamp et al., 2012). Additionally, men are able to promote their own uniqueness and align themselves with the hegemonic male ideal of independence (Magnuson & Dundes, 2008; Strano, 2008). However, they must establish that despite appearing attractive they must not seem vain. Vanity is seen as something feminine that needs to be disavowed. (Gill et al., 2005).

In her case study of how a young college-age heterosexual man portrayed himself on MySpace, Manago (2013) explores one strategy men use to realign themselves to the hegemonic norm after adopting a seemingly feminized position. Manago's (2013) findings indicate that irony is another adaptive strategy for protecting the masculinity. Manago contends that "irony allows men to disavow associations with all things feminine, thus a hegemonic status quo is maintained even as men adopt practices associated with femininity." These practices include visually presenting the self in ways that appear sexualized and permit objectification. Additionally, Manago explains that men can use irony to explicitly "avoid appearing sexist or misogynistic" or homophobic. Similarly, Niels Van Doorn (2010) studies the way gender affects networked interactions on MySpace. He pulls from the text, images and videos users posted on their profiles to examine the way online performativity can transgress the heteronormative gender binary. Van Doorn argues that irony can be used to strengthen relationships between group members. He looks at sexually explicit content as a way in which peers can show affection. In the Dutch social group, Van Doorn examined, such ruptures of conventional heteronormative behavior are accompanied by humor that served to desexualize images. Irony not only creates distance between masculine performance and femininity, but it helps reestablish a system of male dominance. Essentially, an ironic posture is used to invalidate feminine characteristics (Siibak. 2009, 2010; Kendall. 2000; Van Doorn. 2010; Manago. 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel. 2013). Male irony can also be used to distance men from any

communication that might reveal too much personal information (Van Doorn, 2010; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Gill et al., 2005). Manago (2013) and Van Doorn (2010) argue that ironic representations explicitly sidestep sexism and homophobia while they tacitly reassert heterosexism and gender normativity.

Findings
Selfo: Resisting the Feminine

In posting self-portraits, men position themselves to appear attractive while asserting their masculinity. One way to do this is by distancing themselves from what they perceive as feminine. Tension is created because viewers can be more easily attracted to feminized positions that men adopt (Siibak,2010; Manago, 2013; De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). One strategy for dealing with potential feminization is for bloggers to ironically associate themselves with the feminine to create a distance between what they perceive to be as truly feminine and their performance of masculinity (Manago, 2013; Siibak, 2010; Kendall, 2000).

In one evocative photo, blogger *AVICIL* (avicil.tk) openly rejects the perception of his portrayal as feminine. The image itself is nothing extraordinary in the context of his images. Standing outside on a sunny day, he smiles wryly and looks directly at the camera. This facial expression accentuates his humor (not his attractiveness.) The label "Haircut selfie. Getting ready for a senior photoshoot" emphasizes his awareness of his appearance for the image. Many of the blogger's photos are devoted to his appearance. Yet two of the tags for this image read #Selfie sounds too girlie, #lets call it a selfo. They open a dialogue that addresses a masculine concern.

Many of *Avicil*'s images deal with his hair or his prettiness. The title of this image indicates this too could be read as vain since he is not only displaying himself, but he is focused on his surface appearance, a stereotypically feminine trait. *Avicil* seems aware of perceptions of vanity associated with femininity. A similar concern manifested in early

Men's fashion magazines. In the essay "Genealogies of Masculinity" from the anthology *Masculinity and Men's Lifestyle Magazines*, Rosalind Gill (2003) explains that men presented in public images are vulnerable to the viewers' potentially sexualizing gaze, risking rupture of their heterosexual and masculine image.

As heterosexual men post images of themselves on Tumblr, they present themselves as objects to be gazed at and risk rupture of their masculinity. *Avicil's* attempt to rename the selfie, the more masculine sounding selfo represents an attempt to separate the masculine and feminine acts of presentation. He acknowledges that his masculinity may be vulnerable through his public, passive display of image. But he also asserts that his public display of identity is distinctly not feminine.

In contrast to the verbal rejection of femininity, other bloggers use visual cues to signal distance. One such blogger is *kwl dude x* (http://it0uchkids.tumblr.com). In an untitled photo posted in February 2013, he sits alone in a sparse room. It is decorated with a modularly constructed wardrobe and dresser. The wardrobe has been pushed into the corner. A screen sits on the dresser. The unintentional effect of these rectangular objects is to create a step pattern that roughly divides the space diagonally. This effect emphasizes the manufactured and functional qualities of this environment. The starkness of the image is in keeping with Siibak (2009) who observed that young women would more often take pictures of themselves in beautiful settings, perhaps to give a better glimpse of their personality. Men, in contrast, are more likely to take images of themselves that describe their lifestyle.

*kwl dude x'*s state of undress could be seen as another gesture that risks the rupture of his masculinity. In the images reviewed for this study, the overwhelming majority (90.21%) showed subjects who were clothed. Subjects were classified as having no clothes are depicted in only 7.06% of the images. But nothing in these images could be read as explicit. When bloggers were naked, the frame was used to crop the image so no genitals could be seen. In only 2.71% of the images were the bloggers partially clothed—taking off a shirt after a long day at work or

while lying in the sun poolside. The infrequency in which men are in any sense of undress indicates resistance to being so obviously sexualized. Yet those users who embrace near-nudity may be acting in keeping with Siibak's (2009) assertion that young men who look "nice and sexy" attract more attention.

Despite the potential objectification the blogger faces, *kwl dude x* engages in other strategies that show a tacit rejection of the feminine. Goffman (1979) identifies a cant to the head and an inviting smile with feminine postures. The blogger holds his head in a way contrary to typical feminine poses. His head faces directly towards the camera, and he does not smile. These small gestures help create distance between the blogger and femininity.

Gay Porn: Ironic Sexuality

These straight male bloggers frequently present themselves as being tolerant of Queer people. However, they assert their heterosexuality, so viewers do not interpret their tolerance and performances as gay. One particularly illustrative assertion appears on *AVICIL*'s FAQ page. In response to a question about his sexuality, he says, "Everyone always asks this question, so for the millionth time, yes I am straight. I am not bi, nor transexual [sic]. I support gays 100% in marriage, but I know that I will never be gay because I am always attracted to girls." His claim to tolerate LGBT rights is reiterated throughout his blog, but he is adamant about asserting his heterosexuality. In part, the pairing of tolerance for Queer people and the insistence of heterosexuality can be seen as an attempt to align masculinity to the gender norm. Connell (1995) asserts "Oppression positions homosexual masculinities at the bottom of a gender hierarchy among men. Gayness, in patriarchal ideology, is the repository of whatever is symbolically expelled from hegemonic masculinity." If the bloggers are perceived as gay, they risk losing the cultural capital associated with being perceived as heterosexual and masculine. One strategy for diminishing this risk is to use humor to reaffirm masculinity.

Humor can manifest either as an ironic pose or by making jokes (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013; Van Doorn, 2010; Gill et al., 2005).

Of course, presenting the self in an attractive way is a strategy for garnering attention. As previously stated, this attention lends itself to both potential feminization and homoeroticization (because men offer themselves as objects to be gazed at.) Bloggers can give these images ironic titles or hashtags to defuse the risk of objectification. *Tomorrow's Worth Today* (hesnevercomingback.tumblr.com) holds this tension when he tags his posts #gay porn or # reallllllly gay porn. He is an attractive young man—dark eyes, curly hair, an expressive face that seems to easily smile. The fully clothed blogger positions his body in the center frame and gazes directly into the camera. The cant of his head may suggest submission (Goffman 1979), but nothing in his selfies is sexual. These tags call attention to the fact that the image is neither pornographic nor gay.

Throughout his blog, *Tomorrow's Worth Today* insists on an ironic masculine stance. His curser is an orange silhouette of a bearded man with glasses (it is the clichéd late '00s hipster.) This icon of a man who flaunts his secondary sexual characteristics has become more a symbol for affected masculinity—with more in common with the 1970s gay Clone Culture than the traditional rugged masculinity. In his FAQ, he answers the question about his sexuality by saying "Dicks make me laugh too much." He asserts his heterosexuality by expressing the untenable nature of homosexuality.

The blogger *sad cool dude* also uses a heavy-handed homoerotic irony to reaffirm his heterosexuality. His short biographical statement reads: "every night when my gf strokes my peanus i laugh at her cause lol shes touchin a dudewang, thats so gay. "your gay" i say to her "your literally so gay, touchin mandong. thats what gay dudes do." haha. ive been single for 3 years." He conflates the eroticization of the male body with homoeroticism. He equates any attraction to a man as being gay. He casts his girlfriend as a gay man then reveals that he is no longer sexually active. For this blogger, being outside of a relationship is superior to

engaging in what could be perceived as a gay, being desired as a man by anyone even a woman.

Furthering his ironic pose, *Tomorrow's Worth Today* has a page devoted to the frontman Bertand Poncet of the French band Chunk, No Captain Chunk!. The page is labeled My Hot Boyfriend. Most of the images of the singer have been reblogged, but he has tagged these images #boyfriend. In at least one he has tagged it #I have a boner now. The image with this tag—an animated gif of the singer emphatically pointing to his temples and then to the camera—is energetic. The blogger conflates an emotional resonance with erotic attraction in a comical way. The ironic association of connection with homosexuality hearkens to the hegemonic masculine trait of lacking concern (Halberstam, 1998) or emotional depth. Basically, to be desirable or be aesthetically interested in a man is suspect. Wrapping these ideas in irony allows the blogger to continue his alignment with hegemonic masculinity.

Another blogger who deals with the line between homoeroticism and homophobia is *Jordan Bradford* (still-the-king.tumblr.com). In a video, he discusses his dreams for the future. This young Welsh man explains that he would like to move to New York City and become a model. Many of his images conspicuously draw on the semiotics of advertisements with pseudo-artistic flourishes—black and white tones, unique locales, a focus on his apparel. Yet other images are more informal. In one selfie, he appears in a room, leaning towards the camera. He looks directly at the image and assumes a dominant position. This subtle masculine aggression is complicated because he is not wearing a shirt. Besides his face and neck, only his bare shoulders can be seen, suggesting a more revealing intimacy than in his other images. Essentially, he postures in a masculine way while at the same time offering himself as an object for contemplation in a similar gesture to *kwl dude x*.

The tension between his alignment to hegemonic masculinity and the desire to be a model is also present on his FAQ page. On which, he

says, "I am straight :)." The smiley emoticon reflects a general ironic, and humorous tone. It almost suggests that any misreading of his sexuality is clearly a mistake worthy of laughter. His response to the question of whether he will promote the blog of his followers reveals a homophobic undertone. He writes, "Not even if you suck my dick." This emphatic rejection casts his followers in a passive sexual position. "Suck my dick" resonates with the slur *cocksucker*, a term that bears a connotation of homosexuality. *Jordan Bradford*'s homophobic vehemence carries with it a tone of defensiveness as well as humor. This gesture helps insulate the masculinity of a blogger who is invested in being objectified (not only does he post images of himself by he expresses his desire to be a male model.)

Other bloggers embed their irony in their blog name or url. *Greasy, Heterosexual, Walt Whitman* utilizes an ironic positioning of a gay reference since Walt Whitman is widely acknowledged to have acted on same-sex attractions. In adopting this moniker, the blogger both engages in an ironic gay gesture as well as an identification with a clearly heterosexual character. *kwl dude X* (http://it0uchkids.tumblr.com) uses a similar strategy with his insouciantly named url. The assertion "I touch kids" although not explicitly referencing homosexual behavior does point toward deviant sexuality framed in humor.

Conclusion

In *The Atrocity Exhibition*, J. G. Ballard (1969/2002) critiques the mass media environment that is fractured and fractures the psyche of its inhabitants. The male protagonist shifts his name and identity as he trips his way from one condensed experimental narrative to the next. Part of this work of fiction imagines global conflict in terms of conflations of bodies, images, and apocalyptic environments. The prescient ideas in this work seem as relevant today when faced with the prospect of engaging with social media that requires a change in thinking about gender performance and identity. For straight men, the conflict takes the form of a precarious performance of masculinity. To be

relevant actors on social media sites, they must attract attention often in such ways that threaten their masculinity.

Most social media sites require users to navigate a collapsing backstage and front stage. In operating in this sphere of social interaction, straight men who use selfies risk the inviolable appearance of their masculinity. Through selfies, straight men make visual appeals for attention. They are complicit in objectifying themselves in ways that could potentially be read as feminine or homoerotic. In order to maintain their alignment to hegemonic masculinity, men actively deny the feminine and ironically acknowledge homoerotic content to create psychic distance from it. These strategies reveal a fuller picture of how straight men adapt and transfer the cultural capital of masculinity in to the online environment.

The strategies that men use to realign their masculinity to the hegemonic norm suggest that the performance of heterosexual masculinity offers the performers social benefits and privileges. In order to protect these, men must adapt to new situations while reasserting the older social relations (dominance over women and gay/Queer men.) The main implication for this study is that power structures adapt to new situations; gender imbalances in those power structures are reasserted even in seemingly fluid environments. Each of these strategies is essentially a way to maintain heteropatriarchy in cyberspace.

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