

# Divergent Masculinities: A Visual Rhetoric Study of Masculinity on Tumblr

A dissertation by

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## Declaration

I, Yoshen Nair, declare that this dissertation is my original work. It has never been presented anywhere else for any purpose. All sentences or passages quoted in this dissertation from other people's work have been specifically acknowledged by clear cross-referencing to author, work and page(s). Images captured off of the Tumblr Social Network Site for sampling and analytical purposes (recorded in the appendices) fall within fair use of Tumblr's Terms and Conditions. All images used as part of the sampling from Tumblr have been collated as a corpus available on Tumblr at:

*<http://divergentmasculinities.tumblr.com/>* with direct links to their originators.

Any illustrations which are not the work of the author of this dissertation, have been specifically acknowledged. I understand that failure to do this amounts to plagiarism and will be considered grounds for failure in this dissertation.

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## **Abstract**

This study is motivated by the need for visual communication designers or graphic designers to research changes in social identity that emerge on social media. Visual communication designers must deal with transforming and proliferating social identities in order to communicate effectively with their audiences. Social media are regarded in the study as highly influential on social identity changes. This study deals with divergent masculinities as an exemplar of these social identity changes, on the social media site Tumblr. To examine divergent masculinities, the study adopts a visual rhetoric perspective on Tumblr as one social media site of masculinity diversification.

The literature review draws together social media perspectives with theoretical themes of reflexive social identity, gender, and fashion as the visual representation of masculinity. The resulting theoretical integration yields two guiding visual rhetoric concepts that inform inquiry into masculinity diversification on Tumblr: performativity and reflexivity.

A Tumblr research setting is then demarcated by observing how the Social Network Site facilitates rhetor performativity of 'fashioned' masculine image posts, and audience reflexivity to these image posts. The roles of rhetor and audience are found to switch in the transaction of visual rhetoric, where image posts are audienceed and further shared from one Tumblr user wall display to another. Meta-data on Tumblr makes extensive user activity around particular images evident, so that significant indications of diverging masculinities can be discerned.

An analytical sampling strategy is then created by combining quantitative Tumblr meta-data with the theoretical themes of fashioned masculine performativity and reflexivity. This leveraged functional/theoretical analytical sampling strategy allows diversifying masculinities to be systematically identified. Five diverging masculinities are illustrated. These are regarded as exemplars of an ongoing process of masculinity diversification.

It is suggested that the research design and methodology of the study can be used to investigate other forms of changing social identity besides masculinity. This is important for visual communication designers, who need to monitor changing social identity mores and their visual expression on social media.



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# Certificate of editing

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Dear Mr Nair,

Thank you for the opportunity to edit your master's dissertation:

***Diverging Masculinities: A visual rhetoric study of masculinity on social media***

We are pleased to advise you that we have completed the necessary editing work on your dissertation in preparation for submission. We confirm that the English language usage is of an acceptable academic standard, and that your references appear to conform with the required stylistic convention.

Should you have any queries, or require us to do any further work, please don't hesitate to contact us.

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# **Glossary of Social Media Terms**

## **Activity Stream/Newsfeed:**

Most commonly when logging on to a Social Network Site, a user is greeted with a series of content arranged either chronologically, or by popularity. This content is known as an activity stream and is updated in real time to reflect any activity on the Social Network Site that is relevant to the user (Beckingham 2015). Content is placed in a user's activity stream by the Social Network Site, based on what content that user regularly searches for, that user's interests - detailed on the user's profile- as well as content shared or uploaded by other users who interact with or are followed by the user.

## **Blog:**

Short for Web Log (Beckingham 2015) , a blog is any form of website that consists of individual entries of content displayed chronologically, from most recent to oldest. Most Social Network Sites function as extremely user-friendly blogs, consisting of inter-related modules that all facilitate the recall and dissemination of these individual content entries or posts. To blog content, is to upload the content onto a Social Network Site or blogging site in the form of a post (Beckingham 2015).

## **Comment:**

Comments are public responses to user content on social media (Beckingham 2015). Comments are a feature intrinsic to most Social Network Sites. They are usually implemented as an interface alongside the content being displayed. Within the comments section, users are afforded the option to express opinions on the content that is being displayed.

## **Content:**

Content describes an individual piece of media or artefact that is uploaded onto a Social Network Site. Content can take the form of a piece of text, audio, video or image (Beckingham 2015). Certain Social Network Sites specialize in the handling of specific content such as images or video content.

**Follow:**

Social media users can 'follow' each other. In doing so, one user subscribes to the content of another (Beckingham 2015). Any important activity that occurs on a user's profile, will be shared into the activity streams of those who follow them.

**Hashtags:**

Hashtags are meta-data attached to content on social media that is used to categorise and sort the content on the Social Network Site's internal database. Hashtags are used to better sort, categorise and recall public data on Social Network Sites. Fontein (2016) explains that Hashtags first emerged on Twitter as a user-created phenomenon and are now used on almost every other Social Network Site.

**IRL (In Real Life)**

In Real Life (IRL) refers to any content, information or mention of an individual user's existing identity offline and outside a Social Network Site. This is specifically pertinent to users who maintain separate identities for themselves on social media that are starkly different to the identities that they maintain in their 'real' everyday life. Calling offline interaction 'real' has been criticised as a misnomer by many theorists, deeming online interaction as 'unreal' and thus meaningless. Many individuals who communicate via the Internet consider the effects of online interaction just as impactful as those one might encounter in a face-to-face scenario (Wood and Smith 2004: 40). The term, however, has been accepted in scholarly literature as a means of differentiating between human interaction that occurs without the aid of computer mediation from that which occurs online (Wood and Smith 2004: 40).

**Like:**

A 'like' button or 'like' option, is a feature intrinsic to many social media Social Network Sites that allows users to express that they like, enjoy or support certain content (Fontein 2016). "The simple act of pressing a "like" button on a social media site can speak volumes about a user's preferences, relationships and behavioural patterns" (Koons 2016:1). Media Social Network Sites that

implement 'like buttons' usually display the number of users who have liked each content. Using the 'like' button attached to content on a Social Network Site, will add your input to a real-time numerical counter displaying how many other users have liked the content as well. 'Likes' can be considered a form of meta-data. The number of likes that content accrues, constantly changes.

**Meta-data:**

Within the context of social media meta-data refers to all the data attributed to a piece of social media content (Barrero 2017). This includes the content's author, the amount of likes, shares and comments attributed to the content. Certain meta-data are displayed along with the content (such as 'likes', hashtags and 'reblogs').

**Notes:**

Notes are a type of meta-data that is unique to the Tumblr Social Network Site. They function as a metric that represents the sum of all 'likes' and 'reblogs' relating to the content that it is linked to.

**Profile:**

A social media profile is a series of web pages on a Social Network Site that contains all the information that a user has uploaded about onto the Social Network Site (Beckingham 2015). It contains public information that the user can customize (such as personal biographies, images and video). Users can control the privacy of their profiles by limiting how and what other users see when attempting to access each other's profiles.

**Reblog:**

Reblogging is a feature offered on Tumblr that functions identically to the 'share' option on other Social Network Sites. As such it allows a user to publicly and directly share content to their social media profile (Beckingham 2015). Essentially, a user who reblogs content, takes ownership of an iteration of that content on the Social Network Site. The process of reblogging thus duplicates the content on the Social Network Site and further disseminates it.

**Search:**

The search functionality is now pervasive throughout the internet. A search bar appears on almost every page on most social media Social Network Sites and allows users to search for content on a Social Network Site by inputting strings of keywords.

**Search Engine:**

The search functionality described above, is based on using a search engine that is integrated into the Social Network Site. The search engine essentially indexes all content on the Social Network Site based on hashtags and other meta-data ascribed to content. Users can recall and access content by inputting keywords into the search engine. Search engines are becoming increasingly sophisticated, able to automatically suggest content based on minimal input from the user. This will be discussed in detail later in the dissertation.

**Search History:**

A user's search history is a list of keywords that the user has previously input into the search engine. Usually this is linked to the user's profile. This list is used by the search engine to better optimize future searches based on what the user has searched for before. For instance, if a user has previously searched for the 'Do It Yourself Tips' on the search engine, and later inputs the key word 'gardening', the search engine will potentially refine its search for gardening content and suggest 'do it yourself gardening tips' as its search result. A user's search history can also be used to optimise the searches of other users that share similar profiles and interests.

**Share:**

Sharing is a feature that is implemented on most Social Network Sites that allows a user to disseminate content across the Social Network Site in various ways (Beckingham 2015). By sharing the content, an individual viewing or interacting with content on a Social Network Site can make that content available to other users on the Social Network Site.

**Social Media Platform:**

A framework or content management system that runs software and presents social media information (Beckingham 2015). Social Media Platforms function as interactive social environments through which users can interact with each other.

**Social Network Site:**

Social Network Sites are websites or web based services that allow users to create public or semi-public profiles within a bound system and develop relationships with other users of the website through user interaction (Liu and Ying 2010). The term has become analogous with Social Media Platform.

**Tag (verb):**

Tagging is the act of assigning a hashtag or keyword to content (Fontein 2016) on a Social Network Site. Tagging can also refer to the act of sharing content with another user by mentioning their name in a comment attached to the content, thus linking the new user to the content.

**Tumblr wall:**

For the sake of this study, a 'Tumblr wall' is used to describe the public face or surface of an individual user's Tumblr profile. It is a montage of content ranging from personal biographical details to images and media content that have been uploaded or reblogged by that user. The Tumblr wall functions as a space where other users can interact with an individual's content by commenting, liking, sharing and reblogging content directly from that individual's wall.

**User-name:**

A self-prescribed name that a user goes by when using a Social Network Site. A user-name can be that individual's true name (the name that they use IRL – in real life) or a name specifically created for use on one or many online Social Network Sites. The user-name serves as a foundation for an individual's identity online (Wood and Smith 2004). Beginning with a user name, an individual can create an identity online that mirrors their real offline interactions and identity, or

completely divorces from their real-world presence and functions as a separate identity.

# **Chapter 1: Introducing the study**

## **1.1 Circumstances surrounding the study**

We live in what Giddens (2013) describes as a late modern society defined by choice. Within this society people are encouraged to create and edit their own identities (Giddens 2013) and social media provides the tools to do so. Visual depictions that announce changing social identities are both actively and passively communicated through media such as magazines, film, books and advertising. Gauntlett (2008), explains that this construction and editing of an individual's identity has for some time been evidenced by the popularity of 'self-help' books. Individuals are presented, in books and magazines, with social identity cues that they can literally pick off a shelf, read, and incorporate into their own identities (Gauntlett 2008).

The advent of digital communication via Social Network Sites has provided far more choice with regard to how identities are constructed than any single book shelf could. The internet – specifically, social media – has become increasingly influential in how people relate to the world around them (Sparke 2011). Certain Social Network Sites such as Facebook, Tumblr and Instagram have been designed to depict and communicate individual idealised lifestyles and identities to others. Social Network Sites such as Tumblr function as unique repositories of global content comprising an inexhaustible array of subject matter. These sites allow people to instantly access different 'lifestyles' (Giddens 2013) in the form of user-generated content.

As facilitator and mediator of social interactions around content, Social Network Sites have thus created a new paradigm for how we communicate (Chan 2009). Many contain systems that are complex enough to handle and document sophisticated social interactions amongst millions of users. These sites serve as everything from a scrapbook or online journal where users can document events in their lives, to an international hobbies club where users from around the world can discuss similar interests. An individual can instantly communicate

ideas to millions of people, whilst on the same site groups of like-minded people can communicate anonymously in closed communities; their group identity is defined by the similar content that they interact with (Wood and Smith 2004:189). In this sense, Social Network Sites function as digital, interconnected, global communities (Wood and Smith 2004).

Social identities within communities 'in real life' are developed through a complex dialectic between society and the individual (Butler 1990). Aspects of an individual's identity are formed as a means of navigating society's social pressures. Individuals mimic the social behaviours of others within that society as a means of managing complex power dynamics (Butler 1990). In doing so, those social behaviours are replicated and re-enacted within the society. This repetition of social behaviours leads to those behaviours being entrenched and established as normative social identities within the society.

Social identities within online social media communities are built and expressed similarly to those in the real world (Wood and Smith 2004). However, on social media, norms are potentially built through user interaction with specific content which represents real-world equivalents. For example, political partisanship – like gender – is considered an integral aspect of social identity (Greene 2004). Interacting with protest imagery can be seen as a real-world equivalent to attending a protest. Harris (2018) alludes to this in her commentary on a 2018 graphic design exhibition showcasing political art alongside equally influential social media posts and online discussions around those artworks. Similarly, interacting with fashion related imagery can be seen as an online equivalent of the dress behaviours represented in that content in the real world. As Sparke (2011:1) puts it, "we are defined by what we share". Essentially, on Social Network Sites people express how they relate to the world around them through the ideas and content that they interact with.

Social Network Sites have become a visual medium (Grzybowski 2018) for users to express themselves. Harris (2018) highlights the important role graphic designers now play in shaping social identities in an "image obsessed" social media world (Harris 2018:1). Social Network Sites have created new channels



through which graphic designers can particularise ideas, visually ideas to wide audiences (Harris 2018). Understanding and predicting users' social interactions with content on digital platforms is now regarded as part of the field of visual communication design (Andrew 2010). New fields of digital, visual-communication design have emerged, such as front-end user-interface design and content-management system design (Andrew 2010). These have all become practices closely linked to the realm of graphic design (McKay 2013) in that they relate to the way people receive and interact with visual messages online.

How people visually communicate their social identity as well as how Social Network Sites affect the visual communication of social identity thus becomes increasingly important to the practice of visual-communication design. Furthermore, the effect interaction on Social Network Sites potentially has on hosted visual content poses new problems and opportunities for designers who have limited control over how their visual messages are interpreted or used after they have been shared on social media. The need for visual-content creators to better understand how visual messages are manipulated, published and disseminated on Social Network Sites is then evident.

## **1.2 Scope of the study**

This study explores the visual rhetorical processes at play on Tumblr, that influence the diversification of masculine identity with implications for inquiry into other aspects of social identity. This study focusses on the visual rhetorical mechanisms through which masculinities as aspects of gendered social identity diverge on social media. It is important to note that although the focus of this study is on divergent masculinities, it is not within its scope to arrive at hard and fast categories of new masculinities. Explicit masculinities do surface as a result of this study (covered in Chapter 5); however, they serve as exemplars, illustrating the divergence of masculinity as a constant process on social media.

Specifically, this study seeks to explore a method of digital rhetorical analysis rather than conducting an analysis per se. This study is delimited to a single

Social Network Site, and masculinity as an aspect of gendered social identity. However, it could be used as a basis from which a methodology for expanded visual communication design and digital scholarship within the realm of social identity could be generated.

### **1.2.1 Delimiting social media to a single Social Network Site**

While each Social Network Site has its own nuances and functionalities, certain features and functionalities are standard across most Social Network Sites; these include the 'like', 'reblog/share' and 'posting' functionality. In delimiting the study to a single social network, the 'Tumblr' platform has been selected as, in addition to these common Social Network Site features, it exhibits characteristics that make it suitable for visual rhetoric research around divergent social identities.

Tumblr is a Social Network Site designed to allow users to publish visual content. On Tumblr, users collect 'bits of information to make a meaningful whole' (Shorey 2015:4) on a Tumblr wall. Images are often lifted out of their original context and reassembled, like a collage, next to other decontextualized images on a user's Tumblr wall. It is this core feature in allowing users to curate their content visually that Shorey (2015) attributes to Tumblr's success. As the name implies viewers of a Tumblr wall move through visual content "quickly and easily – each picture 'tumbling' the user to the next" (Shorey 2015:4) moving the user through the Social Network Site.

As a visual Social Network Site, Tumblr was designed to allow for meaningful visual content to "diffuse easily through the system" (Shorey 2015:5). The ease with which visual content can be uploaded or reblogged – and thus "spread" – is another central feature that has made Tumblr extremely popular (Shorey 2015:5). Reblogs of visual content often rank in the thousands. Additionally, Tumblr's popularity is due, in large part, to how easy it is to anonymously create and curate content (Shorey 2015). It is far easier on Tumblr for a user to function anonymously compared to other Social Network Sites.

As a primarily a visual Social Network Site within which users can function anonymously, Tumblr makes for an ideal research setting for a visual rhetoric study that focuses on the creation of diverging masculinities

- As a site that is used primarily for visual communication, research can be conducted into how users create their gendered identities purely through visual content.
- The idea of anonymity is important for a study on diverging social identities. Individuals are more likely to express aspects of themselves that do not align with normative social identities if they can do so anonymously (Foucault *et al.* 1988).

### **1.2.2 Delimiting social identity to masculinity using fashion**

Preliminary investigations on Tumblr show that fashion imagery and iconography are ubiquitous across this Social Network Site. Tumblr is widely used by fashion and lifestyle bloggers to visually communicate their ideas (Schiffer 2017). Established fashion theory literature further points to fashion as an inevitably gendered visual expression of social identity (Kaiser 1997); this is in line with Butler's (1990) argument that social identity is inevitably gendered. In light of this, the study focuses on the diversification of masculine gender as an aspect of constructed social identity on Tumblr. Fashion is used as a lens to further delimit the study to make explicit visual expressions of gendered social identity.

Although gendered social identity is potentially performed across a spectrum of media (Butler 1990), this study focuses on 'masculinity'. Fry (2009) points out that with women's studies being a fashionable topic throughout the early 20<sup>th</sup> century masculinity had, for the most part, been marginalised as a non-issue by the academic world. Although masculinity studies have increased exponentially in recent years, Light argues that there remains a need to study masculinity, especially in relation to how digital technologies such as Social Network Sites affect masculinity (Light 2014).

### **1.3 The Importance of the study**

Knowing how people think about certain social identity constructions provides visual communicators with insight into how better to create and communicate visual messages that relate to those social identities. This study hopes to suggest new ways in which aspects of social identity can be researched on social media in order to improve the efficacy of visual communication design. Understanding how aspects of social identity are diverging as a result of social media is important for visual communicators seeking to target specific audiences. This is especially relevant considering the exponential rise of visual social media as a method of communication (Walter 2012). The medium affords Social Network Site users myriad tools and functionalities to better visually communicate to a global audience, through specific groups of people with whom the messages resonate.

Social media is a relatively new medium through which graphic designers, as visual communication practitioners, can create and disseminate new visual content. Like a painter approaching a blank canvas, visual communicators have become enamoured with the idea of creating content on social media. However, new Social Network Sites are inherently nuanced (Clampitt 2017), potentially affecting what and how visual content is communicated. This shift within the practice of visual communication design toward creating content for social media, facilitated by this new medium, has meant that comparatively little time or energy has been spent considering the aftermath of creation. This study investigates new ways in which graphic designers can better explore the rhetorical effects of their own creations in relation to how people use them to construct and visually communicate aspects of their own social identity.

The need visual rhetoric-focused studies on social media is evident. Martin (2016) explains that visual thinking has become an integral aspect of social media users cognition. The demand for visual content on social media by users has urged content marketers, including visual communication design

practitioners, to consider visual rhetoric as an important tool to better communicate ideas to particularised audiences on Social Network Sites.

This study explores how visual content could potentially be further ‘designed’ by social-media users via the site’s functionality to communicate new meaning relating to social identity. By showing how new meaning is created on social media through visual rhetoric - how an image persuades an audience to interpret a particular meaning (Foss 2004) – this study highlights that graphic designers could potentially have limited control over how messages they create are interpreted by varying audiences. To explore these implications more fully, this study considers:

- social media users’ re-appropriation and dissemination of visual content in relation to their social identity;
- the technology and functionality that Social Network Sites afford users, allowing them to re-appropriate, manipulate and further disseminate visual content;
- the rhetorical effects that re-appropriation and manipulation of visual content, as a result of social media sharing, has on the visual content;
- how these processes of re-appropriation and manipulation of visual content, afforded by Social Network Sites, potentially create new diverging meanings in relation to aspects of social identity, in particular gender.

#### **1.4 Research questions addressed throughout this study**

As a means of exploring the themes discussed in section 1.2, within the parameters described in section 1.3, the study aims to surface divergent masculinities, evident on Tumblr, through visual rhetoric. In Chapter 2, specific research questions arise from a review of literature surrounding the theoretical concerns of the study. These questions are addressed individually within each

chapter of the study, each building on the preceding question to further the argument of the study – that masculinities as aspects of social identity constantly diversify as a result of visual rhetoric mechanisms at play on Social Network Sites.

The research questions formulated in Chapter 2 in response to the theoretical considerations and addressed in subsequent Chapters, are:

1. *How is masculine identity expressed and understood through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?* Chapter 3 contributes to answering this question by delineating the masculinity visual rhetoric research setting within Tumblr's overall environment, examining the ways in which Tumblr users perform and reflexively respond to visual masculinity rhetoric.
2. *How do masculinities as aspects of social identity diverge through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?* By developing and implementing an analytical sampling strategy, Chapters 4 and 5 address this second research question.
3. *What is the broader significance, for visual communication design, of visual rhetoric on Tumblr that evidences divergent masculinity?* This question concerns the importance of the study to the visual-communication design industry and is addressed in the concluding section of Chapter 5 by drawing upon insights gained throughout the study.

Figure 1 (see page 10) relates these research questions to the argument of the study.

### **1.5 Plotting the argument across the study**

This study deals with emergent phenomena and the research design has similarly evolved in accordance with this social media research exigency. As discussed in section 1.4, the study argues that masculinities constantly diverge

as a result of visual rhetorical mechanisms at play on social media. Chapter 2 integrates as main themes the social media, social identity, gender and visual rhetoric literature that forms the theoretical foundation of this study. In more detail, the chapter examines:

- Visual Rhetoric
- Masculinity as gendered performance of identity
- Fashion as the visual expression of gender performance and gender reflexivity
- Masculine identity as gender reflexivity
- Social media

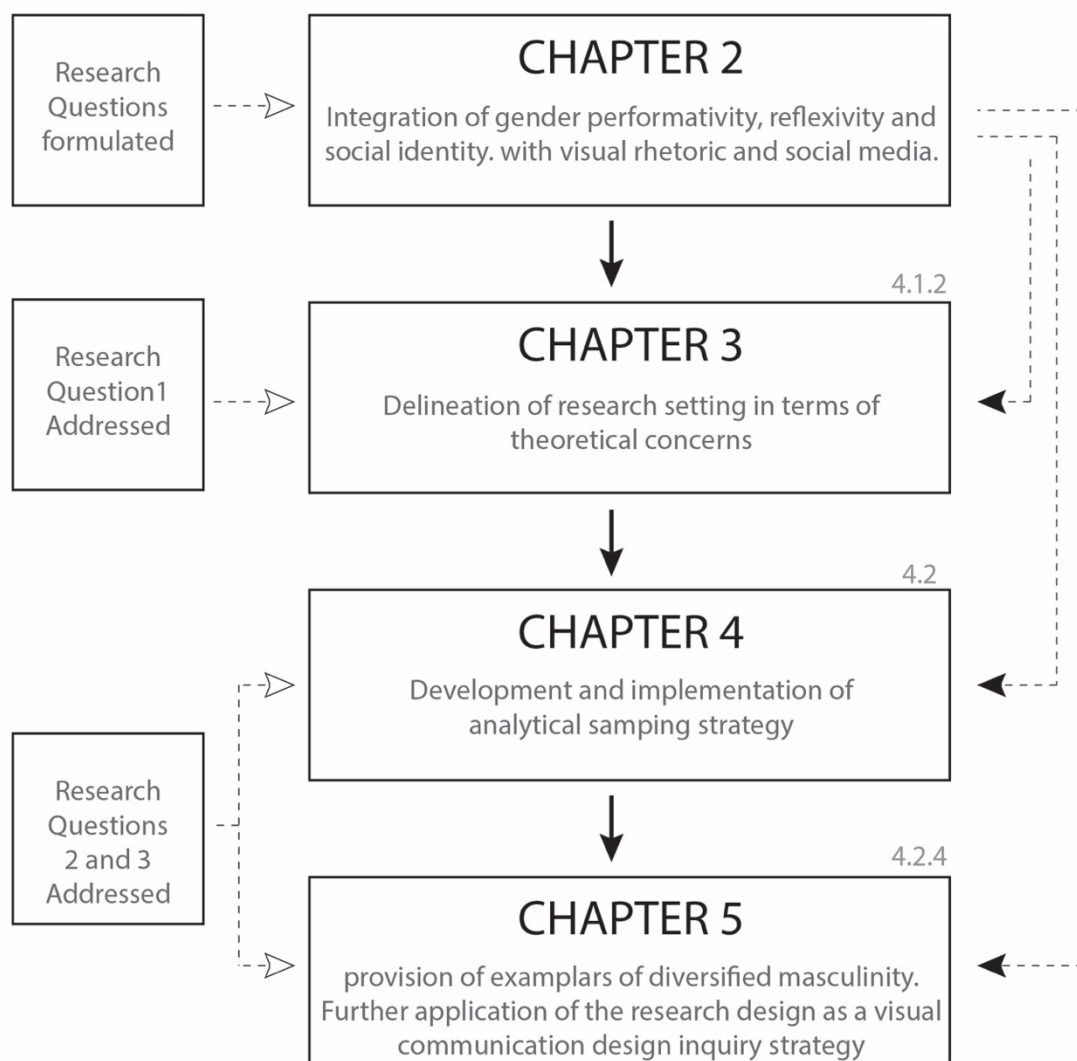
The discussion in Chapter 2 positions gender as an aspect of social identity. Specifically, performativity and reflexivity as concepts that underpin the construction of gender and social identity are used in conjunction with theory on visual rhetoric to provide understanding of visual rhetoric as it applies to the construction of gender on Social Network Sites. Fashion theory then extends the visual legibility of performative and reflexive gender interactions on social media.

Chapter 3 delineates the research setting in terms of the theoretical concerns discussed in Chapter 2. The chapter first investigates how masculine identity might be negotiated and transacted through visual rhetoric on Tumblr. Then theoretical concerns raised in Chapter Two are considered as they apply to functionality afforded to users on Tumblr. Spaces and processes of identity performance and reflexivity within Tumblr are outlined as a means of understanding how users performatively create and reflexively edit their masculinity.

Chapter 4 develops a methodological strategy deriving from the theoretical /digital interplay offered in Chapter 3. An analytical sampling strategy is developed that accommodates the integrated theoretical perspective of the

study (Chapter 2) with Tumblr social media affordances, for example, the digital tools that enable interacting with others online (Chapter 4).

Finally, Chapter 5 recounts the implementation of the analytical sampling strategy developed Chapter 4. Chapter 5 offers exemplars of diverging masculinities, as research findings. This chapter then reflects on the significance of the research findings as indicative of developments in masculinity and, by extension, social identity. The chapter then concludes by discussing the significance of the methodology for visual communication designers who inquire into social identity.



**Figure 1:** *Plotting the argument of the study*



## **Chapter 2: Reviewing literature: the visual rhetoric of masculinity on Tumblr**

### **2.1 Introduction**

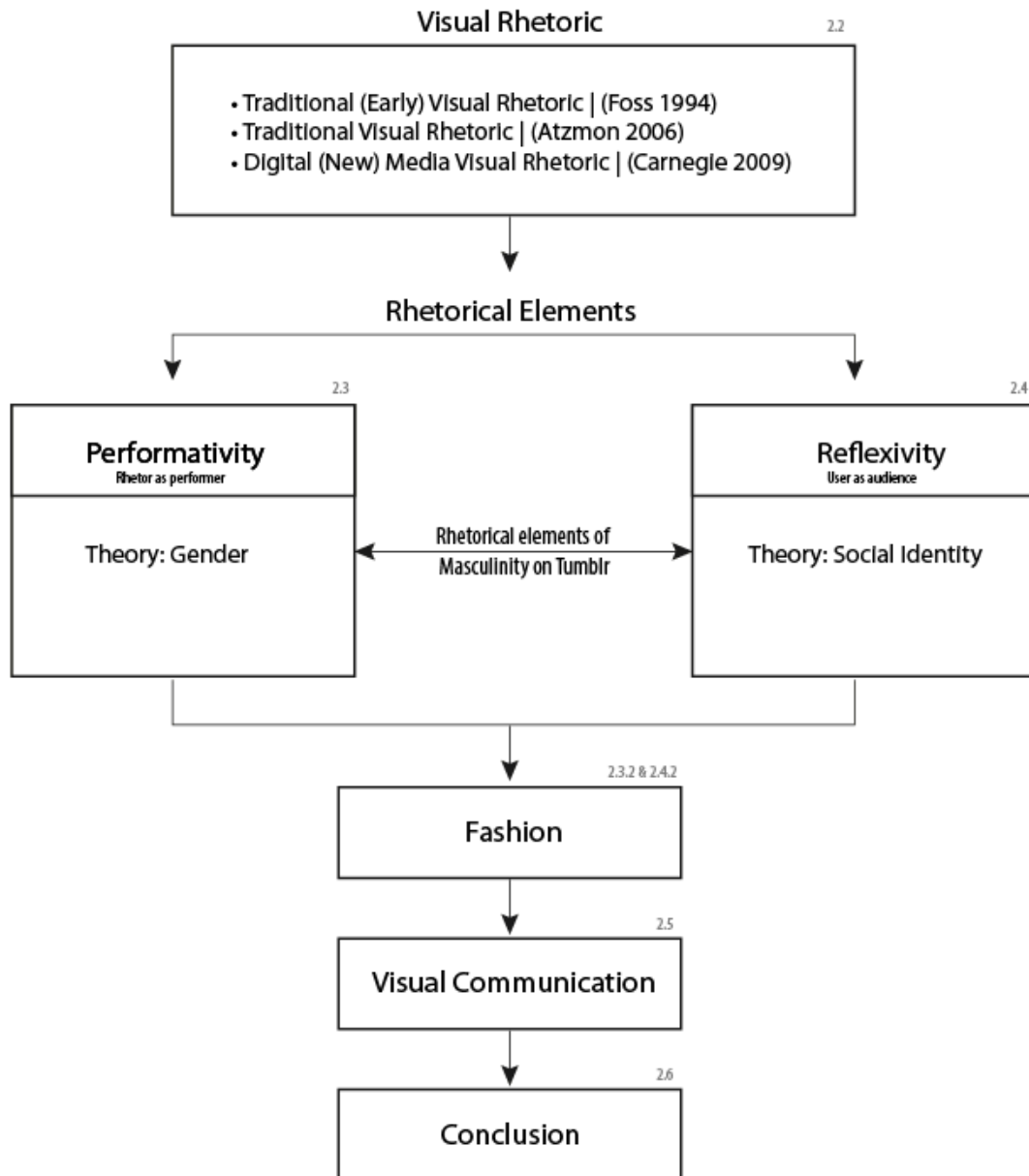
Understanding the emergence of divergent masculinities on Tumblr requires understanding of how gendered identity is expressed through visual rhetoric. To this end, this chapter integrates theory on visual rhetoric, masculinity as social identity, and social media. It begins by exploring perspectives on visual rhetoric, in section 2.2. Using these perspectives as a foundation, the chapter goes on to examine the rhetorical aspects of new media and specifically, social media interfaces like Tumblr.

To extend the discussion of visual rhetoric in social media to the study focus on masculinities, the gendered performance of masculine social identities is examined in section 2.3. Especially significant is the visually performative role of fashion and hence of fashion imagery on Tumblr. This is discussed in section 2.3.2. This section on the performance of masculinity constitutes one major component of the integrated view of visual rhetoric on Tumblr that I take in this study.

The other major component of visual rhetoric on Tumblr concerns the notion of the reflexivity of social identity (Giddens 2013). In light of masculinity as a reflexive construction of social identity (Nilan 2000), Tumblr users can be seen as reflexively responding to ‘fashioned’ masculinity rhetoric in the form of image posts. This is argued in section 2.4.

Section 2.5 delves into the wider value of understanding masculinity on Tumblr specifically for the field of visual communication design. Social media have changed the way in which visual communication design practitioners can research social identity in terms of their target audiences.

To conclude this chapter, research questions are formulated that take up the issues raised in this chapter, to be further explored in later chapters. Figure 2.1 outlines the key areas that are discussed in this chapter.



**Figure 2.1:** *Outline of key areas of Chapter 2*

## **2.2 Visual Rhetoric in social media**

Gauntlett (2008) has argued that mass media channels play an important part in communicating, propagating and entrenching socially normative behaviour that informs the development of social identity. In Chapter 1, shifts from traditional mass-media communication to democratized digital media via the internet have been discussed. Communication over the internet is an important propagator of social values (Gauntlett 2008). Importantly for this study, Walter (2012) notes that communication across social media is becoming primarily visual in nature. With this in mind, it becomes necessary to understand how images, as the primary vehicle for communication within social media settings produce meaning that affects the construction of social identities.

Visual rhetoric has long been considered one of the primary ways in which images produce and communicate meaning (Foss 2004). In light of this, this section aims to explore:

- perspectives on visual rhetoric.
- how visual rhetoric functions on social media.

### **2.2.1 Perspectives on visual rhetoric**

Traditionally, rhetoric can be seen as the art of using language to persuade (Werry 2015). Rhetoric refers to the study and uses of written, spoken and visual language. The study of rhetoric investigates how language is used to organize and maintain social groups, construct meanings and identities, coordinate behaviour, mediate power, produce change, and create knowledge (Werry 2015). While visual rhetoric encompasses all of these effects, it may be simply understood as, how an image persuades an audience to interpret a particular meaning.

The following section explores the perspectives on visual rhetoric that are relevant to this study. I refer specifically to the work of Foss, Atzmon, and Carnegie. Foss's (1994) and Atzmon's (2006) perspectives on how images function rhetorically provide a basis for understanding visual rhetoric, whilst

Carnegie's (2009) work allows visual rhetoric to be seen in the context of new media interfaces such as Social Network Sites.

Foss (1994) discusses the difference between an intentional and functional approach to visual rhetoric. She explains that classically, the intention of the rhetor, in embedding an image with meaning, was prioritized when analysing visual rhetoric. An image's rhetorical meaning was primarily evaluated based on the communicative intentions of its creator. Foss (1994:216) argues, that this intentionalist approach to the analysis of visual rhetoric is inadequate. Foss (1994) instead proposes a functional approach to the analysis of rhetoric of an image. She argues that judgments to the functional communicative qualities of an image should be made when attempting to understand the image's rhetorical meaning. By function, Foss refers to the audience's response to the image and its visual rhetoric.

Intention and function as concepts for evaluating visual rhetoric, prioritize different actors. An intentionalist view of visual rhetoric prioritizes the rhetor as the primary producer of rhetorical meaning when they create an image. Conversely, a functionalist approach prioritizes the audience to an image as critical to the production of meaning, through their subjective understanding of what has been created. To Foss (1994) there is no necessary link between intention of the rhetor and audience response to the image.

By looking at both the rhetor's intention in creating rhetorical messages as well as how those visual messages are received and understood by the audience, a more holistic understanding of the images rhetorical meaning is gained. Atzmon (2008) on visual rhetoric extends Foss's idea of function by connecting the intention of the rhetor and the response of audience.

Atzmon (2008) discusses visual rhetoric by referring to images as visual artefacts. Atzmon's work often refers to the field of design and designers, although she does see all designed objects as visual artefacts. Visual artefacts are always designed artefacts in the sense of the word 'artefact' as a human-made and therefore 'designed' and not a naturally occurring object (Smith

2007). Because this study concerns visual artefacts that are produced by social media users who are not necessarily designers, the term 'visual artefact' will be used in connection with Atzmon's visual rhetoric.

Atzmon (2008) conceptualizes the way in which visual rhetoric functions to persuade audiences as distinctly different to the way in which classical linguistic or textual forms of rhetoric function. She argues that linguistic and textual based rhetoric relies on a linear narrative to persuade an audience. By telling a persuasive story that has a start, beginning and end, meaning is produced and relayed to the audience (Atzmon 2008). Visual artefacts, such as images however, are not as obviously or explicitly persuasive (Atzmon 2008). Atzmon explains that images, persuade through offering the audience communicative data that reflect, orchestrate and develop an array of cultural concerns. The visual artefact producer in encoding the visual artefact with rhetorical content has limited ability to create a linear rhetorical narrative (Atzmon 2008).

Atzmon (2008) argues that visual artefacts create rhetorical narratives that are neither linear nor plot driven in nature. She explains how these visual narratives are;

*"typically constructed of layered and interconnected meanings that are articulated in a holistic fashion both in the physical form of design artifacts, and also in their use processes"* (Atzmon 2008:2).

Visual narratives, to Atzmon (2008:2), are constructed through the audience's navigation of a constellation of symbolic meanings portrayed through material symbols. Although the visual artefact producer has control over what symbols are embedded into the artefact. These symbols nevertheless exist as a constellation which can be navigated by the audience, in a variety of ways. Valid meaning can thus be produced based on how the audience creates connections between the symbols arranged by the rhetor within an image.

Atzmon thus extends Foss's account of visual rhetoric by suggesting that audience response to a visual artefact is predicated on a 'constellation of

meaning' (Atzmon 2008:3) arranged by the image creator. The intended message is one out of many possible messages decoded out of this constellation of meaning by the audience. How the audience responds to the visual artefact is thus as important as the way in which the creator intends for the visual artefact to rhetorically function.

Foss's and Atzmon's account of visual rhetoric are situated primarily within the realm of the traditional non-digital visual mediums. Their insights are useful for understanding how image posts on social media can be used to rhetorically produce meaning toward the construction of social identity. There are however, elements unique to social media -such as uploading and sharing visual content- as its own new medium for visual expression and communication, within which visual rhetoric can be both performed and audienceed. These elements require further investigation.

Social Network Sites such as Tumblr, as a social setting, could potentially affect the context within which visual rhetorical information is created and viewed. In the following section, how new-media has provided new modes of practical application for visual rhetoric that align with Atzmon's views on visual rhetoric in relation to visual artefacts and further extend the ideas of intention and function in relation to visual rhetoric are outlined.

### **2.2.2 Visual rhetoric in social media interfaces**

Carnegie (2009), in "*The Rhetoric of Interactivity*", explores how interactivity on new media interfaces serve rhetorical functions. These extend to Social Network Sites as new-media interfaces.

Carnegie (2009) argues that new-media interfaces work rhetorically to influence how we perceive information. The term 'interface' here refers to "a means or place of interaction" or "a meeting point or common ground between two parties, systems, or disciplines" (Carnegie 2009:165). This relates to the visual elements that the user interacts with as part of their experience on the website. How a user navigates through content on a Social Network Site for instance,

can potentially influence how that content intended and the functional communicative value of an image hosted on it.

To Carnegie (2009) the rhetorical qualities of the interface are rooted in interactivity. The fact that users can often manipulate different aspects/components of the interface creates a rhetorical scenario. To extend this to Social Network Sites such as Tumblr; it is through this interactivity that users can function as rhetors and audiences in terms of Atzmon's (2008) perspective of visual rhetoric.

Carnegie provides two important ways in which interactivity on new media interfaces can function rhetorically. Carnegie (2009) describes them as:

1. **Multidirectionality:** Here, Carnegie refers to ways in which users of can travel in various 'directions' across nodes of virtual network. Content on interfaces are connected via hyperlinks (Carnegie 2009). The user moves from content hosted on one interactive interface to another. Multidirectional navigation across multiple user interfaces occurs when users interact with these hyperlinks that are presented as interactive elements on a website to move back and forth. Essentially, Carnegie (2009) refers to the idea here that users can move in multiple directions, with attendant rhetorical effects.

Talty (2002:142) explains that connectivity of texts and ideas in this multidirectional manner takes precedence over the linear assumptions of print forms. She also points out that

*"the author of a website understands that he or she has no control over the depth, breadth, or route a reader will take when viewing his or her site. The control is not in the writers words, but with the readers' choices (Talty 2002:142)".*

In this sense Multidirectionality harkens back to Atzmon's perspective on visual rhetoric in highlighting that the author of the rhetoric of a designed artefact, has little control of the narrative path the audience.

Furthermore this multidirectionality goes beyond user navigation to include the circulation of messages (Carnegie 2009:167). In this sense the concept of Multidirectionality is extended to the ideas of 'intention' and 'function'. Carnegie (2009:167) explains that the user exists as both the receiver and creator of rhetorical messages on an interactive platform. This further complicates the notions of visual rhetoric put forth by Foss (1994) and Atzmon (2008). These ideas are further explained by Carnegie in her discussion on 'Manipulability' (2009:168).

2. **Manipulability:** Carnegie (2009) refers to the idea that an artefact in a digital space can be dematerialized, provisioned, and redeployed through various forms of computer alteration as "manipulability". Here, manipulability refers not only the generation of content from users, but also, to the idea that users can interact with artefacts online as discrete units and dematerialize, edit or manipulate them through new media interfaces to provide new meaning (Carnegie 2009).

A user on a Social Network Site such as Tumblr is afforded the option to further manipulate the meaning of an image they have just audienced and re-post it. In doing so, they create new rhetorical meaning. In this sense, the idea of manipulability is especially important to this study as it means that a user on Social Network Sites could function both as audience to visual rhetoric, and through manipulating content, simultaneously act as visual rhetoric producers as well.

Carnegie's discussion on the rhetorical elements of new-media inform this study in two important ways.



- It provides insight into specific locations where one can study visual rhetoric and its effects on visual media within new-media interfaces such as Social Network Sites.
- Carnegie's work also provides us with a way of understanding how visual rhetoric works on these Social Network Sites.

The theory discussed in this section has provided insight into the rhetoric of visual messages on social media as well as what aspects of Social Network Site interfaces could have a profound effect on the construction and reception of visual rhetorical content. The discussion on visual rhetoric in relation to social media leads to the first research question which will provide us with insight into how gender constructions such as masculinity are diversified on Tumblr with visual rhetoric. Namely: *How is masculine identity expressed and understood through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?*

### 2.2.3 Summary

To summarise; Foss (1994) shows us that there is no necessary link between the intended rhetorical meaning of a visual artefact and its communicative function. Atzmon (2008) extends Foss by providing a conceptual platform within which intended meaning and functional meaning are connected. Within Atzmon's (2008:2) 'constellation of meaning', an audience's interpretive response is predicated on the intentions of the image creator.

There are thus, two roles that can be seen as important to rhetoric in visual communication:

- The artefact producer (or *rhetor*), who assembles a series symbols that embody meaning in a visual artefact.
- The *audience* for the visual artefact, who deciphers whole meanings from meaning elements.

Visual rhetoric is an interpretative exercise to both the rhetor and the audience. The way in which visual rhetoric is interpreted is heavily dependent on both the context of its creation as well as the context of its viewing. Both the intended message as well as the myriad of interpreted audience responses coexist. Foss and Atzmon show the difficulty in attributing either rhetor intention or audience response as function of visual rhetoric without a strong rationale.

Compounding this difficulty, Carnegie shows us that on new-media interfaces, there are a number of rhetorical choices for the sending and receiving of rhetorical messages. We also see that the nature of the roles of rhetor and audience are further intertwined due to the nature of Social Network Sites as settings within which visual rhetoric is both created and audienceed. Therefore, there is a need to find some flexible concepts for visual rhetoric on social media that do not constrain rhetoric as either intended message or message understood. These are discussed below and centre on performativity and reflexivity in relation to social identity.

## **2.3 Visual rhetoric and the performance of masculinity**

This section explores gender theory concerning masculinity; a social performance which is also has rhetorical significance. The key concept of rhetorical performativity is then extended to fashion theory. The role of fashion in the performance of masculinity adds a second layer to the focus on visual rhetoric. Fashion, as a visual aspect of masculine performativity, is then positioned as a lens through which divergent masculinities can be searched for and identified on Tumblr.

### **2.3.1 Performativity and masculinity rhetoric**

The idea that we are not born with an identity or gender, but rather, it is something we develop as we interact with society, lies at the core of seminal discourses around gender and identity. Judith Butler (2011) takes this approach to gender, viewing it within the context of complex dialectic between individual and the society they live in.

Butler's arguments around gender question the origins of hetero-normative gendered thinking and provide an alternative to the idea that gendered behaviour is natural (Butler 2011). Butler's understanding of gender as a social construct is based on the idea that the individual body is both a physical and a social entity. Gender thus concerns the body as a social entity which is subject to societal norms.

Butler (2011), describes gender performativity as an act of 'doing' as opposed to simply 'being'. In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Butler 2011), Butler sees masculinity and femininity as performative in that an individual's actions produce gender identity as opposed to those actions being a result of anatomical sex. Butler argues that what we see as concrete expressions and conceptions of gender are in fact performances of culturally produced but also changing gender roles.

Butler sees gender performativity as based on one hand on a conception of society as a cultural producer of repeated behavioural patterns. This repetition of performative behaviour entrenches the behaviour as a societal norm. The performance of these behaviours "congeal" (Butler 1990:208) over time in normative conceptions of gender.

But on the other hand, Butler is concerned with subverting the hegemonic power dynamics that gender performances rhetorically perpetuate. Gender is a concept that can be altered through performative action, as opposed to actions being strictly the result of anatomical sex. Gender performance is contextually related and can change as new contexts arise.

Butler's work has been influential in understanding how ideas of gender, identity and society interact with each other. Butler (2011) critiques the division between gender and identity, arguing that although they are separate in theory, they are nevertheless performatively merged. When we perform aspects of our identity, those performances inevitably communicate gender as well.

Societal conceptions of gender can thus be constructed rhetorically through individual actions and behaviours. Many of the rhetorical behaviours that make up the performance of gender and identity discussed by Butler, convey gender visually. In this sense, an individual, in executing a gendered performance, is in accord to Atzmon's (2008) perspective on visual rhetoric, functioning as a rhetor.

Butler's arguments discussed in this section focus predominantly on gender as a whole as opposed to focusing on aspects of gender such as masculinity. However, they provide insight into what masculinity is and how it is communicated and produced within a society rhetorically. 'Masculinity', refers to a variety of social behaviours that individuals perform to portray masculine identity.

Pinning an exact definition of masculinity becomes increasingly difficult when viewing it as rhetorical behaviours performed. In terms of both Butler's (2011) arguments around gender, and the perspectives on visual rhetoric discussed in section 2.2, the context within which a gendered performance takes place is crucial to understanding what might be considered a masculine performance. To Foss and Atzmon, a rhetorical gendered performance is as much functional as it is intentional. How that masculinity performance is viewed and responded to by an audience is as important as the intention behind its creation. Social Network Sites such as Tumblr, exist as spaces where individuals from different backgrounds and social contexts communicate visually with each other. The idea of a singularly executed and understood gendered performance is complicated by the multiple ways it can be interpreted by differing audiences. In this sense, an exact definition or singular conception of masculinity is not possible.

The complexity of masculinity is discussed by Connell (2005). Much of Connell's (2005) work on masculinity in society has been aimed at providing a multifaceted perspective on masculinity. Like Butler (2011) Connell views masculinity and gender as intertwined. However, where Butler sees masculinity

as one of the many aspects of gender, Connell (2011) sees it as gender relations itself. She explains that;

*“To speak of masculinities is to speak about gender relations. Masculinities are not equivalent to men; they concern the position of men in a gender order. They can be defined as the patterns of practice by which people (both men and women, though predominantly men) engage that position”* (Connell 2011:1).

This constitutes a broad definition of masculinity that incorporates the ideas on gender discussed. As such, the term masculinity will be used to denote gender as well henceforth.

The social relations that encompass masculinity are also closely linked to the social settings in which these relations take place. Diversified social systems and settings act as loci for performative behaviours that construct and propagate masculinity (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Masculinity performances are shaped by interactions within social settings. These interactions can function rhetorically to entrench existing conceptions of masculinity as well as produce new conceptions of masculinity. Connell (2005) highlights that it is necessary to explore the links between the social setting and the individual interacting within it to better understand how these interactions and the setting themselves impact on masculinity. Certain social settings, with high levels of social engagement and interaction, such as Social Network Sites can potentially act as hubs for the performance of divergent masculinities.

The discussion on gender highlights masculinity as social identity performance. These performances extend to the realm of the visual. In this sense, they encompass perspectives of visual rhetoric relating to how messages are created by a rhetor. It is thus necessary to find a lens through which the visual performance of masculinity can be focused on. This is especially necessary considering the visual nature of Social Network Sites such as Tumblr. In the case of Tumblr, the visual performance of masculinity through fashion is

extensively evident. This led to consideration of the idea of fashion as the visual and rhetorical performance of masculine identity on Tumblr.

### **2.3.2 Fashion and performative visual masculinity rhetoric**

Entwistle explains that becoming a competent member of a society involves acquiring prior knowledge on custom and convention around dress (Entwistle 2000:11). She argues that a complex dynamic relationship exists between the body, dress and culture. How we dress and physically adorn ourselves provides other members of society with information relating to our identities.

To Entwistle, fashion and the act of dressing should be seen as an embodied activity that is embedded within social relations (Entwistle 2000:10). In this sense, fashion encompasses a series of behaviours that visually, rhetorically perform identity. These behaviours and displays have become so intricately entangled within our society, that Li (1998) argues that fashion is not simply dress, but rather, the way in which we visually communicate or perform our social identity to society. Kaiser (1997) in fact, argues that fashion is inherently coded with gender.

Similarly, Pan *et al.* (2015:53) explains that fashion refers to the symbolic, aesthetic, and cultural meanings that artefacts carry, especially the ways in which people use objects to express their taste, lifestyle, social status and belonging to a community. In this sense, fashion can be seen as the rhetorical performance of gender through social activities and practices.

Imagery that depicts these activities on social media has the same rhetorical effect. Figure 2.2 below shows a fashion image that depicts two youths smoking. The youths' masculinity is depicted as confident, 'edgy' and 'cool'. The act of smoking can be seen as performative behaviour that has been entrenched within our society as glamorous, edgy and 'cool' (Rodrigues 2009). Within this image, smoking becomes a symbolic practice that imparts the idea of glamour to the overall fashion rhetoric of the image. To reiterate, fashion should not solely be seen as the adornment of the body, but rather, as a series

of behaviours and visual expressions, that symbolically and, rhetorically, express aspects of an individual's social identity.



**Figure 2.2:** *Depiction of identity expressed through behaviour*  
(<http://www.88for8.tumblr.com/image/113157928727>)

Behaviours relating to how we use fashion as a means of expressing our identity, function performatively to produce gender. In adopting and curating various performative fashion behaviours, masculine identity can shift and evolve. The underlying premise here, is that gender is constructed through fashion as a socially constructed “culture of appearance” (Kaiser 1997:65).

Fashion can be viewed as rhetorically performing the visual meaning of masculinity as social identity. In light of this, Fashion, considering its prevalence on Tumblr, could be used to focus in on gendered visual rhetoric on Tumblr in an effort to search for divergent masculinities.

## **2.4 Reflexivity and masculinity rhetoric**

In section 2.4.1 Giddens' (2013) perspective on reflexive social identity construction in late modern society is examined. Giddens shows that each individual is encouraged to reflexively construct an identity for themselves based on points of reference within society. This reflexive response is related to masculine identity and gender, returning to Butler's (2011) concept of gender performativity. Section 2.4.2 relates reflexivity to fashion as a rhetorical phenomenon of Tumblr as a Social Network Site.

By exploring theory on reflexivity in the construction of social identity alongside reflexivity in fashion, reflexivity is positioned in social identity as a possible factor that leads to divergent masculinities on Tumblr with fashion again, being a focal lens through which to observe these behaviours on Tumblr.

### **2.4.1 Reflexivity, social identity and masculinity**

In *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Giddens 2013), Giddens discusses how people understand and shape their identity in modern societies. Giddens sees society in the midst of what he describes as 'Late Modernity' (Giddens 2013) characterized by post-traditional values. These values include cultural self-consciousness, and scepticism toward macro-narratives (Giddens 2013). Communities have moved away from normative social identity constructions based on conformity and historical stereotypes and toward reflexivity and personalisation.

As a result, social identity, becomes subject to a particular type of reflexivity. Individuals "continually integrate events which occur in the external world, and sort them into the on-going 'story' about the self" (Giddens 2013:54). They carefully assess new developments and changing meanings in their social milieu, revising their self-concept and self-presentation in response to new knowledge about the world.



Giddens' (2013) perspective on reflexive social identity can be extended to masculinity. Masculinity is above all, a social identity accomplishment (Nilan 2000). In accord to Giddens' ideas on reflexive social identity, Nilan (2000) explains that masculinity is "not a fixed essence but a shifting gendered social identity" (Nilan 2010:52). She goes on to explain that how people experience masculinity in society, goes on to affect how they perform. In this sense, masculinity and social identity are equally reflexive.

Rather than seeing identity as fixed, Giddens (2013) claims that post traditional society engenders reflexive change regarding how individuals view themselves. Identity within this kind of society can be seen as modular; with masculinity, fitting in as an impermanent part of a much larger whole. Masculinity then may have parts that can be replaced and recombined to respond to the rhetoric presented by emerging societal viewpoints or the rhetorical performance of alternative masculinities.

What emerges through this discussion on reflexivity and masculinity, is that how people experience masculinity is important to how they perform it. Furthermore, masculinity is not a fixed thing. Rather an individual can edit their masculinity to incorporate new behaviours based on what they are exposed to in an "on-going 'story' about the self" (Giddens 2013:54). This is especially relevant on Tumblr, where individuals are exposed to fashion images that rhetorically depict masculine behaviours. With this in mind, fashion rhetoric once again becomes important as a means of focusing on the visual surface of masculinity.

#### **2.4.2 Fashion rhetoric and reflexive masculinity**

Visual communication media and fashion imagery continually engages with gender politics. Particularly, it has an important role to play in the way in which individuals internalize new conceptions of gender. In *Framing Masculinity*, Triggs (1992) posits that fashion imagery in media (such as fashion magazines) that are disseminated across a wide audience, not only document, but also construct new modes of gender.

The process of internalizing social identities conveyed through the visual rhetoric in fashion images is a reflexive one, in the social sense that Giddens (2013) uses this term (explained in the previous section). An individual reflexively integrates masculine fashion imagery in the “on-going ‘story’ about the self” (Giddens 2013:54) as mentioned above. Consequently, the individual’s conception of masculinity may change. It is through this dialogue between the individual and the images they audience in media, that new modes of gender are reflexively created, as a rhetorical effect. In this sense, fashion imagery essentially offers audiences rhetorical depictions of new gendered behaviours. These can be internalized through reflexively editing their own masculine and feminine performances.

Through fashion and fashion images, changes in gender constructions are rhetorically brought to social attention in a tangible manner. Fashion images especially capture these shifts in gender representation. As fashion performances change, so to do the ways in which gender is rhetorically expressed through fashion and vicariously, fashion imagery (Kaiser 1997). Through exposure to fashion imagery, individuals construct gender (Ash and Wilson 1992). As people engage with fashion media depicting different gendered behaviours, they reflexively edit their own fashion practices. This inevitably impacts how they present their gender. Consequently, visual media surrounding fashion, can provide great insight in documenting societal changes.

Understanding fashion, and the reflexive way in which individuals interact with fashion imagery is especially useful to this study. The propagation of new gendered meaning on social media can alter and diversify gender identity. Considering the prevalence of fashion imagery on Tumblr, divergent notions of masculine gender may be reflexively internalized. Tumblr users could potentially be reflexively responding to ‘fashioned’ masculinity rhetoric in form of image posts. Using fashion imagery to examine and inspect gendered behaviour on Tumblr, may bring insight into divergent masculinities on Tumblr. This leads to the second research question: **How do masculinities diverge through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?**

## **2.5 Visual communication design significance**

As a hub for social activity that functions rhetorically, Social Network Sites like Tumblr are prime settings for investigation into the diversification of social identity manifestations such as masculinity. Considering the pace and scale of social interaction on Tumblr, performative social interaction online relating to gendered visual rhetoric could potentially have transformative effects on gender constructions. This is especially relevant considering that Tumblr, by its very nature, functions to allow users to create identities for themselves through the use of images.

The discussion throughout this literature review has been geared toward identifying ways in which social identity can be rhetorically performed and constructed. Potential ways in which visual communication practitioners could gain insight into evolving gender and identity constructions relating to the construction of social identity have been highlighted. Specifically, through studying visual rhetoric relating to the construction of social identity on social media. As a case in point, fashion related visual rhetoric has been discussed as a potential lens through which masculinity, as an aspect of social identity, could be studied on Social Network Sites. These issues are important to the professional practice of visual communication design.

The following section aims to explore the benefit of monitoring social identities on social media, as a market research tool, to visual communication practitioners. New-media has provided visual communication designers with new ways to create and display visual messages. As discussed in Chapter 1, Interface design has become an integral part of visual communication design. Visual communication design practitioners commonly work on the visual design of new media interfaces, working hand in hand with the developers who focus on interactivity and interface design. Within this context, the study of rhetoric and visual rhetoric in relation to new-media becomes increasingly important to of visual communication designers.

Foss (2004) and Atzmon (2008) both discuss how, within the schools of traditional, non-digital design, the material with which a designer creates an object, can function rhetorically, to produce meaning. Similarly, as per Carnegie (2009) the interface of new media platforms (such as Social Network Sites), can rhetorically convey and produce meaning. Understanding how meaning is produced and communicated on Social Network Sites as well as sentiment regarding social identities is an integral form of market research to communication practitioners.

Market research is a key aspect of any profession to fall under communication and design (Millman and Bainbridge 2008). Advertisers and designers alike all create media for social consumption by specific audiences. Regardless of whether that audience is an isolated group or a large community, knowing how people think about certain values and social identities, is important when it comes to creating messages that relate to those values.

In line with Gauntlett's (2008) discussion on the paradigm shift from mass media to democratized social media (discussed in Chapter 1), Lane *et al.* (2005) highlight the importance of knowing, 'whom we are speaking to'. Lane *et al.* (2005:101) argue that the days of the mass-media monolith are long dead. Society, from a communication standpoint, has been fractured into smaller markets (Lane *et al.* 2005). These smaller markets each have their own social identity that underpin the way in which they consume and relate to messages they see in media around them. This thinking also mirrors Connell's (2005) aversion to grand narratives when discussing aspects of social identity such as masculinity. Here, different audiences could potentially have different viewpoints regarding social identity constructions.

Lane *et al.* (2005:101) argue that classically, trends in communication have been capitalized by market generalization. They, however, caution against communication practitioners creating messages for generalized audiences. Rather, they highlight that creating messages that rely on insight into how a specific audience relates to the world around them, will create much stronger messages. For communication practitioners, the need to understand one's

target audience becomes obvious. Lane et al. (2005) highlight that communication practitioners need to understand specific details relating to their target audiences to better communicate with them. Visual communication practitioners, in creating visual messages, would gain similar benefits to understanding how diversified audiences relate to the world around them. Understanding changes taking place in society as well as the impact that these changes have on individuals and groups are important to visual communicators who rely on visual rhetorical messages to communicate ideas. Aspects of social identity such as gender permeate society (Butler 1990). Understanding how people think and relate to these aspects of social identity can better equip visual communication practitioners when creating visual media and messages for those audiences and markets.

Classically, market research for visual communication and advertising has been seen in a procedural light (Lane et al. 2005). Lane et al. (2005) highlight ways in which communication practitioners could potentially gain insight into target markets. They specifically highlight the need to understand the constructed social identities of specific groups to better communicate to those groups. However, the way in which they propose conducting market research is somewhat outdated.

Lane et al. (2005) propose that communication practitioners should engage in both qualitative and quantitative market research. They provide various options available to communication practitioners to better understand their target audiences. These include face to face interactions, focus group interviews, questionnaires and psychographic profiles (Lane et al. 2005). Design and Communication theorists however, have criticized this approach with regard to better understanding target audiences.

Millman and Bainbridge (2008) criticizes this classical approach to target audience research by highlighting its intrusive nature. Millman claims that understanding the lifestyles, sensibilities and consumption patterns of target audiences allow design practitioners to, comprehend consumers on a deeper level, thus allowing for a better understanding of their imagination through

design (Millman and Bainbridge 2008). Although Millman agrees with Lane et al. regarding the importance of audience research to visual communication design practitioners, she argues against overt interactions between communicator and audience during this phase of the design process. Millman argues that audience research for design practitioners often deal with the sensitive topic of social change and that any research that probes these ideas are likely to be taken negatively. Here, the act of questioning or interrogating individuals and groups that form an audience, could potentially affect the response that is given during the research (Millman and Bainbridge 2008).

Social Network Sites however, have revolutionized the way in which visual communication design practitioners can potentially investigate their target audiences. Social Network Sites offer an opportunity for design practitioners to observe their target audiences without direct interaction. In this sense, monitoring audiences on social media, allows for a covert way in which a visual communicator can gain insight into how people think and feel about certain things, without having the process of research, effecting the outcome (Patino, Pitta and Quinones 2012).

Social Network Sites have transformed the way in which society communicates and has changed societal perceptions (Patino, Pitta and Quinones 2012:12). By their very nature, Social Network Sites such as Tumblr, are geared toward the social interaction. Understanding how social identity is constructed, performed and reflexively edited on Social Network Sites could potentially allow visual communicators to gain insight into how target audiences think about and react to certain visual representations of social identity constructions.

Additionally, studying how audiences, through interacting on Social Network Sites with visual content to rhetorically construct social identities could potentially shed light on how exactly social identity constructions are diversifying, through visual rhetoric, on Social Network Sites. Studying visual rhetoric processes on Tumblr that lead to the diversification of masculinity through visual rhetoric could potentially inform other visual communication design enquiries into social identity change on social media. This leads to the

third research question: *What is the broader significance for visual communication design of visual rhetoric on Tumblr that evidences divergent masculinity?*

## **2.6 Conclusion**

The understanding of visual rhetoric in the work of Foss (1994) and Atzmon (2008) in section 2.2, coupled with Carnegie's (2009) work on rhetoric in new media (and thus social media) provides a basis for investigating visual rhetoric on Tumblr. The specific enquiry into diversifying masculinities on Tumblr is aided by conceiving visual performances of masculinity as rhetorical events. Responses to these performances can be seen as reflexive incorporation (Giddens, 2013) of these masculinity performances into the masculine identities of the Tumblr user audience. Fashion, in that it is both reflexive and performative in nature, can serve a lens through which divergent masculinities can be investigated. This allows initial research questions to be asked:

1. *How is masculine identity expressed and understood through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?*

The following chapter, Chapter 3 contributes to answering the first research question by delineating the masculinity visual rhetoric research setting within the overall Tumblr platform. The ways in which Tumblr users perform and reflexively respond to visual masculinity rhetoric are examined.

2. *How do masculinities as aspects of social identity diverge through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?*

The fashion theoretical section of the present chapter extends the visual surface of Tumblr users' performance and reflexive response to masculinities. This lays the groundwork for Chapters 4 and 5 which address this second research question is investigated.

3. *What is the broader significance for visual communication design of visual rhetoric on Tumblr that evidences divergent masculinity?*

This question concerns the value of the study to the visual communication design industry. The final research question is addressed in Chapter 5.



## Chapter 3: Delineating the visual rhetoric research setting on Tumblr

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter dealt with the rhetorical performance of and reflexive response to masculine identity through visual images posted on Tumblr. This chapter explores how such visual rhetoric interactions are enabled and promoted by the Tumblr user interface. One aim of the chapter is then to establish a rhetorical research setting on Tumblr. This informs the data generation and analysis of the study, which is presented in the next chapter, Chapter 4.

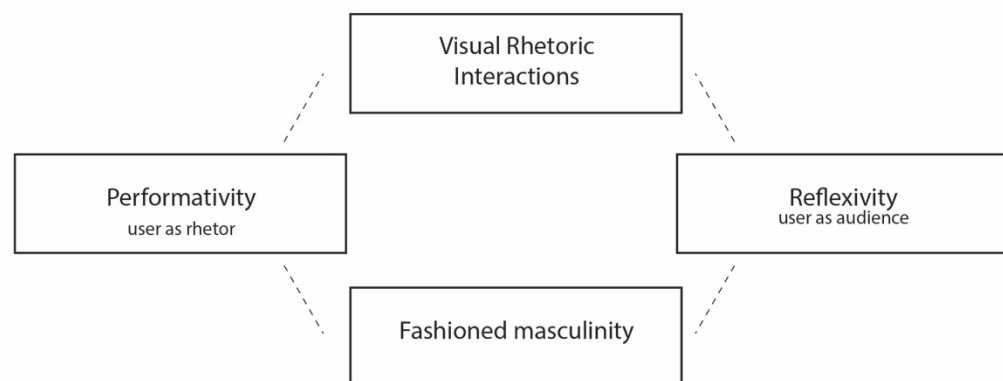
Tumblr allows its large user-base to communicate primarily through images. In the case of images relating to the masculinity, the Tumblr interface provides the opportunity to study how aspects of social identity, such as masculine identity are rhetorically transacted. Masculine identity may not be intentionally performed or reflexively received in every single masculine image post on Tumblr. However, ‘fashioned’ masculinity rhetoric is inevitably present in images representing masculinity social identity on Tumblr as was noted in Chapter 2.

To varying degrees then, Tumblr user image posts present content that not only performs masculine identity, but also provides users with the building blocks to reflexively create their own masculine identity. By virtue of the way that content on the site moves between users (through likes and reblogs), two broad categories emerge in relation to the theories of visual rhetoric discussed in Chapter 2. These are:

- The Tumblr user as *rhetor* and performer of masculine identity
- The Tumblr user as reflexive *audience* of masculine identity

Figure 3.1 below shows how performativity is here applied to the Tumblr user as rhetor, and how reflexivity is applied to the Tumblr user as the audience. As shown below, themes of visual rhetoric, masculine identity, and fashion from

Chapter 2 are revisited in light of the rhetorical interaction between the Tumblr user-rhetor and the audience for this rhetoric.



**Figure 3.1:** *Performativity and reflexivity in the research setting*

Delineating the research setting in terms of masculinity helps to address the first research question arrived at through the literature discussed in Chapter 2. Namely: *How is masculine identity expressed and understood through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?*

### **3.2 The user- rhetor as performer of masculinity rhetoric**

Before discussing image-based, visual performance of masculine identity, it is necessary to note the text-based beginnings of the rhetor role on Tumblr. As early as the account creation process, the user begins to interact with the Tumblr interface. Although it is possible to view webpages from Tumblr without actually being on the site; using Tumblr to its fullest requires the creation of a profile Tumblr.

One of Tumblr's draw cards is ease of use and privacy. To create profiles on sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google, extensive verification including

real world location, telephone numbers and even proof of identity documentation is required to fully use their services. Conversely the creation of a Tumblr profile requires only a valid email address and a username. This means that a user can function on the site with a great deal of anonymity compared to other Social Network Sites. This allows users to also have much more control over the identity they consciously perform on the site.

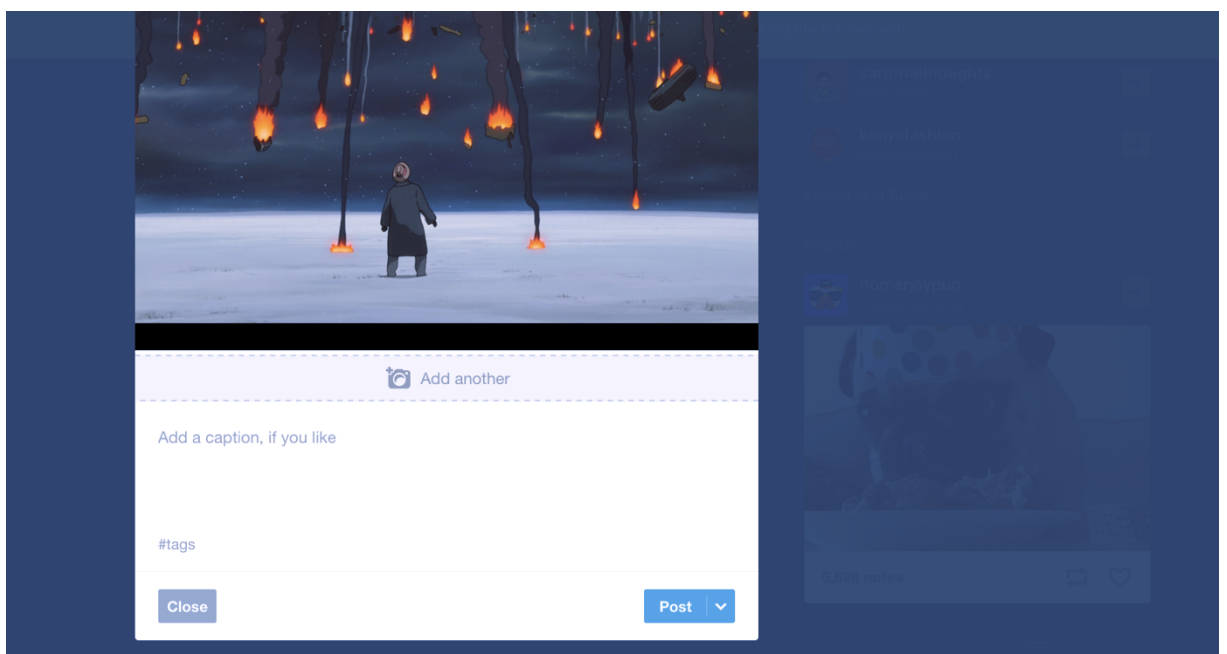
The performance of masculine identity on Tumblr revolves predominantly around interactions with visual content. From the instant users begin interacting with Tumblr's interface, user-rhetors moderate and curate their posts based on the images posted by other users. In the same way that wearing a men's suit would performatively confer certain masculine qualities on to the person wearing it (by virtue of the normative values attached to the suit), so too would interacting with certain imagery on Tumblr confer the rhetorically gendered values those images communicate to a user's online identity. By picking and choosing which images they interact with and how they interact with them, a user rhetorically performs their social identity, and through that, their masculinity on Tumblr.

Controlling others' perception of the rhetor's visual masculine identity is then far easier online than it is face-to-face in real-world interactions. When individuals interact in real-life, the instantaneous nature of their real-time masculine performances make it difficult for them to manage their masculine performances (Wood and Smith 2004). On Tumblr a user-rhetor's masculine performance can be meticulously curated. A user-rhetor can take as much time as they like in constructing their masculinity performance and choosing which images they make available. In this sense a user on Tumblr has great control over how they perform their masculine identities.

Tumblr allows users to manipulate visual content as part of their social identity performances on the site. Users can interact with imagery on Tumblr by either reblogging images that already exist on the network or uploading new images. Once a user has uploaded an image or chosen to reblog an image they can provide a post caption and hash tag. The way in which a user captions and

hashtags an image is another rhetorical strategy that can facilitate the performance of masculine identity. An image can be “manipulated” (Carnegie 2009) to become gendered through the way that image is uploaded and captioned by the user-rhetor on Tumblr. By adding masculinity-related keywords to the image, or tagging it using a popular gendered hashtag, the user may realign an image to their own gendered interpretation.

How user-rhetors manipulate visual content by editing keywords, and hashtag inputs (meta-data) on an image post also serves an important purpose. The input used in the caption and hashtags associated with the image are used to file the image for effective recall by the Tumblr’s search engine. These inputs are also used for placing the image into other users’ feeds. So how a user manipulates an image post, by editing the meta-data attached to it, will affect where and how others react to and interact with this image post. Such rhetorical processes extend to the dissemination of visual content across the entire Tumblr. Figure 3.2 shows how Tumblr’s interface facilitates rhetorical manipulation through hashtagging. This is manipulation is part of the user-rhetor’s performance of visual rhetoric and in the case of this study, visual rhetoric of masculine identity.



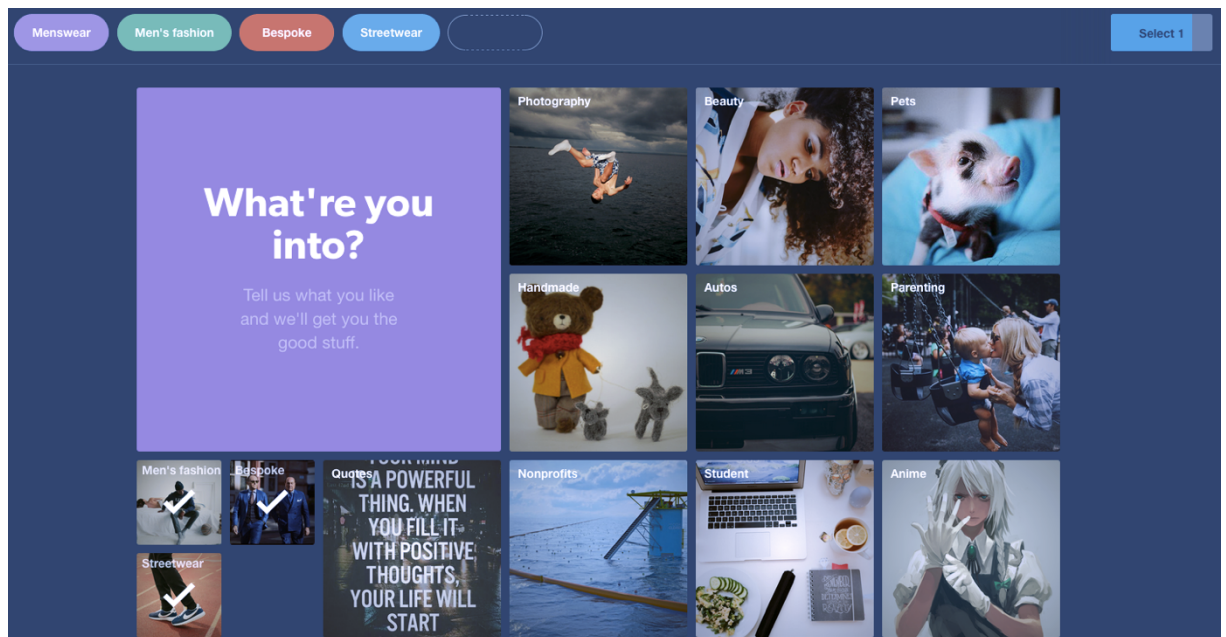
**Figure 3.2:** *Tumblr’s interface facilitating rhetorical manipulation through hashtagging* (<http://www.tumblr.com/account/upload/image/6795673956>)

### 3.2.1 Telepresence

Those posting on Tumblr, are aware of the 'presence' (Carnegie 2009), of an audience for their performances. What Carnegie (2009) describes as 'presence', Steuer (1992) sees as 'Telepresence'. Telepresence can be understood as "the extent to which one feels present in the mediated environment, rather than in the immediate physical environment" (Steuer 1992:76). Telepresence occurs for instance, for a user-rhetor when their image posts are 'liked' or 'reblogged' by their online audience. To put this in other words, telepresence is created when the user-rhetor feels that they have an effect on the perceptions of others. An image posted by the user-rhetor then makes a rhetorical proposition about the user-rhetor.

Tumblr's interface supports telepresence by presenting images to a user alongside meta-data. This meta-data indicates when other users have shared the image as well as how many users have interacted with the content since its upload. In doing so, the user-rhetor is made aware of the presence of other user-rhetors that they can perform their masculine identity to on the site.

As part of the profile and identity creation process on Tumblr, a user-rhetor is asked to highlight their interests by choosing from a variety of topics (Figure 3.4). These interest categories are indicative of audiences and communities on Tumblr. This interest selection interface (Figure 3.4) serves an important role. The interest categories displayed here, direct the user-rhetor to specific audiences. The more interests the user-rhetor selects on this screen, the more accurately the Tumblr interface refers them to nuanced audiences based on their own interests.



**Figure 3.3:** *Tumblr elicits user interests* (<http://www.tumblr.com>)

Highlighting interests in this manner, will begin to populate the Tumblr dashboard with visual content from the Tumblr walls of users who focus specifically on that content, as well as visual content that has been hashtagged according to those interests. This leads the user-rhetor to more visual content to better refine their masculine performance on Tumblr. The following section outlines the rhetorical forces at play as the user-rhetor performs and constructs masculine identity by interacting with those images and curating them on a Tumblr wall.

### **3.2.2 The performance of masculine identity on the fashioned Tumblr wall**

Creating and maintaining a Tumblr wall is a key way in which a user may rhetorically perform masculine identity. Through selecting images on the site, a user-rhetor can curate their Tumblr wall. A user-rhetor's Tumblr wall functions as a space where a montage of visual content is uploaded or appropriated by the user-rhetor from another user's wall. Image posts are collected together and displayed as the visual surface of a user-rhetor's masculine identity.

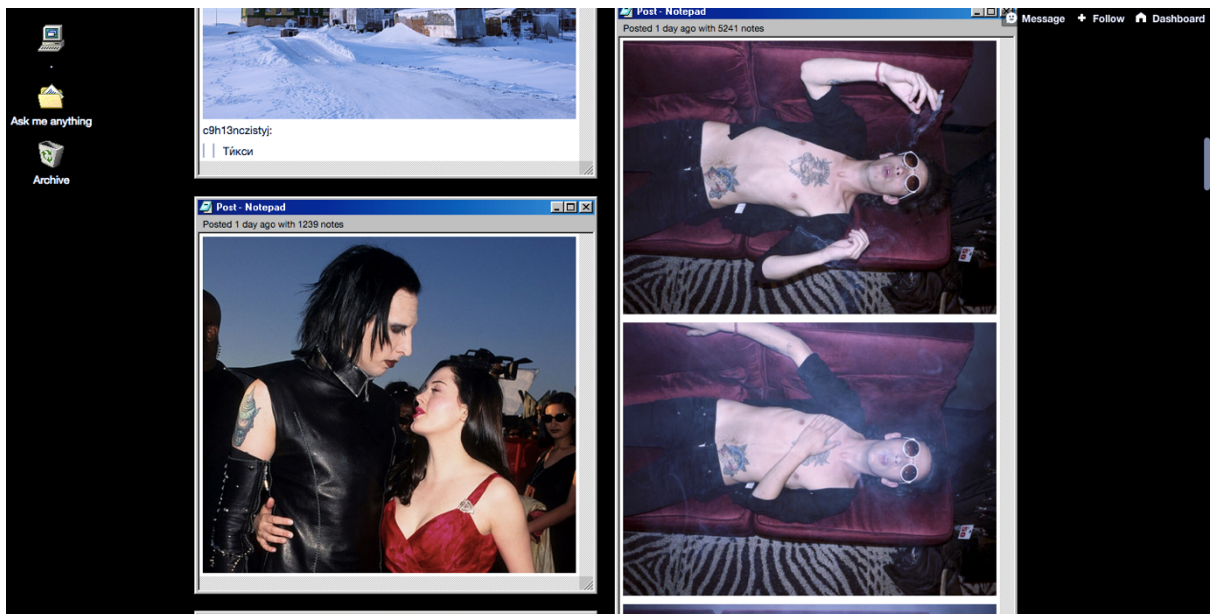
From a visual rhetoric perspective; although each individual image has meaning, together on a Tumblr Wall, the collective meaning of the montage that a series of images next to each other make, can be different. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Atzmon (2008) understands images placed as within a single Tumblr wall as symbols within a larger constellation of rhetorical meaning. These symbols are not viewed in isolation, but rather, work together to provide rhetorical meaning. The visual rhetoric of a user's Tumblr Wall, functions as a montage, with the rhetoric of its parts bleeding into each other to create a whole. Simultaneously, the rhetorical whole influences the interpretation of any single image contained within the montage. Within this context, images can acquire new gendered meaning.

Again the manipulability (Carnegie 2009) of online posting means that the Tumblr wall lends itself to creating new, personalized masculine expressions. Within the Tumblr setting the user-rhetor can edit how they perform their masculine identity by controlling how their Tumblr wall is structured. This is done by incorporating, arranging and curating rhetorical visual content on that wall using Tumblr's systems and interfaces. The user-rhetor, in constructing a Tumblr wall, manipulates, curates and reorganizes images on their Tumblr wall to create their own visual meaning. These affordances predispose the user-rhetor not just to the performance of masculine identity but also to the manipulation of masculine identity.

The Tumblr wall functions then as a virtual surface through which user-rhetors can then manipulate masculine identity fashion related cues. This process harkens back to the theory on fashion discussed in Chapter 2. Dress enacts identity and is embedded in social relations (Entwistle 2000:10) and fashion refers more widely to aesthetic choices in the use artefacts to convey social belonging (Pan *et al.* 2015:53). In Figure 3.4 below, the user wall contains images that convey a 'fashioned' sense of masculine identity in the sense of fashion explained in Chapter 2. In Figure 3.5 below, the user has customized their wall using fashion references. In both cases, a gendered identity is performed through the use of shared visual content. In this way, masculine identity on Tumblr is performed through fashion.



**Figure 3.4:** An example of a Tumblr user blog wall (<http://00414.tumblr.com/>)



**Figure 3.5:** A Tumblr user blog wall showing a fashion aesthetic (<http://skska.tumblr.com/>)



### **3.2.2 Preliminary summary**

From the very first interaction with the Tumblr platform, the user-rhetor is enticed to function as rhetor or producer of content. Tumblr facilitates user rhetoric in the following ways:

- it predisposes the user to the idea that they can visually construct masculine identity on the site.
- it allows the user to manipulate masculine identity performance.
- it provides the user with a space in which to perform new and diversified masculine identities.

Exploring Tumblr as a research setting for masculinity has shown that masculine identity in part, is constructed on the site, performatively. The user-rhetor is also provided with a space to perform their own masculine identity in the form of a Tumblr wall. They are also provided with the visual content needed to construct and perform masculine identity, namely; images that are circulated between users from wall to wall. It is important to note here that the very act of circulating masculine images, (through liking and reblogging them) is itself a gendered performance.

Masculine images move across Tumblr as people share them and use them as part of their masculine identity presentations. The Tumblr wall is an integral aspect of the user experience on Tumblr. It can function as the performative visual surface of an individual's identity on the site. These masculine identities are performed through visual rhetoric by users interacting with images on Tumblr and curating visual content on to their Tumblr walls. These walls form the greater shifting visual surface of the masculine identity research setting of this study.

### **3.3 The user as reflexive audience of masculine identity rhetoric**

Tumblr users as audience have a reflexive (Giddens 2013) response to Tumblr content. Tumblr users search for content on Tumblr, viewing visual content that is presented by Tumblr and finding Tumblr Walls that pique their interest. Because new content is constantly being suggested to the Tumblr user, there are constant opportunities for the Tumblr user audience to 'borrow' the visual images that have been rhetorically performed by from other Tumblr users. For the purposes of this study, it is reflexive borrowing of selected images for the purpose of the audience construction of masculine identity that is important.

The following sections aim to show how the user functions as audience for masculine visual rhetoric on Tumblr. Section 3.3.1 explores how audiences develop within Tumblr. Section 3.3.2 furthers the discussion by highlighting how these audiences function reflexively in terms of Giddens' (2013) perspective on reflexivity discussed in Chapter 2.

#### **3.3.1 The user as audience**

The user's journey as audience on Tumblr begins when they become aware of other user-rhetors performing identity on the site. When a user searches for images they are presented with a series of constantly updated search results showing new relevant content that expresses other user's masculine identity. A user viewing images on Tumblr, is not just viewing visual content, but also evidence of other users interacting with that visual content. In this sense they become audience to the telepresence of user-rhetors.

Alongside posted images, the Tumblr interface presents meta-data in the form of 'likes', 'reblogs', comments and discussions accrued by these images. Such meta-data is contributed by the user in response to the viewed performance of masculine identity. Tumblr then re-presents to the user that visual content which is 'trending', 'most recent' and 'most liked'. In doing so, Tumblr's interface rhetorically predisposes the user audience to the idea that a community exists

on the site. Overall, viewing accumulated meta-data allows a user to recognize themselves as member of an audience community.

Rheingold (1993) discusses virtual communities as social aggregations that emerge from the internet when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough and with sufficient human feeling to form personal connections within cyberspace. This is congruent with Butler's discourse on societies being built through 'shared intelligibility' (Butler 1990). Audiences on Tumblr are then a constantly shifting and interconnected virtual communities that are stitched together by shared interest in particular visual content.

As per Rheingold's (1993) definition, these virtual communities on Tumblr are distributed in that they are not limited to a specific time or location. But an image on Tumblr can be archived and resurface again, after months of dormancy. Even though the image might have been posted some time ago, it can nevertheless impact a new audience or user. The content of that image can still have enough impact for that user to like the image, or reblog it, incorporating it into the visual surface of their identity, to be disseminated to further user audience throughout the Tumblr site. In this sense, the user audience is 'multidirectional' (Carnegie 2009). Tumblr's interface provides for movement of content, through both time and space in multiple directions. Interests and visual content can be viewed and explored through Tumblr's archives, and reappropriated for new audiences.

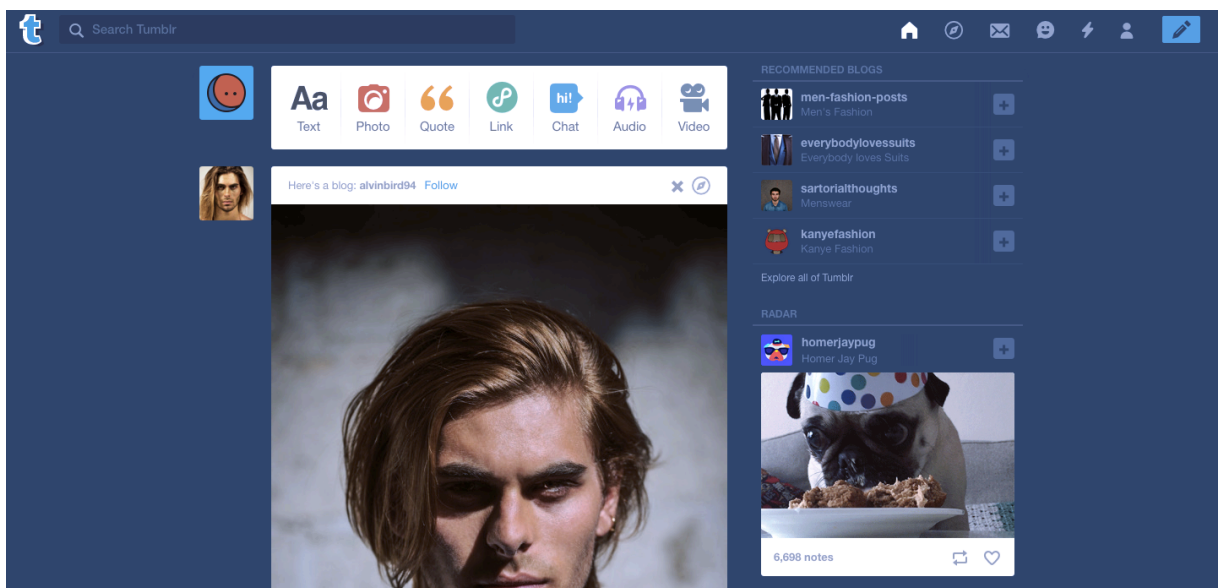
Audience communities evolve through these routine meta-data mechanisms, which include:

- Likes
- Hyperlink display of Reblogs
- Hyperlink display of source content

Interaction with these mechanisms constitute the audience community's reflexive responses.

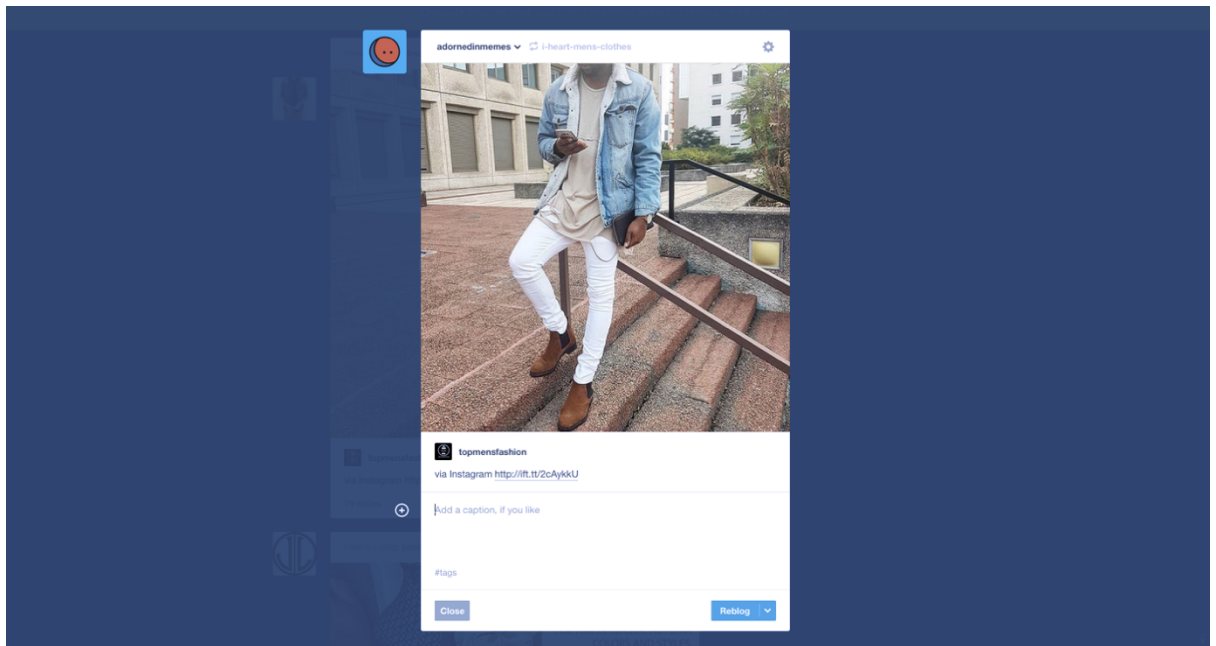
### 3.3.2 Audience reflexivity

When a user logs into Tumblr, they are presented with content based on the interest categories and audience communities they have chosen to follow. This content is presented to the user in the form of the Tumblr dashboard (Figure 3.6). This Tumblr dashboard is constantly being updated with new imagery. In this sense it serves as a reflexive gateway to visual rhetorical content that leads the user to new communities based on their shared interests.



**Figure 3.6:** *Tumblr dashboard, populated with content based on the interests selected. (www.tumblr.com)*

Here, the user audience, in real time, receives the most popular and relevant content that is disseminated on Tumblr, based on their chosen interests. Recent activity is immediately updated for viewing. Visual content, appearing as posts, are shown on the activity stream in chronological order. Through the dashboard's activity stream, an audience user can reblog content, sharing it on their Tumblr Wall. At this point, the user can give the image new text and hashtags or use the existing hashtags. Reblogging content in this manner is a reflexive response to the visual rhetoric contained in the image.



**Figure 3.7:** *Reblogging a masculine fashion image from the activity stream*

Figure 3.7 shows reblogged masculine fashion content. The image has appeared on the user's dashboard based on their chosen interest of fashion and menswear. The Tumblr site has marked the image as relating to these two interest categories based on other user-audience's interaction around the image (recorded in the forms of 'likes', 'hashtags', 'reblogs' and comments). By virtue of this relation to their existing interests, the user views the image in terms of fashion and masculinity. This pre-existing conception of masculinity serves as starting point from which they can interpret other visual rhetorical information within the image.

For instance; in Figure 3.7 the image being reblogged contains two rhetorical fashion symbols that the user as audience, views as part of Atzmon's (2008) constellation of visual meaning. The model depicted in the image is adorned in seemingly opposing rhetorical symbols that together, create new meaning. The way in which he is wearing these juxtaposed symbols communicates a certain positioning within social relations. By reblogging this image, the user is reflexively incorporating new visual rhetorical meaning into their existing conceptions of masculinity.

This process potentially occurs whenever a user interacts with an image on the Tumblr site. The user audience reblogs, likes and comments on visual content that they find on Tumblr that deal with those interests. The significance here is that 'liked' images become the building blocks used to reflexively construct a user's masculine identity.

### **3.4 Switching rhetor and audience roles.**

Audience communities on Tumblr respond reflexively to user-rhetor performances of masculinity. But it needs to be noted that a user-rhetor masculine identity would in all likelihood be appropriated from other Tumblr walls across the network. What occurs then is a switch between functioning as audience and functioning as rhetor. The user-rhetor, in performing their own masculine identity on Tumblr, simultaneously functions as a member of the audience community. At the same time by 'liking', 'reblogging' and curating masculine visual rhetoric content in a reflexive manner, the rhetor also performs masculine identity.

### **3.5 Conclusion: The Tumblr research setting**

The question raised in the beginning of this chapter was *'How is masculine identity expressed and understood through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?'* This chapter has shown that Tumblr as a setting for the transaction of masculine identity affords users the opportunity to perform and respond to masculine identity visual rhetoric. The user constructs their identity through interacting with visual content on the site in a manner that has them switching constantly from the position of visual rhetor to audience. As rhetors, users perform identity, and as audience, view content and in doing so, reflexively edit their identities in relation to what they see on the network.

These switches hinge on the what content the Tumblr interface automatically displays on one hand, and the distinctive way in which an individual interprets and interacts with the content (through 'liking', 'reblogging' and commenting). Different aspects of the Tumblr interface function to position the user as both rhetor and audience. In mediating meta-data, Tumblr facilitates the movement

between these roles. This is because Tumblr's interface presents the user with visual content whilst at the same time acquiring information about the user's response to the visual content presented.

Although Tumblr's system architecture is stable -the means afforded to users to interact with each other have not changed over the years- the result of that architecture is a constantly shifting visual surface. This visual surface consists of visual content as well as users' recorded social interactions around that content. Through meta-data recorded and presented alongside visual content, Tumblr's visual surface can be analysed.

Understanding Tumblr in light of these fast-paced interactions relating to the performance of masculine identity has helped to delineate the research setting. These research-setting interactions with visually rhetorical content on Tumblr lead to the development of a methodology for generation and analysis of data in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4: Observing masculine rhetoric on Tumblr

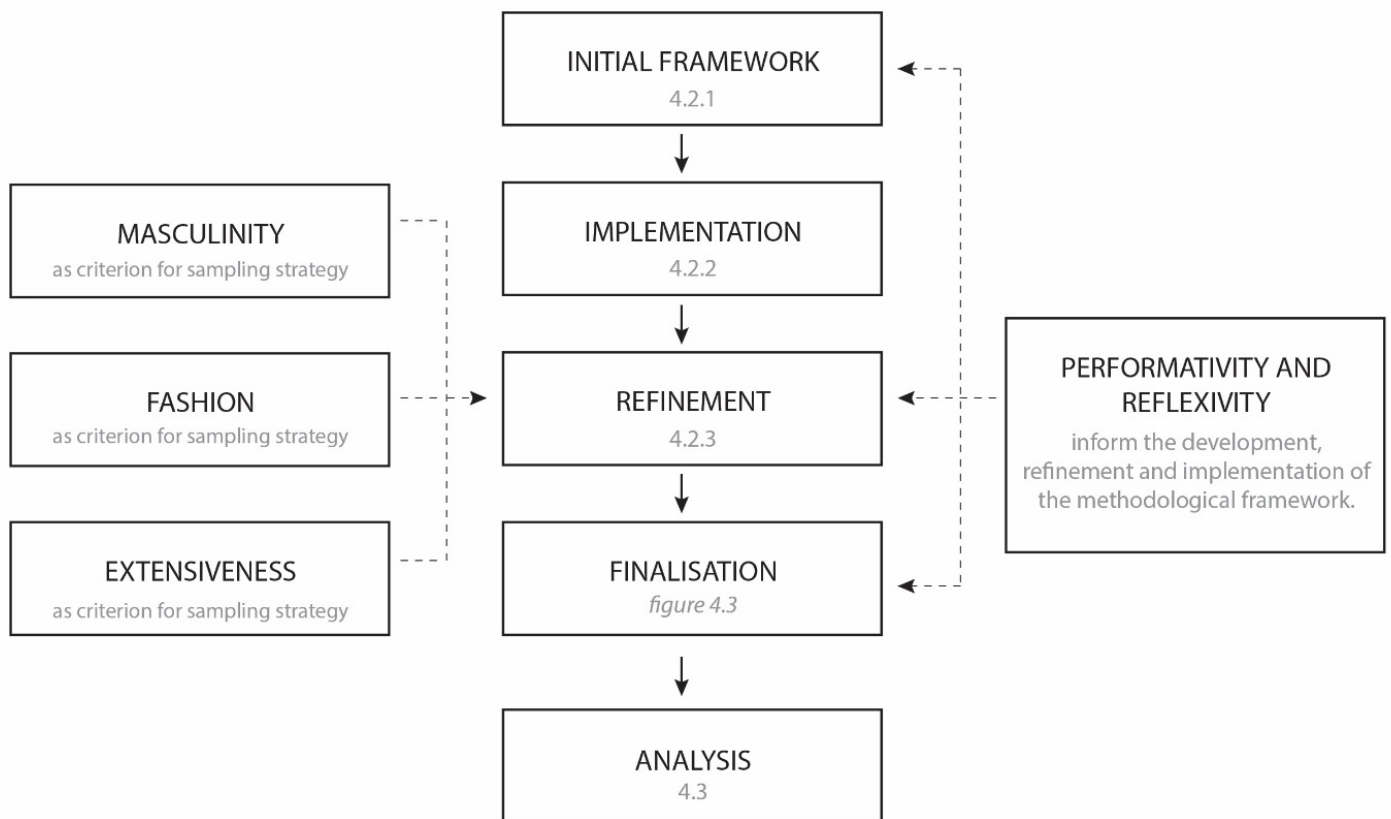
### 4.1 Introduction

Chapter 3 explored Tumblr as a research setting for inquiry into diverging masculinities. The chapter delimited the research setting to rhetorical transactions of Tumblr users around masculinity and related these to the inner workings of Tumblr and its functions. To recapitulate, a user's movements across Tumblr's visual surface, moving from image to image, are all recorded by Tumblr in the form of meta-data ('likes' and 'reblogs'). Users can visually perform and reflexively respond to masculine identity images through the digital collection, synthesis and recall of meta-data through the Tumblr interface.

Through the development of search protocols, this chapter develops an 'analytical sampling strategy' for observing the negotiation of masculine identity rhetoric on Tumblr. The concept of an 'analytical sampling strategy' departs from more traditional data generation methods and begs questions which are addressed in section 4.2. Through the delineated research setting established in Chapter 3 and analytical sampling strategy developed in this chapter the second research question of this study is addressed: In what ways *do masculinities as aspects of social identity diverge through visual rhetoric on Tumblr?*

Figure 4.1 outlines the chapter and key aspects of the methodological framework. It also sets out the sampling criteria used to search for masculine visual rhetoric on Tumblr and explore how these images diversify masculinity as a whole. The end result of the implementation of this analytical sampling strategy is the collection of a pool of diverse rhetorical masculine imagery for further analysis in Chapter 5.





**Figure 4.1:** *Outline of key aspects of methodological framework*

## 4.2 Developing an analytical sampling strategy

Initial explorations into Tumblr as a research setting in Chapter 3 indicated some challenges regarding data generation and analysis. These challenges arose, firstly, because interactions on Social Network Sites are rapid, and online community groups shift constantly. Initial searches and trial runs showed that developing a rigorous sampling strategy would need to take note of the way in which I moved through this shifting research setting.

Therefore, sampling of instances of visual masculinity rhetoric needed to be governed by search protocols developed in the process of exploring the research setting. At the same time, these search protocols would need to reconcile:

- theoretical thrusts that inform the entire study (addressed in Chapter 2)
- shifting structure of the research setting itself (addressed in Chapter 3).

To incorporate these considerations, the analytical sampling strategy required:

- Development of an initial sampling framework (4.2.1)
- Implementation of a sampling framework trial run (4.2.2)
- Refinement of the sampling framework based on observations (4.2.3)

### **4.2.1 Initial sampling framework**

The initial framework was developed through Informal explorations on Tumblr implicitly guided by performative and reflexive masculine identity rhetoric. With Tumblr being a global platform upon which images are transacted between users at a rapid pace, image searches on the platform could potentially differ depending on factors such as the number of users online at a given time as well current real-world events. Likewise, the meta-data attached to different images (such as popular hashtags) could change between sessions of Tumblr exploration. With this in mind, the initial sampling framework attempted to interact with Tumblr's unstable, shifting visual surface.

Creating an adaptive but limited sampling process was to consider the following: When would the search for images occur? For how long would a search session for images last? For how long would the sampling phase of the study last? With these variables in mind, the search sessions would be structured as such:

- Each session would last 1 hour
- Each search session would occur once a day at the same time each day (18h00)
- No limit would be placed on the number of images collected within that session
- The collection phase would last for 2 months (finalized sampling occurred between July and September 2016)

This structure was then extended to further quantitative factors. The importance of meta-data (likes, hashtags, reblogs) became even more apparent. Insights gained through explorations in Chapter 3 pointed to meta-data as a means of highlighting popular visual content on Tumblr. The number of likes, comments and reblogs accrued an image, is evidence of group interaction around an image. Consequently, images with a higher number of likes and reblogs, are more likely to rhetorically express masculine identity, than those with lower meta-data counts. The more likes and reblogs an image has, the more it appears across the research setting's visual surface. By creating quantitative sampling criteria that took into consideration how research setting itself handled imagery, focus could be placed on visual content that was used by large groups of people on Tumblr as material for the rhetorical construction of masculinity. The size of these groups, evidenced by higher meta-data counts might fluctuate day by day, but high meta-data counts were still indicative of larger groups of people interacting with images. Most importantly, this interaction always involved a swapping between user-rhetor and reflexive audience roles. This would be important in identifying rhetorical dynamics.

Quantitative considerations as to the frequency of propagation of masculine images became a deciding factor in the selection of images. Quantifiable properties attached to the images post were the number of 'likes' and 'reblogs' cumulatively recorded and presented as 'notes' by Tumblr.

This would enable popular and well propagated images on the Tumblr network to be identified. Including the baseline criteria above; initial sampling framework would thus include:

- a **minimum of 100 "notes"** signifying that the image has been interacted with by 100 anonymous users on the network, who have either liked the image, or have reblogged the image on Tumblr.
- Images that were considered could come from anywhere on Tumblr, both through Tumblr's search functionality (actively searching for images

as an average user would) as well as via images suggested to me by Tumblr itself on the Tumblr Dashboard (functioning as a passive audience to Tumblr's suggested content).

- I would allow myself to move multidirectionally (Carnegie 2009) through Tumblr as an average user would (from image link to image link) however, I would only consider images for sampling if they had accrued over 100 notes.
- The date of upload of the image is not a factor for the sake of sampling. Old images are nevertheless relevant to the study as they can recur on blog walls and still provide context for other images.
- Images saved would be moved to a Tumblr wall, as a means of recording both the image as well as the shifting meta-data attached to it.

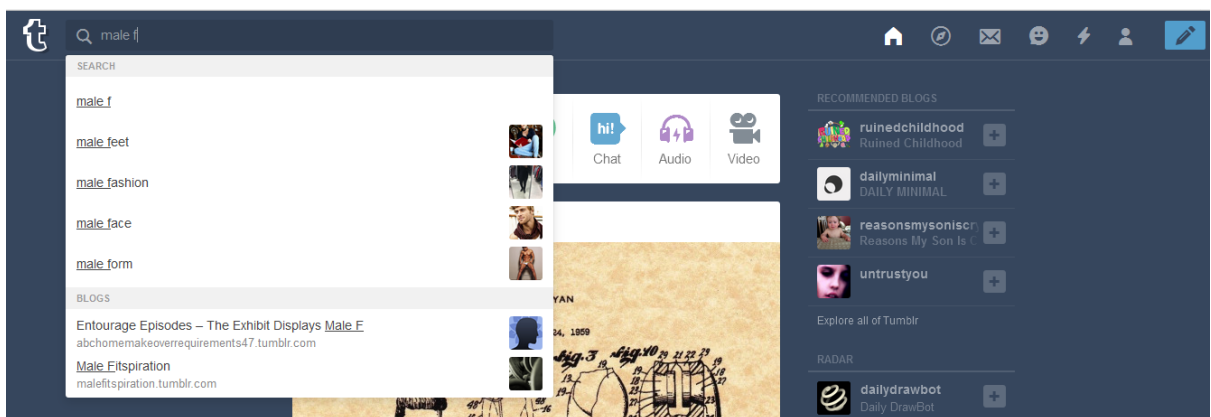
#### **4.2.2 Trial run observations**

Upon creating a new Tumblr profile and beginning my trial search session, issues arose that would greatly influence the final analytical sampling framework. From the outset, issues of coherence and methodological alignment became apparent. Although a framework for sampling popular masculinity images on Tumblr had been created, it did not take into consideration the theoretical thrusts of the study, namely; reflexivity and performativity of 'fashioned' (as explained in Chapter 3) masculinity rhetoric.

To explain further, trial runs of discerning rhetorical content of images in terms of masculinity and fashion, were based purely on key theoretical thrust (as discussed in Chapter 2). Keyword inputs based on these key theoretical thrusts however, raised an issue of interpretive rigor to the study. Although visual rhetoric studies are interpretive in nature (McQuarrie and Mick 1999), I nevertheless sought a more rigorous way wanted to find a means to move beyond interpretive inference as a means of identifying masculine content on Tumblr.

During the process of these trial runs, a means of contending with this issue emerged. It became apparent that the research setting itself, in the form of the Tumblr functionality was in real time, actively moderating my searches by auto-suggesting content to me. Tumblr's digital mechanisms constantly record the number of likes, notes and reblogs an image accrues, as well as the connections between images and hashtags. In this way, the performative and reflexive behaviour of users around those images are too recorded. This information is immediately used by Tumblr to present users with the visual content most highly indexed by other users, even moments before a search occurs. This means that the Tumblr interface essentially offers a consensus of response to visual images and to the text-based indexing of them.

Beside this consensus response, the ubiquity and rhetorical importance of fashion on Tumblr cannot be overstated. To illustrate: if a user wished to search for “male fashion”, they might begin with “male f” but before the word f – ashion is completed, the user is presented with content archived under the meta-data tag, “#male”. The qualification ‘f’ further narrows results. This input into the search engine is then cross referenced to the most widely used hashtags. In this case, ‘male f’ turns out be associated with #fashion, so Tumblr auto-completes the user input of ‘male f’ with the suggestion “male fashion”. Significantly, the letter “f” remains enough for the Tumblr search engine to cross reference connect it with the most popular searches on the database and present a ‘fashion’ (Figure: 4.2).



**Figure 4.2:** Tumblr's search functionality (<http://www.tumblr.com>)

As researcher-user I could at this point, choose to use the auto-suggested search, and select the 'Male Fashion' prompt provided by Tumblr, I could also travel to a selection of Tumblr walls (seen under 'Blogs' in Figure: 4.2). To relate this back to the issue of rigor in terms of the theoretical targeting of the study, what I was observing, was the research setting itself targeting the theoretical concerns of the study (through minimal input and by virtue of the ubiquity of the connection between masculinity and fashion on Tumblr).

In sum, allowing Tumblr to auto-suggest and complete search terms as a strategy for analysis meant that trial searches could be ventured and confirmed or disconfirmed. The meta-data that Tumblr uses to cache information around content on the site indicated reflexive user response to the performance of masculine identity rhetoric. Thus, by allowing the research setting itself to guide my searches for masculine content through using its autosuggestion features, I move beyond subjective interpretation when applying the key theoretical thrusts of this study to my sampling framework. With this in mind the initial sampling framework would need to be refined.

Through using the research setting itself to hone in on the theoretical thrusts of the study an 'unobtrusive research method' (Webb 1966) emerged. This new approach to how target audiences could potentially be observed, (observing interactions around content by monitoring hashtags and other meta-data), aligns with Millman's (2008) discussion on the need for new ways of researching target markets within the practice of visual communication and design as discussed in Chapter 2.

Thus, observations during the trial runs of the initial sampling framework showed that my original methodological approach needed to be further adapted to the research setting. The original sampling framework involved tracking user paths on Tumblr and collecting masculine images along the way. The aim was to create a pool of images that could be used for analysis. This proposed process separated my data collection and data analysis and into two separate phases. After having found sample images on Tumblr, I would then analyse

them. My thinking here, however, conformed to linear and sequential steps. When considering qualitative research methods, Lawrence and Usman (2013) suggest that a linear approach to data collection and analysis is well suited to purely quantitative research, however, these kind of linear distinctions between phases of research are not clear-cut with regard to qualitative research. With regard to this study, this linear approach was ignoring the fact that my data collection was serving as a form of analysis in itself.

During the trial runs, the analytical nature of my movements across Tumblr became apparent. These movements capitalized on the 'multi-directional' (Carnegie 2009) nature of the research setting. I began using content from hashtags related to masculinity and fashion attached to images that fit my sampling criteria as inputs for further exploration on Tumblr. It became apparent that I was not simply collecting data in terms of images to be sampled, but also collecting data via analysing, in real time, the meta-data content that was attached to those images. This analysis then fuelled searches for new images. In allowing the data itself to fuel my interactions with the research setting, I was moving away from using my own interpretation to the key theoretical thrusts as a primary force in my sampling.

The data analysis thus related to more than the sample images collected from across Tumblr. It became apparent that the processes around how images were collected as well as to how images were disseminated, communicated and interacted with on Tumblr were of crucial importance. In relation to these processes, Herring (2004) explains some important features of the analysis of new media content. The heterogeneous and interconnected nature of objects (in this case, images), and the new media environment (the Tumblr setting) and how users interact and use the objects within the environment (to construct masculine identity through visual rhetoric) makes it difficult to study each at a separate phase. Accordingly, an integrated approach (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004:109) to data analysis would be more suited to the research setting. It is recommended that qualitative data collection and analysis should be simultaneously conducted (Maxwell 2008:236). This sentiment is echoed by Neuman (2014: 477):

*“Certain qualitative research, collects a great deal of data to describe details about people, actions and events in social life. The data are in the form of text from documents, observational notes, ...and images or photos. It is not enough to collect the data; we also must analyse it. In qualitative approaches to research, analysis begins while gathering data...”* (Neuman 2014:477)

In the case of analysis of social media, the case is somewhat different to the co-ordination of data generation and analysis over a series qualitative interviews, for instance. As Herring (2004) has mentioned above, there are images, the social media environment and interactions between users and images to consider. With this in mind, it became apparent that I would need to refine my initial sampling framework.

#### **4.2.3 Refinement of analytical sampling**

Observations throughout the trial run of the initial sampling framework had highlighted the need to refine key aspects of my methodological approach. Specifically, the need to reconcile Tumblr’s dynamic structure with the theoretical thrusts of the study became apparent. This is in accordance to Henning’s (2004) integrated view of data analysis. I would need to integrate the theoretical thrusts of the study (addressed in Chapter 2, The dynamic structure of the research setting itself (addressed in Chapter 3) as well as the analytical nature of my sampling strategy that emerged through my trial runs (addressed in section 4.2.2).

The sampling framework would need to be readdressed and instead, an analytical sampling strategy created. Although much of the sampling framework relating to the creating stability within Tumblr’s shifting setting would remain the same. I would create additional analytical protocols that balance the theoretical thrust of the study against Tumblr’s dynamic functionalities as a means of unobtrusively honing in on specifically masculine and fashion related rhetorical



content. In accordance to my observations in section 4.2.2, the theoretical thrusts of the study would thus be targeted using the research setting itself. Any inputs into Tumblr, would need to be based off existing fashion-centric hashtags found on Tumblr. Similarly, masculine and fashion related imagery would only be chosen for sampling, if arrived at via Tumblr's auto-suggestion features.

Images selected for this study would need to be ones that have been used extensively across the visual surface of Tumblr to represent masculinity. The extensive reach of an image on Tumblr could be established by the amount of 'notes' attached to the image. Tumblr images may accrue a large amount of reblogs and likes (meta-data) or accrue very few of these endorsements. Similarly, users may widely or less widely incorporate other users' images in their own Tumblr wall montage. The difference, in this case is indicative of societal movement toward reflexive assimilation of conceptions of masculinity.


At the same time concern with regard to my initial sampling criteria when outlining the initial methodological framework was the sheer amount of quantitative data, attached to the images on Tumblr. My initial sampling framework entailed searching for images with a minimum of 100 notes attached. However, during the trial run process, it was becoming apparent that most images, especially those that presented masculine fashion related content, had accrued likes, shares and reblogs in the thousands. As such, I decided to change the minimum number of notes attached to an image for consideration from 100, to 1000. An image with 1000 likes, thus is a much more potent indicator of the evolution of ideas from relatively arbitrary challenges to normative social identity constructions, to a shared shift in thinking. Thus, looking for images that have a large number of likes, reblogs, and reposts, will better suit this study.




Based on the foregoing analytical sampling concerns, I arrived at a layered analytical sampling strategy. The strategy is informed by an integrated view of data analysis where "the very structure of the data is seen as the organizing logic" (Henning, Van Rensburg and Smit 2004). Figure 4.3 shows the

integration of the theoretical and research setting thrusts that inform this study.

The Figure shows two layers:

- The first layer is a framework, attempting to create a structure for analysis of the shifting nature of the research setting.
- The second layer is a series of protocols calls that attempt to leverage the key theoretical thrusts of the study against the dynamics of the research setting.

FRAMEWORK		
Images that were considered could come from anywhere on Tumblr, both through Tumblr's search functionality (me actively searching for images as an average user would) as well as via images suggested to me by Tumblr itself on the Tumblr Dashboard (me functioning as a passive audience to Tumblr's suggested content).		
As user-researcher, I would allow myself to move multidirectionally (Carnegie 2009) through Tumblr as an average user would (from image link to image link) however, I would only consider images for sampling if they had accrued over 1000 notes.		
Each sampling session would last 1 hour.		
Each search session would occur once a day at the same time each day (18h00).		
Search sessions would be carried out for 60 days (between the months of July and September 2016).		
No limit would be placed on the number of images collected within that session		
The date of upload of the image is not a factor for the sake of sampling.		
A new search session can use hashtags discovered in previous sessions as starting points.		
Images should be placed within a context (through montage, on a Tumblr wall) of fashion imagery if not overtly relating to fashion or masculinity in isolation.		
Images saved would be moved to a Tumblr wall, as a means of recording both the image as well as the shifting meta-data attached to it.		
PROTOCOLS		
THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS		STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATIONS
Search inputs should relate to Male Fashion.		Any search inputs must be auto-completed by Tumblr.

All Tumblr walls and Hashtags explored, should relate to male fashion.		Only automatically suggested content can be explored from Tumblr's search functionality.
Images should relate to the performance of masculinity through fashion.		Images must have fashion-centric hashtags attached to it.
All images considered for sampling should be potent indicators of the evolution of ideas from relatively arbitrary challenges to normative social identity constructions to a shared shift in thinking.		Images must have accrued a <b>minimum of 1000 "notes"</b> signifying that the image has been interacted with by 1000 anonymous users on the network, who have either liked the image, or have reblogged the image on Tumblr.

**Figure 4.3:** *Integrating theoretical and research setting thrusts within an overarching framework*

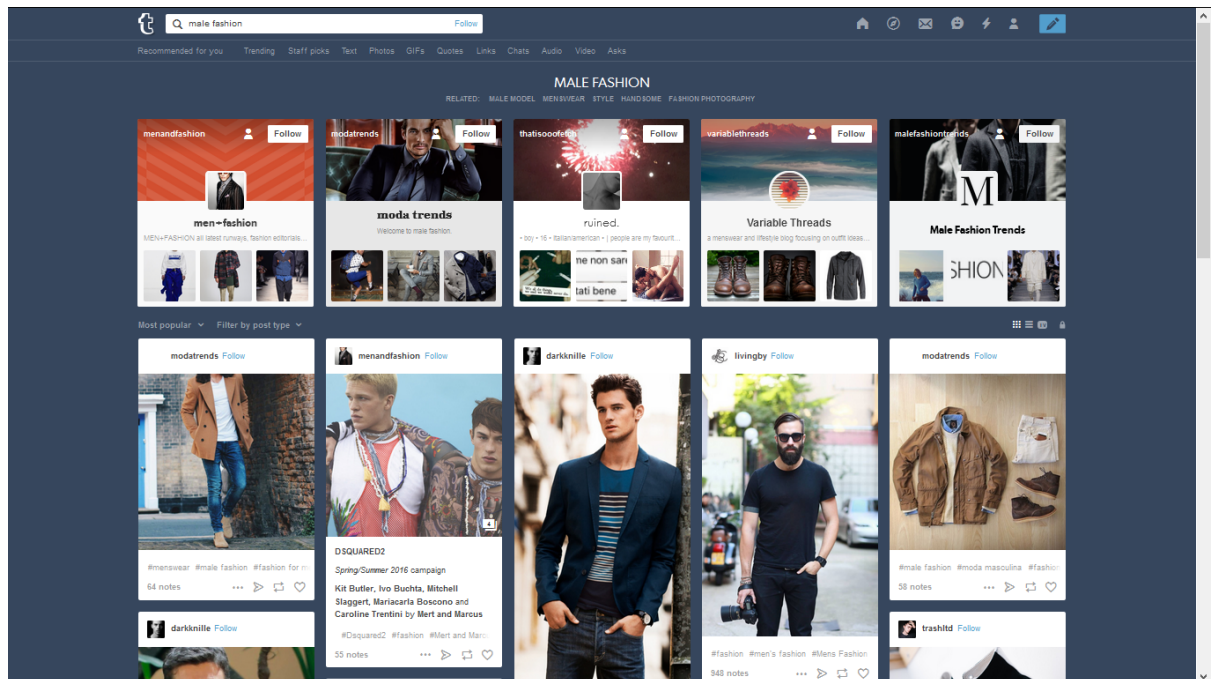
### 4.3 Implementing analysis

This section provides an illustrative account of the analytical procedure followed during every search session using the refined analytical sampling strategy. This procedure was carried out during every search session for the two months during which the sampling for masculine imagery on Tumblr occurred (60 sessions).

The procedure began with inputting a string of keywords into the search bar that appears on the Tumblr dashboard. At this point, the auto suggest feature became active, and the input of 'male f' was auto-completed as 'male fashion'. When choosing the auto suggested term and selecting "Male Fashion", a series of the most popular Tumblr walls and images relating to the search was presented in Figure 4.3.

Each image in Figure 4.4 is culled from user-rhetor walls by the Tumblr database, based on frequency and type of interaction around those images. All this data is used by Tumblr to provide a refined search result as well as a set of divergent suggestions in the form of popular hashtags based on similar content.

The search functionality thus acts as a gateway to new content based on interactions between content and communities of users on the social network.

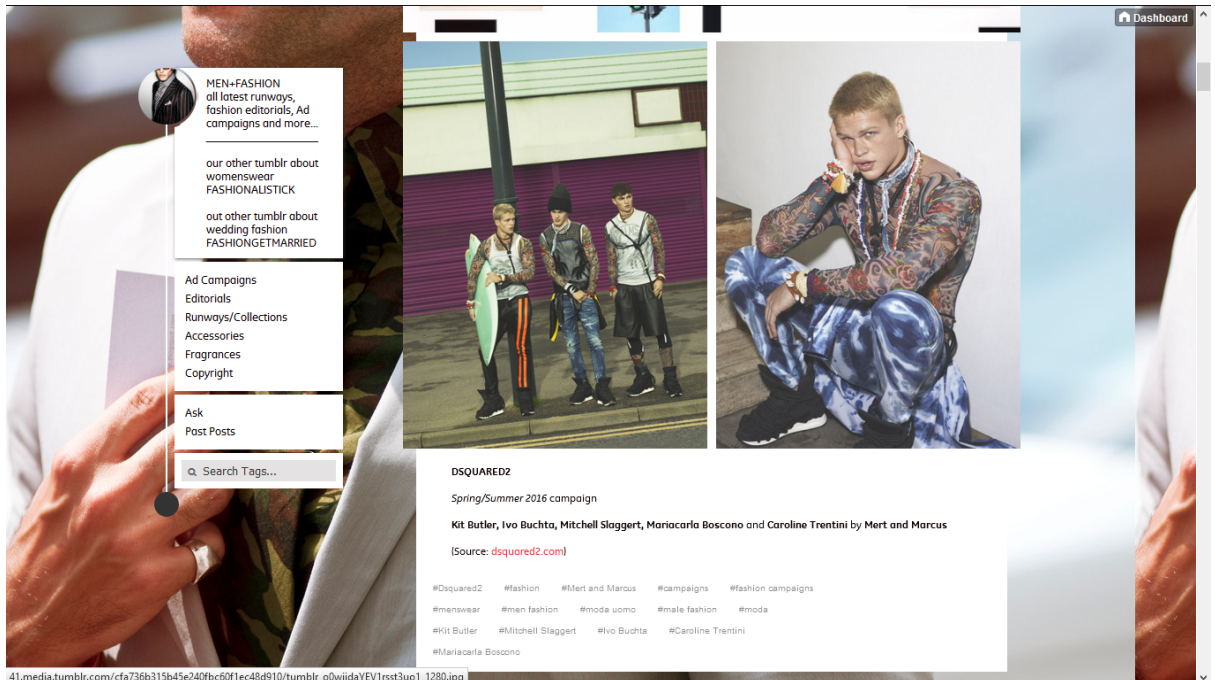


**Figure 4.4:** *Tumblr, recalling content based on auto-completion: ‘male-fashion’*  
(<https://www.tumblr.com/search/male+fashion>)

This refined search is bolstered by what the database sees as related topics such as “Male Model”, “Streetwear”, “Handsome” and “Style” (Figure 4.3). These terms were presented as suggested hashtags and are all terms that can be associated with the performance of masculinity through fashion. In accordance with the analytical sampling strategy, these terms also indicate appropriate further searches.

Searching for content and being open to new content that might offer divergent conceptions of masculinity, meant being co-opted into functioning as an audience of the masculine performances of other users. This is due to the group dynamics of active co-participation with thousands of other users all actively consuming content.

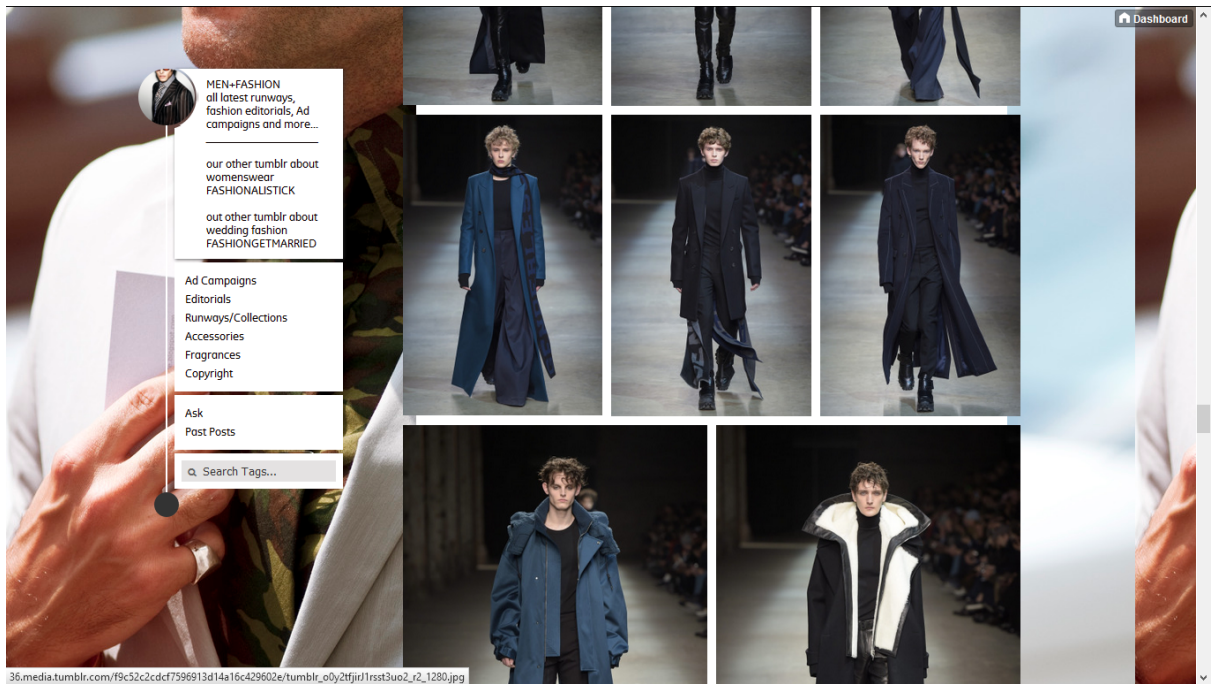
After being presented with the first set of images (Figure 4.4) (all based on popularity), I can choose an image. By clicking on it, I am taken to the Tumblr wall of the user who has recently posted the image (Figure 4.5).



**Figure 4.5:** *Tumblr wall connected to a selected masculine image*  
([Http://www.fiticzen.tumblr.com](http://www.fiticzen.tumblr.com))

At this point the search led me to a series of male fashion images that were used as part of a masculine presentation (by appearing on a Tumblr wall) by a specific user. This user's Tumblr wall contained images that are related to a Tumblr community concerned with a particular influence of male fashion. It is not a far leap then, to say that the images on this wall contain what is considered socially acceptable in terms of masculine identity.

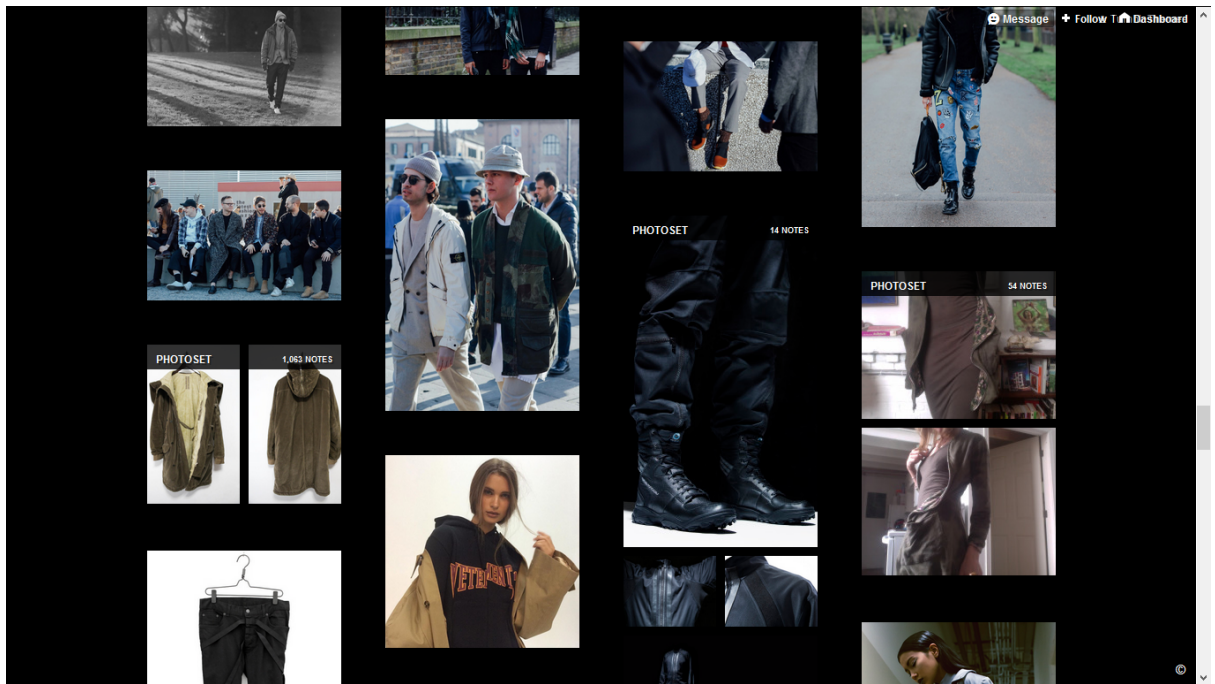
A search originating on the page featured in Figure 4.5 lead to a divergent set of images shown in Figure 4.6. When continuing to view images presented on this user's Tumblr wall, I am presented with images that are divergent from the initial content that I selected when searching for images actively (Figure 4.4).



**Figure 4.6:** *A divergent masculine image set on Tumblr wall*  
([Http://www.fiticzen.tumblr.com](http://www.fiticzen.tumblr.com))

The visual rhetoric of the images depicting masculinity in Figures 4.4 and 4.5 are nuanced, however, they are both situated under in the same Tumblr wall dedicated to “Male Fashion”. They have also both garnered the same amount of attention within the “Male Fashion” community on Tumblr (achieving over 1000 notes). Thus, the signal being sent to me as a user, is that, even though the images in Figures 4.5 and 4.6 are different, they still have appeal within the larger scope of male fashion and masculinity. Whereas Figure 4.5 reads as a rebellious and youthful masculinity, Figure 4.6 reads as a subdued, gender-ambiguous and sophisticated one. They both however, are considered masculine. Thus, as a user, I am led in to accepting this new form of masculinity. Clicking on the new image in Figure 4.6 sends me to a Tumblr wall a particular masculine sub-genre. Essentially, a sub group within the larger group of Male Fashion that I had initially searched for (Figure 4.4).





**Figure 4.7:** A Tumblr Wall displaying the visual DNA of a divergent masculinity ([www.edgecity.tumblr.com](http://www.edgecity.tumblr.com))

This new Tumblr wall (rhetorically diverging from the masculine image that initiated this search) contains a montage of images that are extensively popular (with thousands of likes and shares). Though this Tumblr wall is not as popular as the wall suggested to me by the database in my initial search (Figure 4.4), it is important as an indicator of the content that defines a subgenre within the larger group of 'Male Fashion' and by association, 'Masculinity'.

Walls such as this (Figure 4.7), essentially contain the visual 'DNA' of the masculine subgenre they dedicate themselves to. Here, the visual rhetoric of this form of masculinity is distilled and abstracted, allowing the user to identify and absorb each element in isolation. The particular masculinity montage in Figure 4.7 is composed of life-style images, distilled colour palettes and textures, close ups, products and brands that, as Pan et al. (2013), have mentioned, together define a 'fashioned' masculinity. In this sense, these abstracted images accrue new masculine meaning by virtue of being used in a montage that as a whole, rhetorically performs a masculinity. This is evidenced by the fashion related hash tagging images, (Figure 4.8). As Pan *et al* (2013)

has explained in Chapter 2, fashion is associated not just with the dressed body, but also with activities practices and objects.



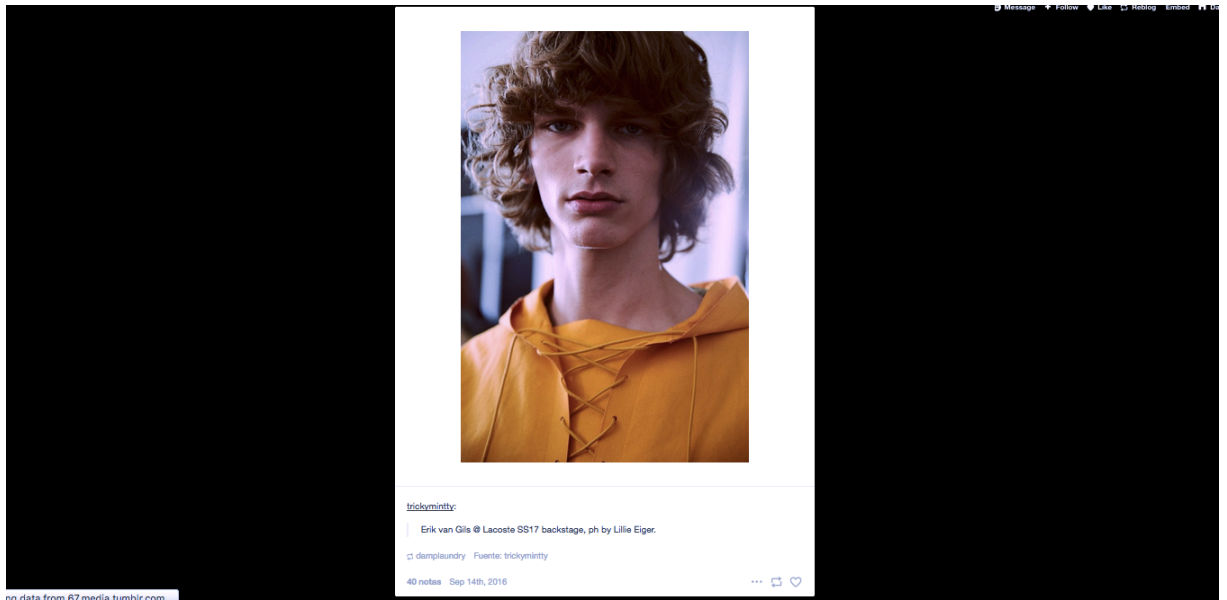
**Figure 4.8:** *An image accruing masculine meaning via hashtags*  
([www.loskkry83/tumblr.com/image/03583484086](http://www.loskkry83/tumblr.com/image/03583484086))

Moving across Tumblr in this manner, revealed diverging conceptions of masculinity. After 60 search sessions it became apparent that masculinities begin to diverge as images move across Tumblr's visual surface and accrue new meaning.

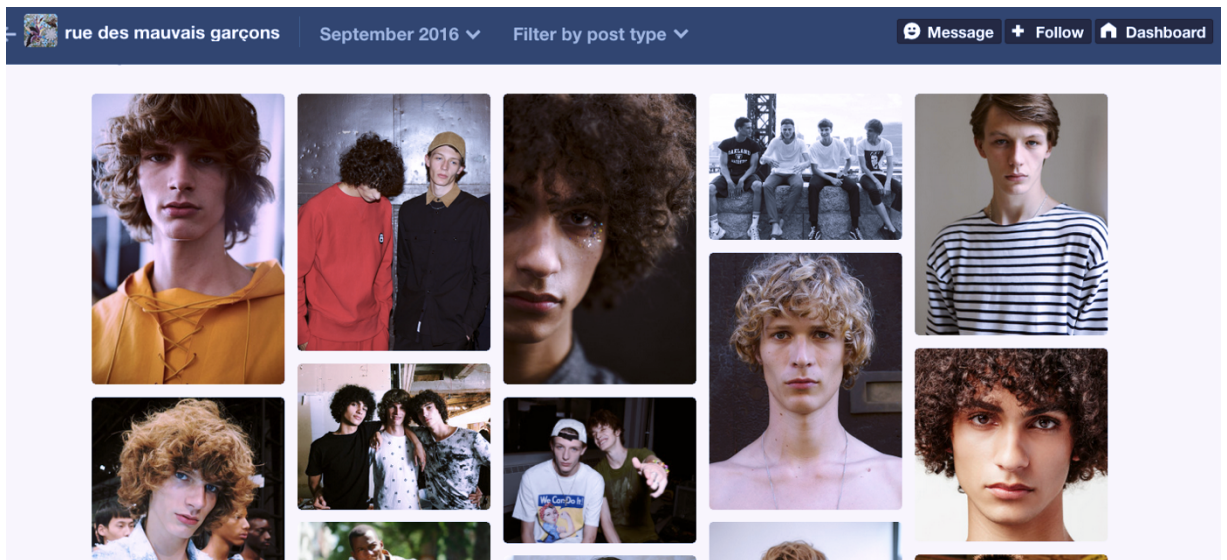
To further illustrate how images, accrue new rhetorical meaning as a result of being shared across Tumblr's visual surface, I have provided the following example, using images that fit the analytical sampling criteria. Figure 4.9, is an image of a popular male model Erik van Gils, who is depicted, modelling for part of a fashion editorial shoot for the luxury menswear brand Lacoste. This image was archived under the hashtag: "#ErikvanGils". Figure 4.9, and Figure 4.10,



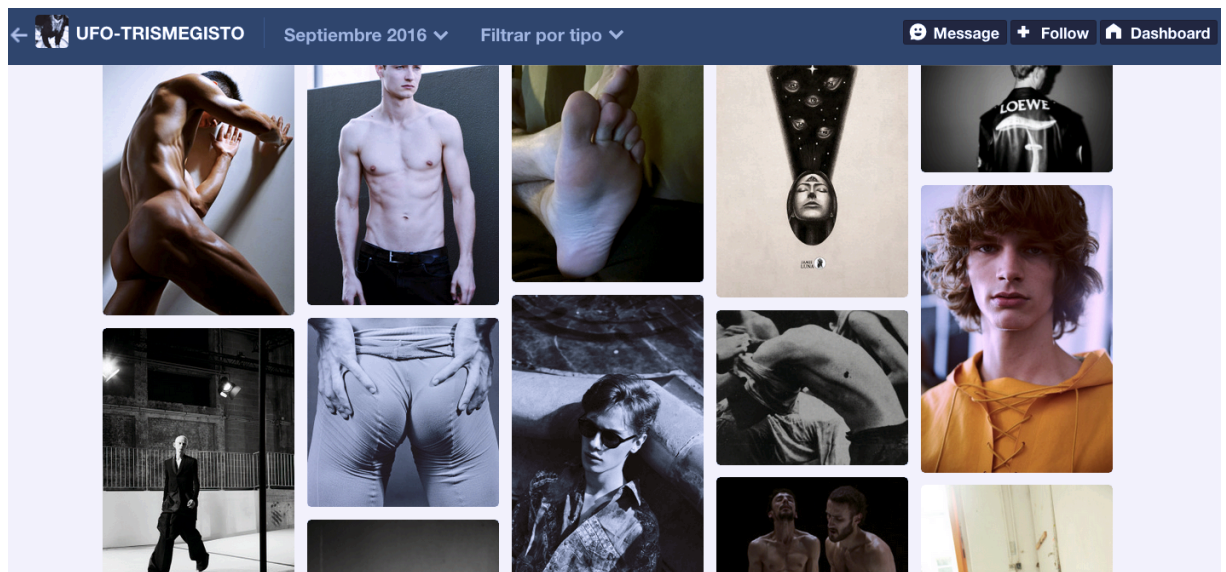
show the same image, featured on different Tumblr Walls. This is common occurrence on Tumblr as images are shared across its visual surface. What is significant however, is the differing contexts created by the recombining of images in the wall montages as illustrated in Figures 4.9 and 4.10.



**Figure 4.9:** An image of male model, *Erick van Gills* ([www.vehemence.tumblr.com/1040670403220.jpg](http://www.vehemence.tumblr.com/1040670403220.jpg))



**Figure 4.10:** *Erik van Gills* recontextualised ([Http://www.rues\\_desmauvais\\_arcons.tumblr.com/archive](http://www.rues_desmauvais_arcons.tumblr.com/archive))



**Figure 4.11:** Erik van Gils further recontextualised ([Http://www.ufo-trismegitso.tumblr.com/archive](http://www.ufo-trismegitso.tumblr.com/archive))

In Figure 4.9, the image of the young man is placed amongst images of similar young men with a curly mop of hair. The aim of this blog is to showcase fashion, and specifically, hair and facial aesthetics of male models. Here the image has accrued new rhetorical meaning as well as a new hashtag: “#menshair”. Figure 4.10 again, contains the same image, shared from the same source, however, recontextualised amongst images to that, together, portray a much more sexual overtone. Here, the image has accrued the hashtag “#beautifulmen”. Although much of the visual information is the same, relating to motifs common within the realm of fashion and fashion imagery, the rhetorical performativity of the overall montage has shifted between Figures 4.10 and 4.11. In the process of being moved from one wall to another, the image has been recontextualised. By virtue of its new context on a different Tumblr walls, the image has accrued new rhetorical meaning. As Atzmon (2008) referred to in Chapter 2, the constellation of images amount to a new rhetorical proposition. To the user, searching ‘Erik van Gil’ (Figure 4.8) could lead a user to multiple instances of the image, each however, within a different context, leading the user to infer diverging masculine meaning from the same image.

## 4.4 Conclusion

Through developing and implementing an analytical sampling strategy, insight has been gained into how masculinity diverges on Tumblr. To answer the question posed at the beginning of this chapter, *“How do masculinities as aspects of social identity diverge through visual rhetoric on Tumblr”*: As Tumblr users share images onto their Tumblr walls as part of their performance of masculine identity, these images combine and accrue new masculine meaning.

In other words, as more and more users interact with an image, it accrues new meta-data that signifies its additional diversified meaning. In light of this process, images that may not have been considered masculine, can now be viewed as masculine. Significantly, these recontextualised, now masculine images, are then used to perform new diverse conceptions of masculinity by other Tumblr users. Thus, masculine conceptions begin to diverge as a result of images acquiring new rhetorical meaning via their movement across Tumblr’s visual surface as they are used in new rhetorical masculine presentations.

The analytical sampling strategy outlined in this chapter led to the creation of a pool of sample images that are used for further analysis in Chapter 5 using the analytical sampling strategy developed in this chapter, a pool of 230 masculine images were collected. The categorization of those images into genres of masculinities is covered in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 5: Concluding the study**

### **5.1 Introduction**

Chapters 3 and 4 dealt with the development of the study. This chiefly involved the development of an analytical sampling strategy that sought to bring the research setting together with the theoretical concerns of the study. Through the implementation of the analytical sampling strategy, a pool of masculine images from Tumblr was created.

This chapter concludes the study by describing how these images were further analysed and sorted into five divergent masculinity categories. Rather than static categories, these are exemplars of masculinities that will continue to emerge and to diverge from earlier gender mores. Finally, the broader significance of this study is discussed and further avenues of research are suggested.

### **5.2 Exemplar categorization of masculine imagery**

The primary objective of exemplar categorization was to show how performativity and reflexivity around masculinity *can* be read as visual rhetoric on Tumblr. To emphasise this point, these categories neither define nor exhaust the possibilities for masculinity diversification. The corpus of these exemplar categories can be viewed at <http://divergentmasculinities.tumblr.com/>. Images were collected on this Tumblr blog so that both meta-data and visual rhetoric could be viewed together. By virtue of the of meta-data's nature -as a cumulative indicator of an image's journey across Tumblr's visual surface- as well as the integrated way in which analysis at all parts of this study approach visual rhetoric and meta-data for, more value is gained by viewing the data situated within the Social Network Site itself.

The categorization process began by dividing the large group of 230 sampled images into smaller more manageable groups Variation is required for discernment to occur (Marton and Trigwell 2000). In light of this, groupings of 10 images were used to aid categorization. This allowed for the discernment of

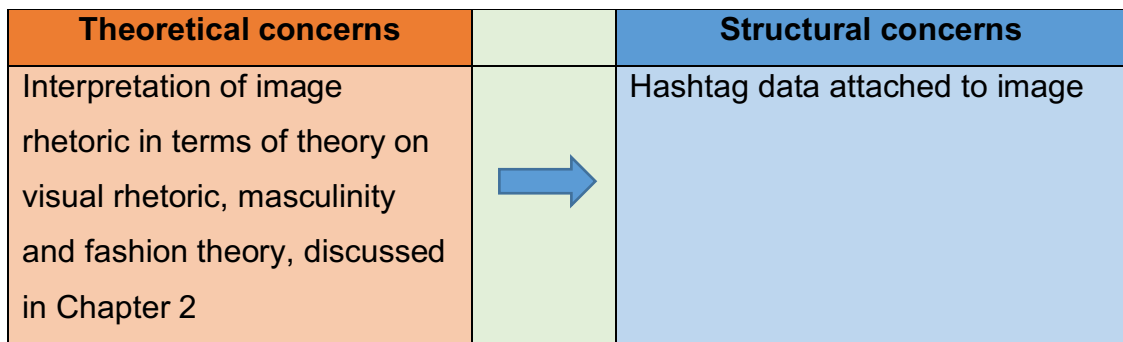
sufficient similarity within a rhetorical category, whilst allowing for variation to occur within the group. Thus with 23 groups of 10, categorization begun by rearranging and combining groups of images based on similarities and differences between the images within these groups.

A process of distinguishing similarities and differences in rhetorical content was adopted, which adhered strictly to the criteria for analytical sampling given in Chapter 4. To re-iterate, these criteria were;

- Fashionability as a cultural and social visual surface including activities, practices and all forms of bodily display.
- Masculinity as the socially differentiated performance of gender.
- Meta-data, as quantitative evidence of performativity and reflexivity.

Within the context of users online, presenting masculinity through curated imagery on Tumblr walls, the idea of “*like looking and like thinking*” (Polemus 1994:15) become important. ‘*Like thinking*’ masculine users on Tumblr are claiming their masculinity by using images of behaviours of ‘*like looking*’ men to fashion their Tumblr wall.

When considering the categorization of these images, a two-pronged approach was adopted. Sample images were separated into broad categories by considering both their visual rhetoric as well as the meta-data attached to each image. In the same manner as the method discussed in Chapter 4, the analytical process leveraged interpretation of theoretical concerns to the study, against structural concerns that were native to Tumblr itself as a means of maintaining rigor and moving beyond pure interpretation.



**Figure 5.1:** *Protocol for categorization of images into broad groups*

Specifically, images were sorted in to groups based on whether they were performatively and reflexively similar or different. As these groups grew, comparisons between the visual rhetoric of individual images and larger group-wholes were made as a means of isolating instances of different visual rhetoric and relocating them to other groups. These decisions took into consideration the hashtag content attached to the individual images, compared against the hashtag content of the group as well. In this sense, the analysis of the images as parts and whole created broad groups of images sharing similar visual rhetorical content and meta-data content.

Moving from group to group and re-arranging images led to the formation of broad categories. This essentially became a process of removing outliers in a group of 10, moving it to another group that shared visual rhetorical as well as meta-data similarities -placing like with like. Figure 5.2 shows the physical process of arranging sample images into broad groups.



**Figure 5.2:** *Physically categorizing images into broad groups in terms of visual rhetoric and meta-data*

With some similarities to the hermeneutic technique (Heywood 1999) of thinking in terms of parts and wholes, focus shifted regularly between the rhetorical qualities of single images, and the rhetorical quality of the group as a whole. To illustrate; in Figure 5.3, although the visual rhetoric and content of all the images are different, two images, A and B stand out as being similar, although other images around them also allude to violence. Images A and B both depict injury, harm and pain. These two would be grouped together and separated from the adjacent images. In this way, by constantly comparing images to those around them within the pool, distinct and diverse groups of images began to emerge.





**Figure 5. 1:** *An unsorted image group.*

Continuing this process with all 230 images, the initial smaller groups of 10 images were reduced to 5 large groups of representing rhetorically different masculinities. Thus 5 diversified conceptions of masculinity have been extracted from the sample image pool. Namely:

- Sportshood
- The Peter Pan
- The Nonchalant Brute
- Fragile Masculinity
- The Nouveau Beau

Appendix 1-5 depicts all 230 images collected into these 5 conceptions.

Within each of these 5 conceptions, the 10 images with the most meta-data at the time of sampling, (likes, reblogs and comments) have been used to form a montage that is representative of the category. Montage is technique for assembling separate items so that they form a coherent whole. The following section focusses on the 5 categories with reference to the montages created to represent the diversified masculinity.

Each exemplar montage is composed of different yet connected images. The connection is based on fashion as a behaviour and practice (Pan *et al.* 2015)













and on masculinity, and, here, as a step forward, an incipient form of masculinity diversification.

### **5.2.1 Sportshood**

Figure 5.4 (see page 76) depicts a montage that at first glance seem to hark to the commodified, 'branded masculinity' (Alexander 2003) that suffused the 1970s and 1980s. Sports-brands in the 1970s and 1980s created an idealized masculinity – the man depicted as a heroic, risk-taking adrenaline junkie (Le Breton 2000) – The 'sports-brand', commodified masculinity via rhetorical scenes created for advertisements; depicting the sportsman and his "athletic ordeals" (Le Breton 2000). The end product of this commodification was an aspirational, hyper- virile and unattainable masculinity.

By contrast, the Sportshood masculinity supersedes the 'jock- nerd' polarisation (Martin and Koda 1989) that suffused branded masculinity in the 1980s. In Sportshood, brand logos are badges of a basic belonging that is non-individual and non-exclusive. Here, the idea of autonomous cultural expression (Malossi 2000:30) comes to light. On Tumblr, the expression of masculinity through sportswear is of the individual's volition as opposed to the sports-brand's. Through this the member of a Sportshood diaspora has broken past the 'grid of cultural intelligibility' (Butler 2011:208) created by the sports-brand's commodification of masculine identity in the media. Sportshood seems to also bespeak the Acting Basic trend (KHole 2013:23) where unexceptional, normal sameness is the watchword. Even infants are included in Sportshood. Men across of spectrum of physiques, ages and social backgrounds as shown in Figure 5.4 participate.

	1	2
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**Figure 5.4:** A montage of Sportshood images


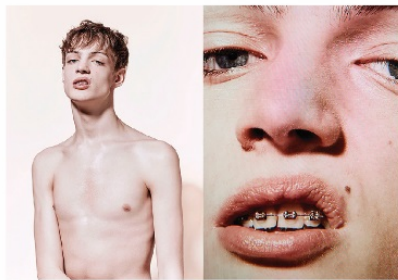




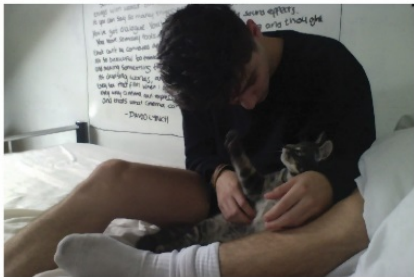

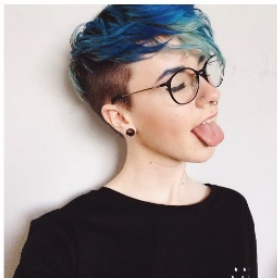

### 5.2.2 The Peter Pan

The montage in Figure 5.5 ( see page 79) rhetorically presents a veneration of boyishness. The meta-data attached to these images include tags such as “#likeaboy”, “#cute” and “#boystuff”. These tags downplay adult masculinity by using oversized clothing and accessories to obscure physique (Figure 5.5: C1, C2, E2); akin to a child playing dress-up. Garments and situational cues associate with the innocence and purity of young boys (Figure 5.5: B1, B2, D1). Through this depiction of youth in Figure 5.5 the actors could be compared to the “ingénue” (Turco 1999:30) trope within literary fiction; its visual rhetoric of youthful purity and idealism. The Figure 5.5 montage presents a rejection of the classically aggressive and stoic depictions of masculinity (Connell 2005). Instead the actors are halted in time, as a homage to ‘Peter Pan’ (Barrie 1999), the boy who refused to grow up in J. M. Barrie’s children’s book.

This conception of masculinity is not to be confused with effeminacy or androgyny. A female actor (Fig 5.5 E1) is purposely included because of her significant choice to mask physical sex with a that of a boy-child gender performance. The selective gender performance moves away from the masculine versus feminine dichotomy to explore how it might be to be callow and unformed.

The rejection of adulthood is not new within the realm of masculinity. In ancient Greek society, men regardless of age, could be given the social status of the adolescent or ‘Ephebe’ (Sachperoglou, Hirst and Mackridge 1996:33). From the 1940s to 1970s, popular culture has venerated the image of the “unfinished” man (Hine 2000:104). Women have felt the need to mother him (Hine 2000). Hine (2000) points out that toward the 1970s, the age at which men attained their economic maturity grew later. Primary contributors to this phenomenon was the need for men to be more highly educated and thus stay in high school and college for longer periods. In terms of masculinity, men remained in a state of adolescent flux for longer. The socio-economic circumstances surrounding Hine’s ‘unfinished” man of the 1970s are reflected, if not magnified in today’s online society. Entire online communities, unable to bear the responsibilities of

adulthood are retreating to the world of online social culture, as Rahman (2017) has shown. In the case of this gender presentation adulthood can be halted altogether, a complete rejection of adult masculinity. More poignantly, it is possible that other men have through the Peter Pan Figure been able to resist the pressure to be fully complete and equipped for life's challenges. This is an unwillingness to don the mantle of social responsibility attributed to adulthood and traditional 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005).

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A		
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C		
D		
E		

**Figure 5.2:** A montage depicting the *Peter Pan* masculinity

### 5.2.3 The Nonchalant Brute

Whereas the 'Peter-Pan' trope discussed in section 5.5 denies the external expectations of masculinity performance; the following (Figure 5.6) rhetorically fetishizes this performance (see page 82). In the nonchalant brute subculture, projections of dominance and toughness typically attributed to masculinity (Anderson 1999) are exaggerated to the point of deviance. Like the academic sense of the term 'brute' as something as yet unexplained, the brute makes no apology or explanation, and is instead most nonchalant.




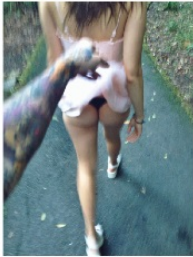




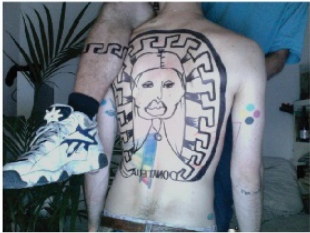
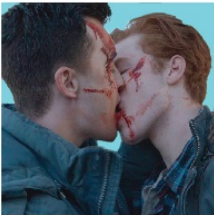
According to Cohen (1997) deviant subcultures are sociologically well researched. The deviant uncontrolled, undisciplined, expressive body communicates internal desires. The montage in Figure 5.6 is a veneration of deviant masculinity, where no holds are barred from the requiting of lust of any kind. For instance, competitive sex and sexual exhibitionism is depicted in Figure 5.6: A1. The actor accentuates his sexual organs as the gang of males around him gesticulate. Figure 5.6: B2 combines similar exaggerated exhibitionism with the objectification of the female form -a toxic hegemonic masculinity trope (Connell 2005). The scene embodies the male gaze (Mulvey 1975) as the subject casually flips a women's skirt up. Figures 5.6: E1 and 5.6: E2 imply homosexual acts, however, as in Figures 5.6: B1 and 5.6: B2, the power dynamic becomes a fetish, taking precedence over any sexual connotation.

The need to earn masculinity through taboo practices is akin to the idea of 'rough manners' (La Cécia 2000). La Cécia (2000:34) describes 'rough manners' as the set of behaviours and practices that young men take on at the cusp of their adolescence so as to distance themselves from the effeminacy of their mother's influence and become men. La Cécia describes these practices as a "constellation where brutality replaces all other relationships" (La Cécia 2000:40). Figures 5.6: A1, 5.6 A2, 5.6 D1 and 5.6: D2 all conjure impressions of the hazing rituals and initiation practices through which "implacable masculine hardness and 'relentless toughness' are gained" (La Cécia 2000:40). La Cécia (2000) explains that men use taboo practices to create and maintain

masculinity; the rhetoric behind the practices being; that one's "masculinity will fade without ruthless, ritual defense" La Cecilia (2000:40) to preserve it. The masculinity being visually presented by users is one that is being claimed, proved and earned vicariously through brutish taboo behaviour depicted in images used to fashion online masculine performances.

There is a further level to the visual rhetoric of this masculinity however. The brutish taboo acts that bring masculinity to the visual surface of this subculture are visually presented so as to rhetorically downplay their taboo nature. The deviant unlawful behaviours that seek to verify and ratify manhood are intermingled with boyish grins (Figure 5.6: D2). Behaviours such as playing with weapons (Figure 5.6: D2) and trespassing (Figure 5.6: D1) are visually presented as mischievous fun. The model playfully sticks his tongue out at the camera in Figure 5.6: D2 whilst in Figure 5.6: D1, the model stops in the middle of trespassing through the back window of a restroom to take a 'selfie'. In this way, the taboo behaviours that claim masculinity are further rhetorically fashioned harmless male mischief.

It is this rhetorical interplay between internal masculine desires and cultural acceptability regarding the expression of these masculine desires that is central to understanding the masculinity depicted in Figure 5.6. Exaggerated, brutish masculine rituals are made nonchalant through the rhetoric behind their depiction. In this sense, the masculine brute is made socially acceptable.

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**Figure 5.6:** *Montage of images representing the nonchalant brute*



### 5.2.4 Fragile Masculinity

The classically stoic portrayal of men as capable of physical and emotional endurance, ignoring pain and grief to put out a 'tough guy' persona is well documented. So too are the widespread negative psychological effects that this has on men (Connell 2005). The masculinity presented in Figure 5.7 (see page 85) is one that visually communicates the idea that the *'tough guy' male, who scorns everything that doesn't reek of smoke and leather and shaving cream is not an absolute datum*" (Malossi 2000). In this grouping, these normative ideas of masculine strength serve as a point of departure for a masculinity that paints men in a much more vulnerable and sensitive light.



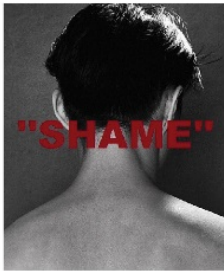

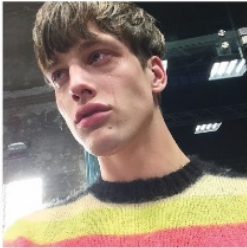
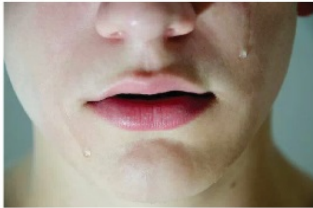




Here, the requisite gracelessness associated with masculine achievement (La Cecilia 2000) is visually contrasted with the disgrace (Figure 5.7: B, C and E) that comes from not fully achieving it as well as the emotional strain of having to constantly prove that one is masculine (Figure 5.7: B1 and B2) (La Cecilia 2000). In this sense, the visual DNA of this masculinity is that of the reality of masculine failure and inadequacy.

The visual representation of masculine inadequacy is exemplified in Figures 5.7: A1, A2 and B2. The power struggle between the masculine and feminine has been popular trope in fashion related visual expressions of gender with the idea of masculine subservience being an established theme within the genre (Triggs 1992). In Figures 5.7: A1 and A2 the visual rhetoric moves past subservience and into the realm of masculine inadequacy. Although the Figure 5.7: A1 depicts feminine dominance, when viewed as part of a whole masculine performance, alongside other images on a user's Tumblr wall, the focal point of the image shifts from the female to the male. In this sense, a complete subversion of traditional masculinity is visual communicated.

This subversion of traditional masculinity occurs through the visual expression of the 'pervious' nature of their own masculinity. These men invite, allow, are open to and receive the actions and attitudes of others. They are not victims, they are just open and yielding - rather than being defensive and armoured. The

man in Figure 5.7: A1 is quite literally, ensnared by the women; his stance and expression are of capitulation. What is rhetorically communicated is a loss in a 'battle of the sexes'; the hegemonic male, defeated and at his most vulnerable. This is contrasted in Figure 5.7: A2 with a depiction of an absence of masculine agency. The gender performance is yielding; overwhelmed and underwhelming.

However, understanding this masculinity as the visual surface of a subculture on Tumblr, provides a further layer to the visual rhetoric of these images. These images are not being shamefully hidden away as their rhetoric implies. They are being used, shared and interacted with by thousands of people and as such form the overt visual surface of an entire active subculture. In this sense, through visually portraying implosion of hegemonic masculinity, a celebration of masculine fragility is rhetorically communicated. What is inferred is a subculture of men who are finally, being kind to themselves, accepting the failure, guilt and pressures they face as part of 'being men' and wearing those pressures, visually as a badge of honour. In fashioning an online masculinity through overt depictions of this failure, a divergent masculinity is claimed.

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**Figure 5.7:** Image montage depicting 'fragile masculinity'

### 5.2.5 Beau Nouveau

Men have long been battling against the belief that they should forgo finery, make up and exotic hairstyles and delight in their appearance (Polemus 1994:74). As a departure from traditional conceptions of masculinity, Figure 5.8 (see page 88) depicts a masculinity reminiscent of effeminate dandyism. What is visually countered here is the “Great Masculine Renunciation” (Flügel 1930:110 ff) which *marked a shift away from masculine adornment and pride in male physicality* (Polemus 2000: 44). Instead of renouncing masculine beauty and adornment, the ‘beau’ or dandy (George 2004) emerges anew as the “*Nouveau Beau*”.

Thomas Carlyle described the “Dandy” as a

*“clothes-wearing Man, a Man whose trade, office and existence consists in the wearing of Clothes. Every faculty of his soul, spirit, purse, and person is heroically consecrated to this one object, the wearing of Clothes wisely and well: so that the others dress to live, he lives to dress ... And now, for all this perennial Martyrdom, and Poesy, and even Prophecy, what is it that the Dandy asks in return? Solely, we may say, that you would recognise his existence; would admit him to be a living object; or even failing this, a visual object, or thing that will reflect rays of light...”* (Carlyle 2015)








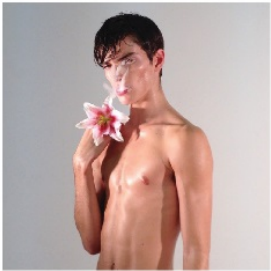
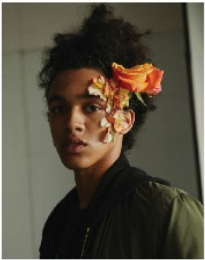

Carlyle’s evocation of dandyism can be construed not as a style, but, as Bayley (Bayley 1991:159) comments, as an attitude. It is in this sense that hashtags to images in the montage below include #bestdressed and #doingitright. These hashtags all point toward of aesthetic refinement as a central theme to this masculine genre. This seems to indicate that men are not just refining how they look, but are showing off about it. Like Carlyle’s dandies, men within this subculture are defined by their relationship with fashion and beauty.

This masculine peacocking is not new. The “peacock male” (McDowell 1997) is an established masculine trope. McDowell (1997) traces the male peacock from

the middle ages to the 19th century. In doing so he shows that although the visual aesthetic of dandyism changes, it persists over time. The '*beau nouveau*' is a development of the dandy genre, but an important one, considering the racial inclusion it shows, as well as the *nouveau* material practices involved in the performance of masculinity (Figure 5.8: 1A) where a man is adorned with a cosmetic facial mask made of gold. Similarly, In Figure 5.8: C2 the male model's sensual gaze, bare shoulder and elaborate posturing are *nouveau* masculine performance, appropriated from female fashion photography of the 1980's.

The *Nouveau Beau* contains elements of the 'new romantics' (Polemus 1994:96) era of the 1980s as well. Here, poses of elegance (Figure 5.8: B2 and E2) alongside soft extravagant fabrics (Figure 5.8: D1 and E2) and finery (Figure 5.8: A2 and E1) all portray a preoccupation with sensuous finery. This use visual rhetoric to communicate these themes of refinement, elegance and beauty is not however limited to sartorial trends.

Images within this masculinity connotes elegance through depictions of the male nude as well. Here, like in the fashion photography of the 1980's the masculine form is objectified (Triggs 1992). The difference lies in the connotations that arise through these depictions of the bare male form (Figures 5.8: A2, B1, D2). What is communicated here is indeed the objectification of the male form. However, these forms are shown as exclusive and unobtainable.

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**Figure 5.8:** Image montage depicting the 'Beau Nouveau'

### **5.2.6 Visual communication design research significance**

The five categories discussed in sections 5.2.1 to 5.2.5 do not exist in a vacuum but are in fact derived from archetypes, icons and conceptions of masculinity that have come before. The Tumblr site and its users' interpretation of these archetypes are however reframed (differently staged and performed) into a new visual communication context as a result of user interactions around diverse visual content. In this sense, Tumblr provides a unique opportunity for visual communication research into masculinity as these diverse visual archetypes, in that these archetypes are materialising and further evolving together in the same social setting.

What is perhaps furthermore unique, regarding masculinity within the social media paradigm is the reception to divergent masculinities. Masculinity has commonly been framed as being in a state of jeopardy. Men have been typically depicted as 'caught in the crossfire' of gender politics (Malossi 2000:27). As such, evolving conceptions of masculinity have historically been greeted by men themselves with perplexity and confusion (Malossi 2000:27). In contrast, the diversified masculinities on Tumblr are avidly and actively negotiated through posts, shares, hashtags, and likes. The masculinities discussed in the previous section serve as snapshots of important divergent and diverging gender mores. These can be monitored continuously for the purposes of ongoing visual communication design research.

The study conducted in this thesis works within the limits of a single Social Network Site, Tumblr. However, as an environment for the visual communication of masculinity, it functions similarly to other much larger sites. In this sense, insights drawn from this study regarding the state of masculinity may be replicable on other sites.

As explained in Chapter 2, visual communication design uses visual imagery to communicate ideas to audiences within the general public. A visual

communication designer (earlier called a graphic designer) working in a communications or advertising agency conceptualizes the communication needs of a client and develops a targeted message using visual image signifiers. The targeting of the message depends on social processes and circumstances affecting its recipients, and the relevance of this message depends on how it challenges older ideas or advances new ones. This is equally the case where products or services are being offered to sections of the public. Visual communication designers address social meaning consumption by specific audiences. Regardless of whether that audience is an isolated group or a large community, knowing how people think about certain values and normative social identity constructions, is important when it comes to creating messages that relate to those values.

As also mentioned in Chapter 2, for designers it is important to know “whom we are speaking to” (Lane, King and Russell 2005: 101). This means that designers should know about the social identities they wish to address. As Wilmer (1997) has trenchantly put it “Identity is the mechanism through which we locate ourselves in relation to the social world”. Identity links the self with its social context. Visual communication designers do routinely study social contexts for this purpose. But the social identity of those to whom a designer might speak visually is changing in reflexive response to the changing world around them (Giddens 2013), so they are a moving target. This is particularly the case where gender mores around masculinity are concerned, and it is for this reason that this study has focused on divergent masculinities.

But there are many diverging aspects of social identity that are important; nationality, ethnicity, religion and politics are contexts of social identity emergence. Emerging social identity formations may change how they consume or and relate to visual messages. For this reason, the methodology of inquiry developed in this study may be useful as an unobtrusive way of ‘following’ selected aspects of social identity divergence for the purposes of visual communication design research.



Throughout this study, the shifting nature of Tumblr's visual surface has been integral to understanding how masculinity as social identity is transacted. The wider significance of this for social media research is the social media user as both visual rhetor and audience to visual rhetoric drive the shifting movements of Tumblr's visual surface upon which aspects of social identity are diversified. As users reinterpret the visual rhetoric of normative masculine identity constructions, the cycle of entrenchment and reinterpretation is constant, making attempts at pinning down static categories of masculinity untenable. Employing the theoretical concepts of rhetor performativity and reflexivity in this study have made a fluid analysis of visual rhetoric possible. When a user, as audience, reacts to a user-rhetor's performance they too become rhetors. It is through this constant role switching, that diverging visual rhetoric spreads across the site's visual surface. As users navigate Tumblr's shifting visual surface, they become the receptive audience of diversified social identity tropes.

Particularly with regard to the transient nature of Social Network Sites, the methodology used to investigate masculinity in this study becomes significant for the purposes of visual communication practitioners. By focusing on meta-data, shifting cultural trends with regard to social identity can be pinpointed. Social identity research has been noted in Chapter 2 as being important to visual communication and design. Additionally fashion theory provides one of the most ready means through which individuals can make expressive visual statements about their identities (Bennet 2005). By using fashion theory as an analytical lens within this methodology; other aspects of social identity that are presented through fashion can be investigated in the same way that masculinity was investigated in this study. In this sense, the methodology and analytical framework used in this study can potentially be further adapted to research other social identity topics for the sake of visual communication and design. How people visually perform and construct their social identity in terms of ethnicity, gender, class, wealth, political affiliation, education, health, heritage and culture can all be investigated by adapting this methodology.

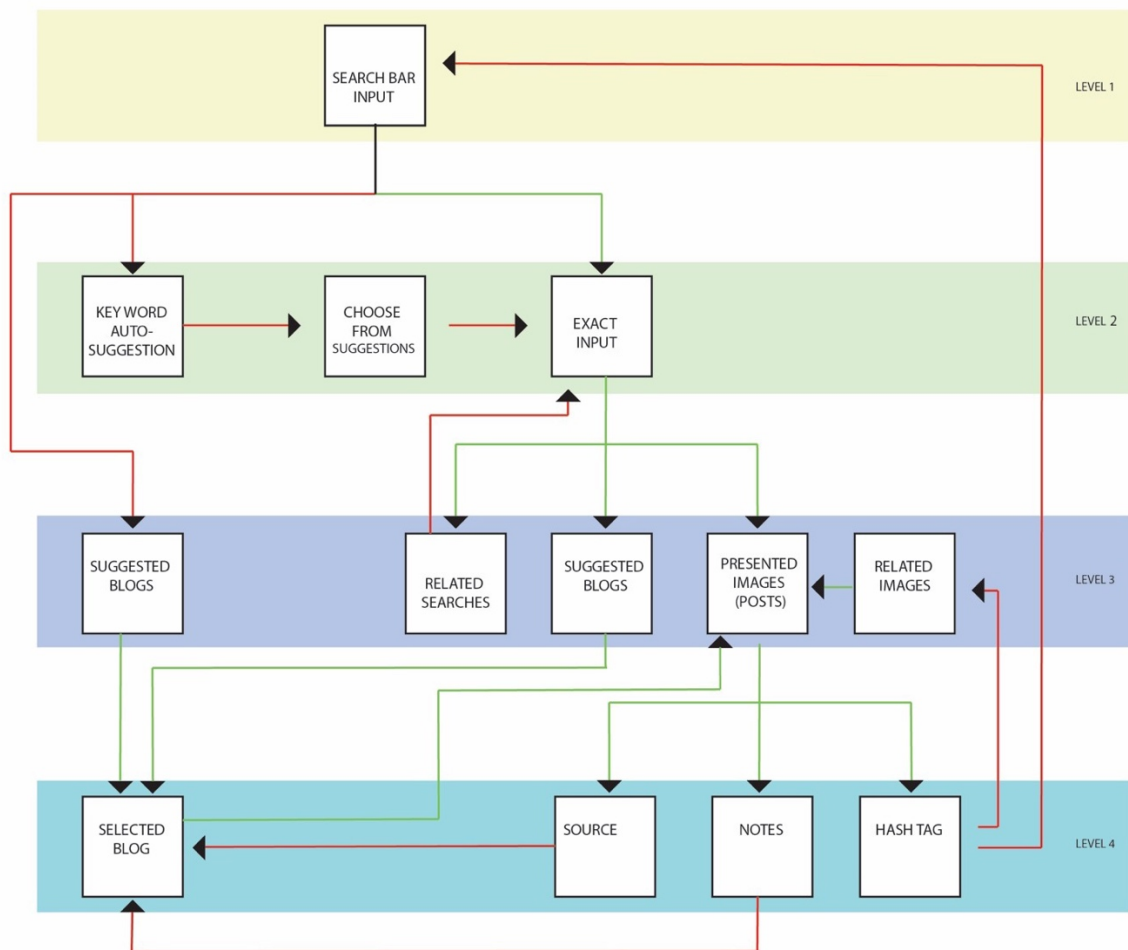
### 5.3 Insights drawn from this study

The shifting visual surface of Tumblr, and the way in which user movements are recorded as meta-data offers some further insights. Meta-data on Social Network Sites could potentially have an impact on how we interpret visual rhetorical content online. User movement across a Social Network Site is not entirely a matter of free will. Underneath Tumblr's visual surface are a series of complex meta-data protocols that moderate a user's movement across that surface.

In the case of Tumblr, decisions available to users are influenced by the type of visual content recalled by Tumblr via its meta-data protocols. By suggesting refined visual content and hashtags based on initial search information, Tumblr narrows down what a user sees and consequently dictates the options made available to the user in their movement across the site. A suggested image or 'popular' hashtag leads the user to a new Tumblr wall. After exploring that user's wall, a user is drawn to another image on that user's Tumblr wall or to new suggested content in the form of hashtags and auto-suggestions. Throughout this process, a relay occurs from the user's interaction with visual content to Tumblr's suggestion of further based on the user's interactions. The display of automatically suggested content to the user by Tumblr is basically a moderation function, and the user chooses a route each time a moderated choice is made. Because the user responds to this and not that semantic choice, rhetorical 'moves' proceed through the site in a non-arbitrary way. One may call this rhetorical moderation through meta-data.

Figure 5.9 below explains the analytical data generation of this study in diagrammatic form as a digitally moderated navigational process. User choices on the site are governed by their reflexive response to visual content, while the site's auto-suggestion protocol takes the lead in decision making. The different types of inputs and interactions that occur on the site as a user moves across Tumblr's visual surface are depicted as follows:

- Green arrows depict interactions where a user's understanding of a topic of interest leads decision making when choosing content on the site (in the case of this study; masculinity).
- Red arrows depict decisions and inputs led primarily by Tumblr's auto-suggestion protocols and the recall of meta-data.



**Figure 5.9:** *User journey across Tumblr; diagrammatized as a data generational process*

Figure 5.9 shows that a series of recursive loops occur across as a user navigates through new visual content. Recursive stages of user engagement are divided into levels of interaction. These recursive loops occur when a user's input moves them from a lower level of interaction to a higher level of interaction. The loops are created when a user's decisions (their reflexive response to visual rhetoric of those images), are influenced by the automated

meta-data protocols of Tumblr (in recalling meta-data and leading the user through suggested searches).

These recursive loops are possible both through the user's semantic input (depicted as green lines) *and* the syntactic autosuggestion from the Tumblr site itself (depicted as red lines). It is through these loops that a user becomes audience to new diverse visual content. In other words, a contributing factor is the site's role in computing user interactions, informing decision making and moderating user experience on the site. Within this context, the illusion of choice on Tumblr becomes apparent. On one hand, Tumblr's interface provides the user with reflexive agency to respond to visual rhetoric by liking, commenting and reblogging visual content, resulting in the user feeling in control of their journey across Tumblr's visual surface. On the other hand, the visual content the user is presented with is moderated by the site itself based on meta-data protocols. Tumblr's interface thus functions rhetorically; leading the user to interact with new diverging audiences and communities on the site, by moderating what visual content from its archives is recalled.

The intended effect of Tumblr's protocols around the archival and retrieval of visual content via meta-data is to create an efficient, personalized and user-friendly experience on the site. What has emerged however, is that the site, in executing these protocols, functions as a rhetorical arbiter between archived visual content and the user. In other words, the visual surface of social identity concepts such as masculinity, could potentially be shaped by digital protocols originally aimed at creating a personalized and efficient user experience.

As a result of this rhetorical arbitration between user and content, the user is led to make certain judgments relating to content. Any new visual content that the user is led to consume is presented, via archived meta-data as 'most popular' and 'trending' on Tumblr's interface. The digital display of visual content in this manner could then have meaningful effects on how content is perceived and consumed by users.

Evidence of this kind of digital arbitration can be seen on other digital platforms that share Tumblr's structure with regard to the archiving and recall of visual content via meta-data. For example, in 2015, Google released a public apology when its search engine protocols automatically tagged a group of African American people as 'gorillas' (Finley 2015). Similarly, Newbold (2015) discusses how search engines archive popular names via race. These meta-data protocols may potentially shape and re-shape social identities that exist beyond digital protocols. Many new studies focus on the relationship between individuals and communities on digital platforms (Boyd 2008). However, this study points to a need to further explore the relationship between Social Network Sites and the people who use these platforms to visually communicate their hopes, anxieties, needs and desires. Further inquiry into the real-world social mediation of meta-data protocols on Social Network Sites is therefore suggested.

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# APPENDICES

Divergent masculinities: a visual rhetoric study of masculinity in  
social media

A dissertation by

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Student number: 20903742

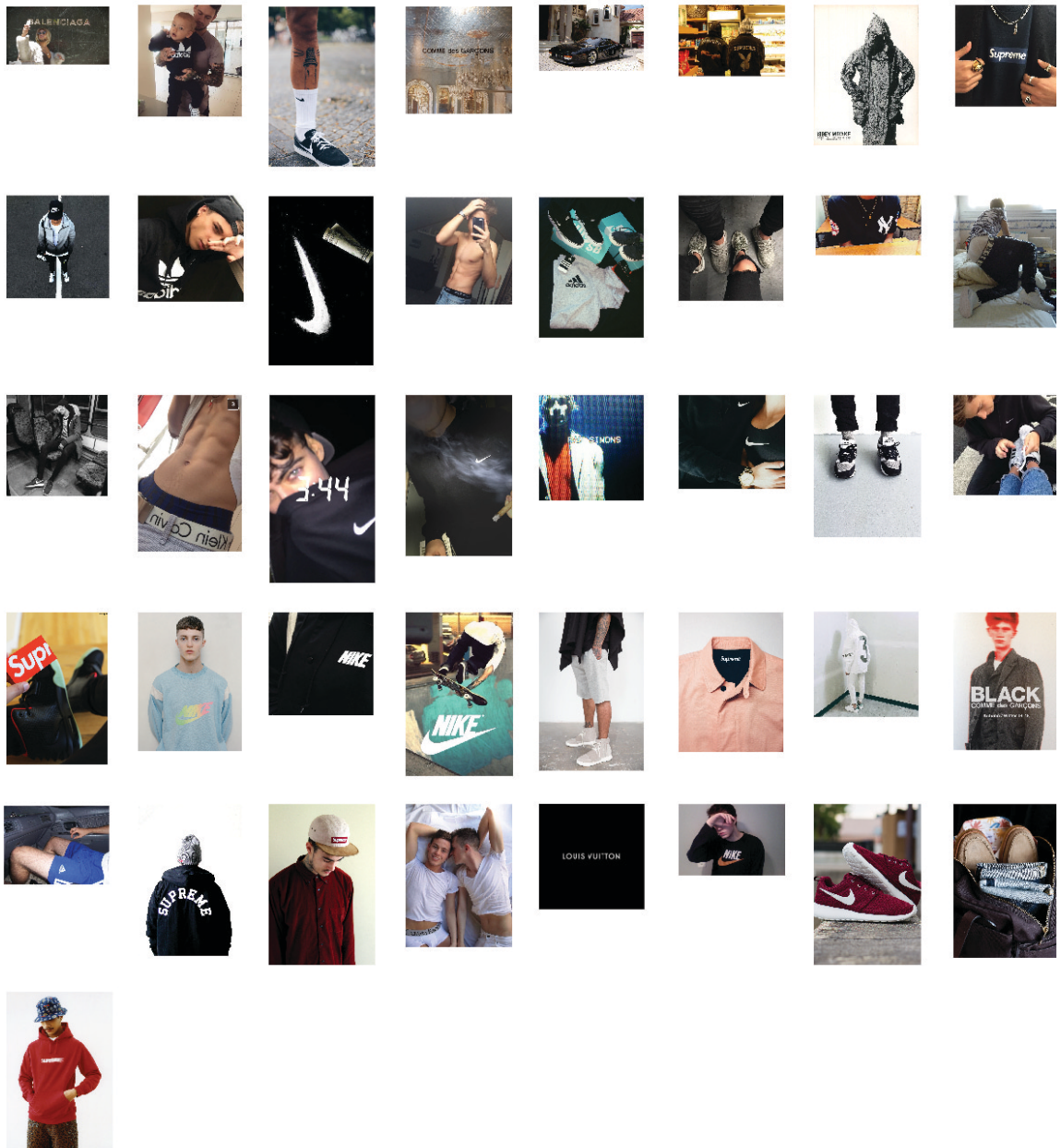
Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Master of Applied Arts in Graphic Design

Department of Visual Communication Design  
Faculty of Arts and Design  
Durban University of Technology

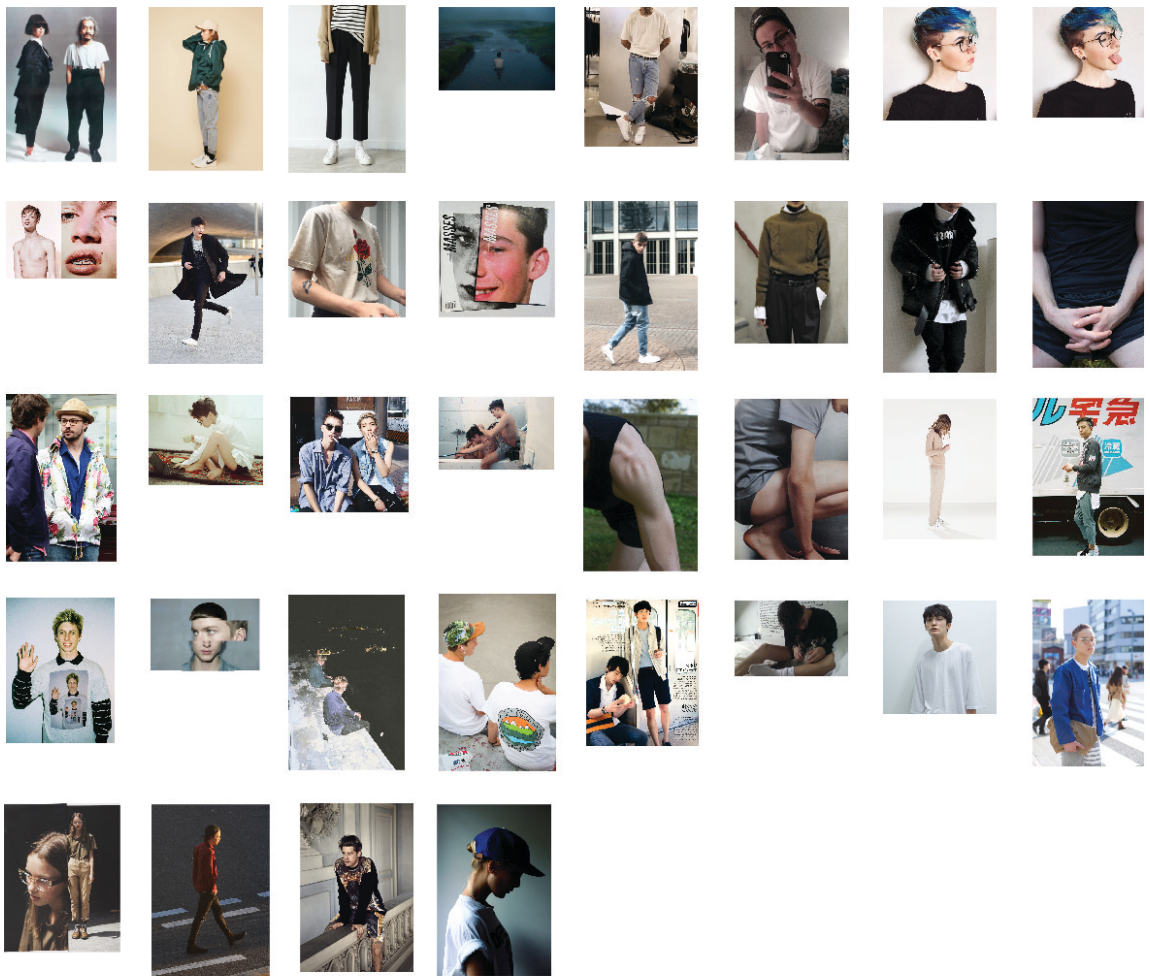
**Supervisor: Dr Philippa Kethro**  
**Co-Supervisor: Ernest Van Der Merwe**

July 2018

## Appendix 1: Sample images categorized as 'Sportshood'

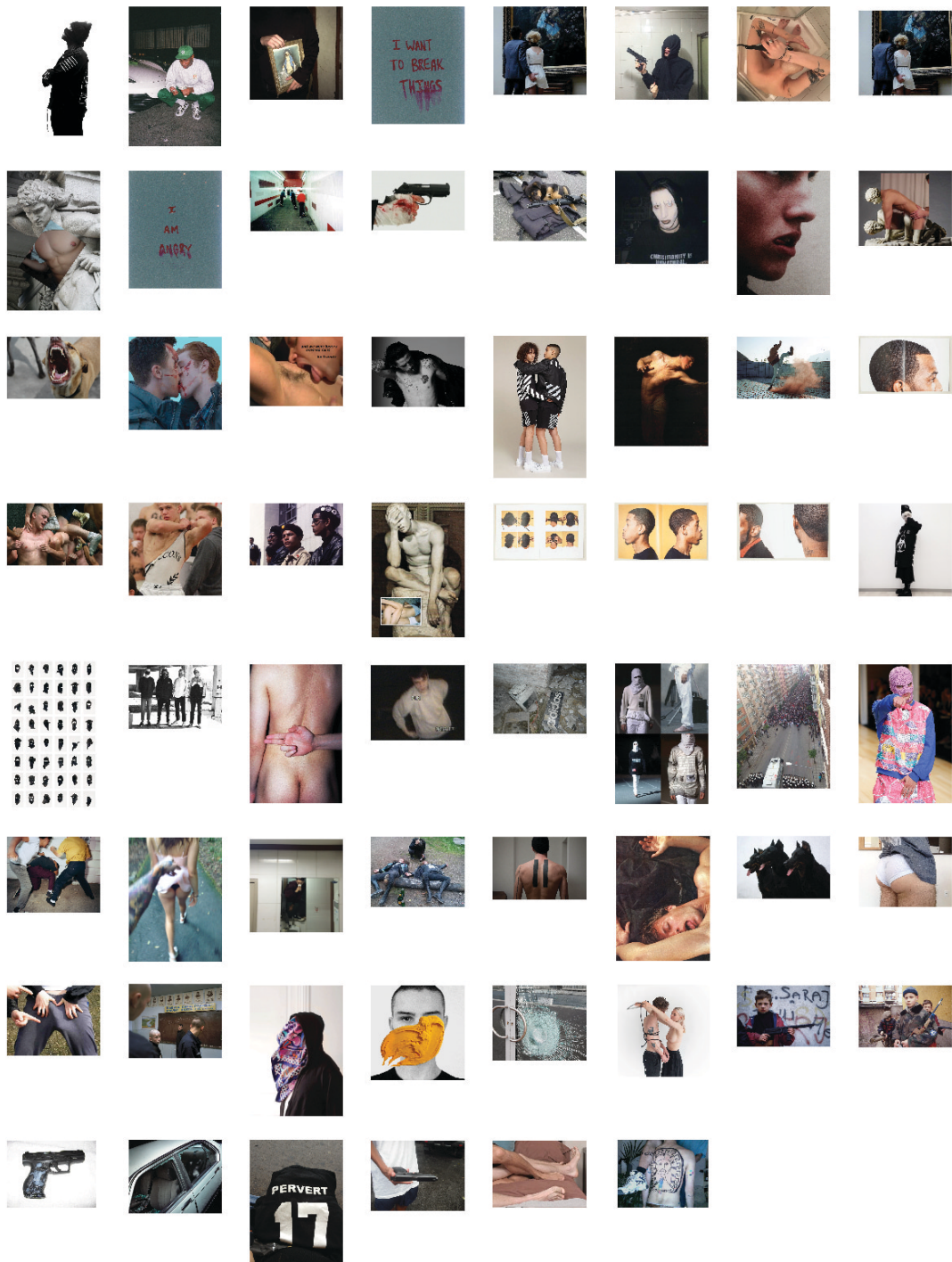


## Appendix 2: Sample images categorized as 'Peter Pan'

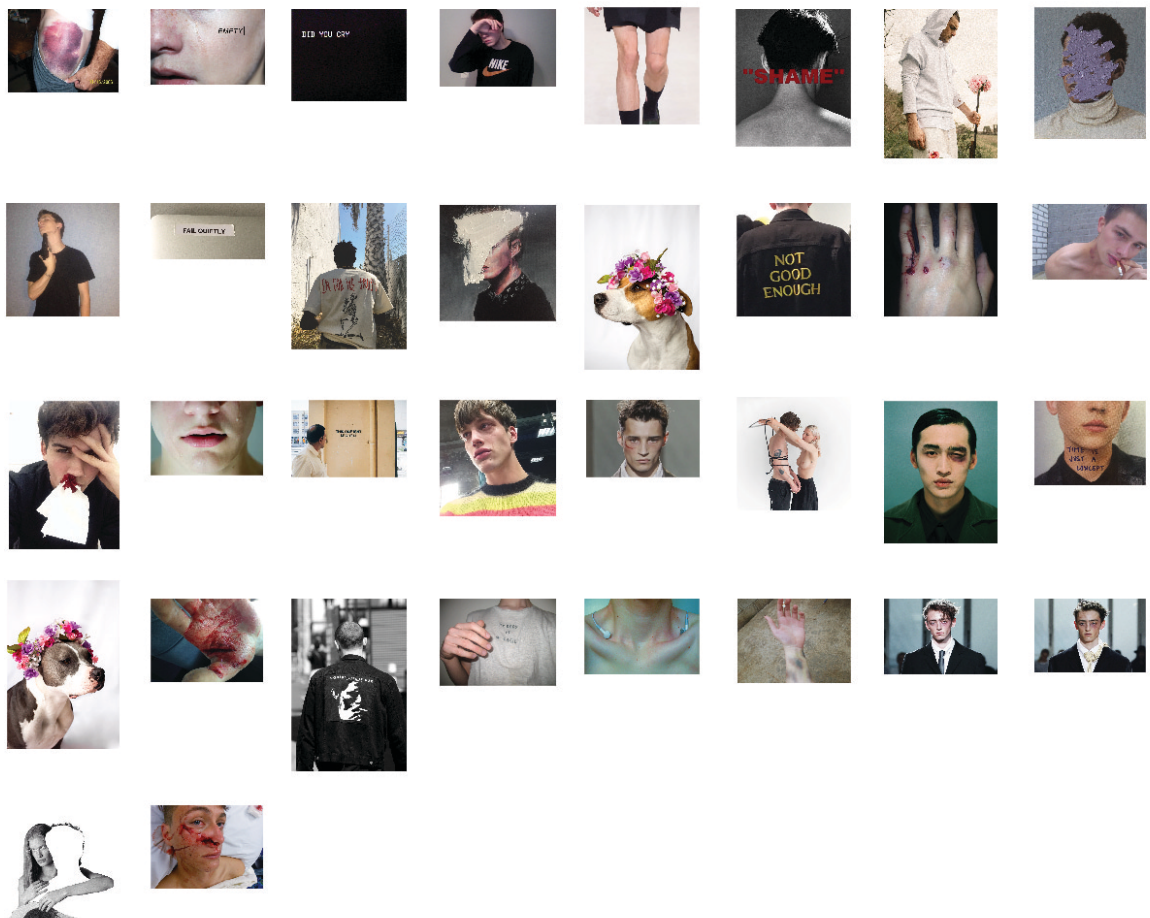




### Appendix 3: Sample images categorized as 'Nonchalant Brute'



#### Appendix 4: Sample images categorized as 'Fragile Masculinity'





## Appendix 5: Sample images categorized as ‘Beau Nouveau’

