

Anthropology Book Forum

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BLUTEAU, JOSHUA M. 2022. *Dressing up: Menswear in the Age of Social Media*. New York: Berghahn Books, 172 pp., ISBN 9781800732773

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In *Dressing Up: Menswear in the Age of Social Media*, social anthropologist Joshua M. Bluteau provides a compelling investigation into the world of men's fashion, examining those who 'seek out unusual or flamboyant tailoring' (p. 6) and how their sartorial choices reflect and actively shape contemporary ideas of masculinity. Drawing on perspectives from identity studies, semiotics, performance theory, as well as understandings of authenticity, fetishization and commodification, he demonstrates how tailored menswear functions as a medium through which men craft their identities within an increasingly digitized world.

Bluteau's research blends participant observation across 'terrestrial' (physical) and 'digital' spaces. He avoids using the terms 'online' and 'offline' to emphasize how interconnected these realms have become: 'so deeply enmeshed... that it [is] impossible to separate the two' (p. 8). The book consists of a preface, introduction, six thematic chapters, and a conclusion. Bluteau opens with a vivid, introspective account of his mornings. He speaks of reaching for his smartphone upon waking to check the engagement on his Instagram posts; selecting and putting on a tailored suit; photographing the look; and reviewing the images before sharing them to Instagram. Such actions effectively set the stage for the book's main argument: the crafting of the sartorial self is a performance that extends beyond the physical act of dressing to include habitual engagement within digital spaces.

Bluteau's ethnography begins in the 'terrestrial' spaces of Savile Row and Dover Street Market (DSM), where bespoke tailored menswear is produced. At Savile Row, open workshops showcase the artisanal skill and heritage behind each garment, elevating their value through visible craftsmanship and a sense of authenticity beyond material worth. DSM, by contrast, offers an immersive, art-like retail experience, where avant-garde designs and a no-photography policy position fashion as exclusive and experiential. Both spaces demonstrate

how men are not just buying clothing, but curated performances—where aesthetics, service, and craftsmanship contribute to shaping identities rooted in taste, power, and exclusivity.

Fashion shows are other performances that men can ‘buy into.’ In Chapter Two, Bluteau attends and analyzes those by designers Sir Tom Baker and Joshua Kane. Building on Debord’s theories of ‘*the spectacle*,’ he frames the shows as ‘*spectacles*’ in their own right—self-generated events where images are commodified and fetishized - blurring the line between fiction and reality. Through the interplay of clothing, mood, music, and staging, fashion shows create powerful images that shape audiences’ perceptions, influencing how they dress and construct their identities.

Bluteau focuses specifically on how ‘depth ontology’ (Miller 2010) is employed to enhance the desirability of the clothes on the runway. This concept refers to the extent to which clothing is perceived as an authentic reflection of the wearer’s identity. Some designers adopt *shallow ontologies*, positioning models as neutral figures so that audiences can project their own aspirations onto the clothing. By contrast, others adopt *deeper ontologies* where models embody a distinctive attitude or aesthetic that aligns with the designers’ vision. This fosters a desire not just to own the clothing, but to inhabit the individual identity it represents. Bluteau adds that the ‘spectacle’ of fashion show extends into the digital realm, where carefully curated and ‘behind-the-scenes’ images are shared to keep their audiences continually engaged with the clothes, effectively shaping both their digital and terrestrial selves.

The remaining chapters shift the focus to Instagram. Chapters Three and Four specifically look at how the platform functions as well as its role in crafting sartorial identities, and the emergence of ‘post-particular’ masculinity’ (p. 80). Here, Bluteau theorizes his research subjects – tailors, designers and other sartorialists – as ‘other Elizabethans.’ This draws directly from Foucault’s ‘other Victorians’—individuals who deviated from their societal norms, those with ‘illegitimate sexualities’ (1990: 4). Bluteau argues that his subjects evoke similar illegitimacies through dress, challenging mainstream masculinity by wearing styles traditionally considered ‘feminine or frivolous’ (p. 62). Instagram, he writes, serves as a space for them to express their individuality and build invisible networks with like-minded people through ‘likes,’ ‘comments,’ and ‘follows’ - a ‘digital reciprocity’ that acts as social validation (p. 61).

Bluteau, however, acknowledges that Instagram is also a space where discourse - primarily images and image-based comments – is controlled. This control occurs through the platforms’

own algorithm and censors which regulate the visibility of content, and the self-regulation of images within specific user networks. By controlling discourse, Instagram dictates which images are considered correct or desirable, shaping users' digital engagements and perceptions of normality in the process. For sartorialists, this has an enormous impact on issues relating to sexuality, gender and the construction of the clothed body (p. 83).

Bluteau also explores the tension between performance and authenticity within sartorial networks. While users often curate their digital identities to match aesthetic ideals, these presentations must remain consistent. Any inconsistencies—such as heavily-edited photos, misleading timelines of when images were taken, or garments not matching expectations of craftsmanship—are seen as deceptive, invoking Sartre's notion of acting in '*bad faith*' (1993: 185). This leads to criticism and diminished reciprocity between network members.

In Chapter Five, Bluteau adopts a more reflexive approach, detailing his experience in becoming a member of these networks. He reflects on his methodological actions, such as buying and regularly wearing bespoke tailored garments, as well as developing an digital persona under the Instagram account 'anthrodandy.' His digital participation involved learning Instagram's communicative norms, including the use of emojis as concise descriptive markers and symbols of intimacy, and hashtags to enhance visibility and signal transparency (e.g., #latergram indicates images were not taken on the day of posting). Additionally, he emphasizes the importance of balancing visual content to meet his networks' expectations: popular photos include close-up shots of tailored garments being worn – without showing faces – to highlight the craftsmanship. However, it is also essential to have some images featuring the account holder's face to maintain a sense of authenticity.

Bluteau begins Chapter Six by analyzing how Instagram distorts perceptions of time, causing the digital to bleed into its users' terrestrial lives. He reflects, for instance, on how the pressure to post at peak engagement times disrupted his own routines, including sleep patterns. More broadly, he argues that the platform 'manipulates a multiplicity of temporal realities', by presenting images taken in past moments as current, sustaining an illusion of real time experiences. Bluteau also reflects on the difficulty of leaving the Instagram fieldsite, noting that digital engagement does not end neatly with the conclusion of fieldwork. The platform's constant accessibility, coupled with the visibility of past content and follower expectations for continued interaction, made withdrawal a gradual and complex process. He concludes by raising five thought-provoking questions concerning the anthropology of dress, the nature of

the individual, and the digital self, whether western-centric fieldsites can be studied without digital anthropology, and how digital anthropology should be conducted.

Bluteau’s writing is clear, descriptive, and accessible, making complex theoretical discussions feel more relevant and tangible. While there is some repetition between chapters, this does not detract from the overall impact of the book. His inclusion of Instagram screenshots—alongside his decision to keep his Instagram account active—invites readers to explore the content for themselves, adding an extra layer of transparency and authenticity to his analysis. From the outset, Bluteau confidently asserts that the book will change how we perceive men in suits—a claim he fully delivers on. Highly recommended.

Emma Rice holds a master's degree in anthropology from Maynooth University in Ireland, and is currently pursuing a PhD. Her research background spans a wide range of topics, including material culture, domesticity, digital anthropology, and migration.



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