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Conference Review

Morolake Dairo

Conference Review

Locating Menswear Forum: Manchester and Liverpool

Manchester Metropolitan University, The Space and Sevenstore, **Liverpool, UK**, 4–5 July
2024

Reviewed by **Morolake Dairo**, *Manchester Metropolitan University, UK*

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Overview

From fashion weeks to research articles, the topic of menswear appears to generate less attention and debate when compared to womenswear, with stereotypical minimalism and conservatism driving the conversations on what men want and how they desire to look. Yet, a look

at history shows that the craft of menswear is as old as womenswear in relation to identity, sexuality, culture and marketing ([Mckeever 2014](#): 10) across the world.

A quick search for the keyword ‘fashion’ online will reveal an imbalance in the imagery and content which is tilted mostly towards womenswear. Yet, the data shows that males in the United Kingdom spend more on fashion products on individual shopping trips when compared to women ([Mintel 2024](#)). Yet there is still a dearth of information and research on menswear in the global fashion industry, with the available information demonstrating limited scope in relation to the various dimensions and dynamics of fashion practises that are defined as menswear.

Attempting to bridge the gap, the AHRC-funded Locating Menswear network was created by Professor Andrew Groves, Director of the Westminster Menswear Archive and Dr Jo Jenkinson from Manchester Metropolitan University with a focus on the impact of the cultural-creative interchange in four cities – London, Liverpool, Manchester and Milan – on British menswear. One of the major resources of this network is the Westminster Menswear Archive – which I had the opportunity of visiting for my research on Black-British designer Joe Casely-Hayford – holding a unique and assorted collection of over two thousand menswear garments of different genres including sportswear, streetwear and uniforms representative of different eras ([Westminster Menswear Archive n.d.](#)). Founded in 2016, this archive has since become a physical and digital resource for both academics and industry practitioners alike ([Groves and Sprecher 2024](#); [Hoste 2024](#)).

The *Locating Menswear Forum* is another extension of the network, organized with the objective to address the gaps in menswear research, albeit from an interdisciplinary perspective. Right from the labelling of the gathering as a ‘forum’ there is no missing the objective, to keep academia engaged and connected to the industry, and the public. This ethos was reinforced in the scheduling and agenda of the two-day forum held between 4 July 2024

and 5 July 2024 that involved panel discussions, presentations and exhibitions from both academics, industry practitioners and menswear enthusiasts. Embracing its dual aim of interdisciplinary discourse and its connection to British menswear, the forum was organized in two cities – Manchester and Liverpool.

Thematic organization

Day one was set against the backdrop of academia at the Institute of Sports at Manchester Metropolitan University, featuring presentations from different perspectives. The sessions were divided into six thematic tracks: ‘Biographical Menswear’, ‘Menswear Design Practices’, ‘Dialects of Menswear’, ‘Menswear and Obsession’, ‘Menswear and Heritage’ and ‘Menswear Subcultures’. Two parallel sessions were run simultaneously in the morning, afternoon and evening slots. Day two expanded beyond academia, with a focus on exhibitions and panel talks that showcased work from both academics, industry partners and menswear enthusiasts.

The craft of menswear was captured in these presentations from various perspectives including self-identity, heritage, culture and design practises. The first session, ‘Biographical Menswear’ featured different discussions on the interpersonal relationship between the wearer and clothing. Iain R. Webb explored the intersection of personal identity and remodelled fashion pieces through an autobiographical lens evoking the practice of crafting in the menswear sphere. While Ania Sadkowska and Katherine Townsend investigated the role of clothing as a tool in the negotiation of changing bodies and identities amongst older British men.

The ‘Menswear Design Practices’ track was rooted in the evolving identities, interpretations and expressions arising from the art and craft form of menswear. The work of Emma Grain explored the functionality and textile technology driving the ‘Jacketheads’ community – linked to innovative brands such as C.P. Company and Vollebak – tracing the rise of a dedicated consumer community building a cult brand around their jacket purchases.

Typical of its academia–industry collaborative tenet, the first panel discussion, ‘Reflecting on One Hundred Years of British Sportswear’ was chaired by Neil Summers and featured Helene Hope, Head of Global Brand Marketing, Umbro and Andrew Groves, who as well as directing the Westminster Menswear Archives was co-curator of the exhibition *Umbro 100: Sportswear X Fashion*. The session explored the rise of Umbro as a commercial sportswear to its evolution and future as a lifestyle and cultural symbol.

Figure 1: Overview of the conference presentations, Manchester, 4 July. Photograph Sevenstore, 2024.

A coloured photograph showing some people paying attention to a screen. The title of the presentation on the screen reads ‘cult status’.

Figure 2: Panel Discussion chaired by Neil Summers, featuring Helene Hope and Andrew Groves, Liverpool, 5 July. Photograph Sevenstore, 2024.

A coloured photograph showing a man and a woman seated with smiles on their faces.

In the afternoon session, presentations from ‘Dialects of Menswear’ were rooted in the intersection between society, subcultures and menswear. The research by Hannah Rumball investigated the religious and societal context of the Ulster overcoat, while Christine Chechinska explored the historical and evolutionary negotiation of identity amongst African diaspora males in England and other countries, through the dialectical stitching of literature, philosophy and personal reflection on her father’s clothing and style. Employing the medium of spoken word, Chechinska’s presentation was rooted in a merger of factual and fictional histories.

Representative of the ‘Menswear and Obsession’ track were presentations focused on the design, craft and consumption influencing the menswear sphere. Di Downs explored a widely ignored aspect of everyday clothing especially for the male folk – underwear. The research interrogated the evolving and shifting dynamics of men’s underwear from a collection

of over two thousand nine hundred items of underwear, swimwear and sports clothing, with the aim of creating a taxonomy for these items.

In the evening the 'Menswear and Heritage' track featured various presentations that touched on identity from the perspective of the owner, second wearer and the place of origin. In his presentation titled 'Locating menswear in an old country: Craft, place and nostalgia in British Heritage Menswear Instagram', Nathaniel Weiner argued that the commodity aesthetics of place have been employed by brands to evoke an association with craftsmanship tailoring and tradition intended to appeal to fashion-sceptical menswear consumers.

The 'Menswear Subcultures' track explored the interpretation and redefinition of fashion pieces and crafts through the lens of group identity. Elizabeth Kealy-Morris and Matt Porter traced the evolution of the polo shirt from British sportswear to its adoption as an American political symbol by the neo-fascist Proud Boys's group.

The tone for day two shifted to a more informal setting at The Space Liverpool, signalling the commencement of the exhibition phase of the forum. The exhibits were organized in three segments; 'Menswear and Identity', 'Menswear and the Leisure Economy' and 'Liverpool's Cultural Economy'. The morning session opened with a panel conversation focused on exploring the dynamics of exhibiting menswear from various perspectives including race, popular culture and evolving masculine perspectives. The discussion was chaired by Ben Whyman featuring curators, Tory Turk, Neil McDonald, Danielle Sprecher and Andrew Ibi who were responsible for *Skateboard* (2023), *Umbro 100: Sportwear X Fashion* ([2024](#)) and *The Missing Thread: Untold Stories of Black British Fashion* (2023), respectively.

The afternoon session featured engagement with different visual, audio-visual and sensory exhibits on display including clothing, accessories, images and text symbolic of the evolving sphere of menswear from Liverpool, Manchester and Milan. The 'Menswear and Identity' session featured exhibits around self-expression and group identity. In the exhibit

titled *Absent Youth*, Jo Jenkinson focused on portraits of young men aged between 16 and 24 years from different walks of life with the aim of exploring dress behaviours and motivations amongst young people. Tony Rivers and James Burnett displayed snapshots and snippets from their book *Magnetic: C.P. Company/Boneville/Stone Island: An Anthology: 1986 to 1993* discussing the craft of Italian designer Massimo Osti and the evolution of the brand from an elitist purchase to a global phenomenon.

Exhibitions within the 'Leisure Economy' theme explored menswear from the perspective of athleisure and activewear. *Berghaus and a Beer* by Becky De Lacy and Richard Kelly investigated the connotations ascribed to the Berghaus jacket by wearers in Manchester and Liverpool, where the brand has since transformed from a mountaineering jacket to an expression of music and sports. The imagery featured people from diverse demographics garbed in Berghaus in a local pub. Jacqueline McAssey retrospectively explored the evolution of men's leisurewear and fashion through the display of official merchandise catalogues. These catalogues detailed the apparel of English football teams from 1989 to 2007 showing the visual transition of sports apparel from functional to fashion symbols. In *Le Croc Monsieur*, P. J. Smith used storytelling to explore his personal experience as a Lacoste enthusiast, the longstanding cultural connection between Lacoste and Merseyside and his recent visit to Marseille to meet with the self-proclaimed 'world's largest Lacoste collector'.

Figure 3: Panel Discussion chaired by Ben Whyman, featuring curators, Tory Turk, Neil McDonald, Danielle Sprecher and Andrew Ibi, Liverpool, 5 July, Photograph Sevenstore 2024.

A coloured photograph showing two men and one woman seated. In the background there is a poster with the label 'Locating menswear' written on it. A white table with mics and glasses of water is also within the space.

Figure 4: Overview of the exhibition, Liverpool, 5 July, Photograph Sevenstore, 2024.

A coloured photograph showing a space with tables holding exhibition pieces. There are people standing in the space. Some of the people are talking to each other or engaging with the exhibition pieces.

The exhibition ended with the last session themed ‘Liverpool’s Cultural Exchange’, exploring the relationship between menswear and place. Paul Owen and Kayla Owen discussed the obsession of Nike Air Max 95 amongst Liverpool young males, leading to the establishment of Block P, the only independent store in the world solely dedicated to sourcing and selling Nike Air Max 95 products and complimentary accessories. While Carolina Davalli and Marta Franceschini investigated the influential threads of origin in the works of Italian fashion designer Luca Magliano and Liverpool-born Steven Stokey Daley and the similarities in their expression of queer identities and sociocultural symbolism.

The event ended with an evening session at the Sevenstore and Massimo Osti Studio chaired by Andrew Groves and featuring a diverse array of panellists’, Lorenzo Osti (Son of Massimo Osti), Robert Newman (creative director of Massimo Osti) and Daniel Milne (Head of Brand and Creative, Sevenstore). The session channelled the legacy of Osti’s design ethos, current reimagined collections, and its influence on the future of menswear production and consumption practices. Accompanying the panel was a visual exhibition dedicated to the technical innovation of the designer featuring images, clothing prototypes, research notes and designs reflecting Massimo Osti’s craft.

Conclusion

The 2024 *Locating Menswear Forum* offered insightful conversations and interactions from an interdisciplinary perspective, a delightful and unconventional alternative to the typical academic conference. The exhibitions and panel talks went beyond the unitary voice of research to accommodate various perspectives from enthusiasts as well as industry stakeholders. It was also refreshing to see a good mix of genders discussing and engaging on these topics.

While the *Locating Menswear Forum* is focused on into British menswear and its interaction with renowned fashion cities like Milan, there is an opportunity to expand these dialogues to feature the international and historical foundations linked to the design, production and consumption of menswear across the world.

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