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## **A Casual Obsession: Inside the British Sock Fetish Council.**

Andrew Groves

**Keywords:** socks, hybrid masculinities, casuals, football hooliganism, fetish.

### **Abstract**

This article interrogates the positioning of socks as a culturally transgressive garment by football casuals through a case study of the British Sock Fetish Council (BSFC). While most studies contextualise casuals within a discourse of hooliganism and violence, their use of dress as a means of negotiating shared masculine identities remains under-researched. Founded in 2011, the BSFC quickly grew to over 1000 card-carrying members, holding meets in Newcastle, Manchester, Birmingham, and London, as well as at football matches throughout the United Kingdom. Within the BSFC, the term fetish is not used to denote a sexual predilection by an almost entirely heterosexual community. Instead, it acknowledges the members' obsession with clothing and highlights the subtextual tensions inherent in their individual and collective practices. The author was an active participant within the BSFC, witnessing first-hand the community's development through the online dissemination of highly constructed, self-generated imagery featuring colourful, patterned socks juxtaposed with rare trainers. This paper explores the self-reflexive use of social media to construct group practices and provides insights into how socks were instrumental in establishing consensus on inclusive and hybrid masculine identities within this community.

### **Introduction**

Casuals as a distinct subculture emerged in the late 1970s, primarily on the football terraces of the North of England and later spread across the United Kingdom. In contrast to other subcultures that use dress to reaffirm group identity, the allegiance of most casuals to specific football 'firms' has meant that their use of dress has been consistently used as a means of one-upmanship against other casuals who are members of rival firms. Football away days functioned as a pre-digital network, allowing participants to exhibit and observe the latest regional stylistic developments from opponents located on opposite ends of the country. This is one of the reasons that the use of dress by casuals has remained unossified over the last four decades. This is demonstrated by the variety and complexity of the ways in which individuals engaged with the British Sock Fetish Council through their dress and its mediation through self-generated imagery, graphics, and artefacts. This article examines how

men's socks have continued to be positioned as a site of liminal transgression and a focal point for male dress deviancy. It will discuss the formation of the British Sock Fetish Council and how their self-reflexive use of social media to construct group practices revealed how socks were central to the group's meditation of acceptable masculinities through the use of dress. It will demonstrate how this was accomplished through the member's cultural production of a series of socks that repurposed the iconography of male labour and protest in order to establish a point of sartorial conflict. As a result, the group's gender practices evolved into a strategy for hybridising hegemonic masculinity in order to continue benefiting from it.

In research and media reports, the terms 'hooligans' and 'casuals' have frequently been used interchangeably, with little recognition that, while there is undeniable overlap in terms of who each term refers to, it is critical to differentiate the two. Football hooligans have been framed as exemplars of hegemonic masculinity (Radmann, 2014). This is primarily established through their actions, which include rowdy, unruly, and occasionally violent behaviour. In comparison, casuals are more concerned with embodying their masculinity through a variety of dress activities. Additionally, many participants dispute the term Casuals (Redhead, 2015); instead, members of this subculture prefer the term dresser, and regional variations have included Perry Boys, trendies, scallies, and, most recently, 'This thing of ours.' Indeed, the names used by various football 'firms' exemplify this taxonomic state of flux. Redhead (2015) compiled a list of 400 distinct firms based on hooligan memoirs, with some clubs having multiple firms over the course of several decades. Through written accounts by journalists, researchers, or first-hand reports from former members of football firms, this subculture has been inextricably linked to violence (Redhead, 2004). This intersection with football hooliganism has resulted in a substantial body of research over the previous two decades, exploring these men within a sociological and criminological framework, (for example, Dunning, Murphy and Williams, 1988; Pearson, 2012; Rookwood and Pearson, 2012) and most notably by Steve Redhead (2004, 2007, 2009, 2012, 2015), whose research draws on over 180 football hooligan memoirs. These books primarily detail the criminal activity of each football firm; however, they frequently include detailed descriptions of the participants' attire. As such, they situate the importance of dress within this activity.

There has been some research of casuals within anthologies of subcultural style (Polhemus, 1994; De La Haye and Dingwall, 1996) or in the context of criminality (Turney, 2020) and two notable examples published by casuals themselves, *80s Casuals* (Hewitson

and Montessori, 2010) and *Dressers* (Smith, 2012). However, there has been little academic research into British casuals and their use of fashion. The notable exception is Mairi MacKenzie (2019), for her analysis of David Bowie's duffle on the cover of *Low* (1977) and its influence on the development of the first casuals in 1970s Liverpool.

Historically fashion research has focused on designer womenswear created for, or owned by, the elite, or 'the avant-garde, the extraordinary, and the unusual...the truly "ordinary" remains elusive' (Buckley and Clark, 2012: 18). The 'otherness' (Barthes, 1957) of the casual subculture with its association with criminality, hypermasculinity, and violence have undoubtedly discouraged some dress historians from researching them. For Hebdige, football hooligans are 'consigned to a place beyond analysis' (1991: 97). There is a classist belief that the working-class's adoption of high-end menswear brands is both unsophisticated and worn merely to conceal criminal behaviour. But as Bourdieu noted in his seminal work on taste '...the working-class "aesthetic" is a dominated "aesthetic" which is constantly obliged to define itself in terms of the dominant aesthetics' (1979: 41). Hall and Jefferson acknowledge this bricolage approach to dress, stating that: 'Meanings alternative to those preferred by the dominant culture, generated within the experience and consciousness of a suppressed social group, may be brought to the surface, and so transform the original discourse' (1990: 178). Indeed, casuals' bricolage approach to dress and masculine identity construction has continued for over four decades, exerting a substantial influence on British menswear during this period. It is self-reflexive, subversive, and multifaceted in its cultural references.

### **Ethnography and locating the researcher**

Ethnography presents several difficulties as a method of qualitative research, including objectivity, data integrity, legitimacy, and ethics. However, it also has several advantages in terms of gaining access to previously inaccessible or hidden social or cultural environments. Significant ethnographic fieldwork has been conducted on football hooliganism, (for example, Armstrong, 1998; Treadwell, 2008; Ayres and Treadwell, 2012; Pearson, 2012, 2014, 2014; Ellis, 2017). Pearson reflected on the inherent difficulties of ethnography, in which the ethnographer 'assumes the values and prejudices of those being observed and uncritically reproduces these "biases" in their account' (2015: xi). While Treadwell asserts that its strength stems from its ability to see '...the world change and issues emerge before the quantitative researchers and policy makers notice...' (2018: 291)

Before commencing my paper therefore, it is critical for me to establish my place within the research. I am a white gay man in my early fifties who comes from a working-class family and works as a university professor where I have taught fashion design for two decades. I am a long-time season ticket holder at Manchester City Football Club, my style is rooted in casual culture, and my dress activity is influenced by similar men who self-identify as casuals. I discovered the BSFC on Twitter in 2012 and became an active member, posting messages, photographs and attending three of the group's physical meets. Throughout this period, people I knew both in person and those I only knew through social media became involved in the BSFC's activities. I am perceived as an insider primarily because of my attire and the cultural capital that my knowledge of menswear provides, but I am also perceived as an outsider because of my job title, which is met with both amusement and bemusement. While my sexual orientation identifies me as an outsider, it is not viewed negatively, demonstrating the inclusive and hybrid masculine identities that exist within this community.

The establishment of the BSFC coincided with the meteoric rise in popularity of Twitter as a social media platform. It was the primary mode of communication and dissemination for the group and its members' cultural production. The ability to use social media platforms such as Twitter and, later, Instagram as data sources aided in overcoming the reliance on personal memory as a data source, both during the initial research period and afterwards to reflect on my findings.

### **The sock as liminal transgression site**

While there is some research on socks from a historical perspective (Farrell, 1992; Cole, 2010) or a technical point of view (Abdessalem et al., 2008; Mohammad et al., 2012), little has been written about their subversive qualities within subcultural style. However, one could argue that socks, located at the liminal zone between the internal and external, have historically been a site of sartorial transgression in menswear.

Throughout the twentieth century in the United Kingdom, unwritten rules regarding men's socks dictated that they should be plain or subtly patterned for formal daywear and colourful and patterned for casual wear and sport. However, various groups of men have deviated from this to make a statement. In *Socks & Stockings* (1992), Farrell describes the rise of the distinctive dressing of a group called 'Knuts' prior to the First World War. They were middle-class dandies dressed in brightly coloured socks, which were accentuated by their short trousers and preference for shoes over boots. In the 1949 British Mass-Observation survey on sexual attitudes, respondents noted a correlation between brightly coloured socks

and deviancy and homosexuality. As Cole notes, ‘amongst its study group “Pale Blue was a queer’s ‘trade colour’ and favoured pale blue for short socks”’ (2010: 175). Following the Second World War, the association with deviance persisted when the Teddy Boys, working-class youths who had adopted the New Edwardian style - ‘a revivalist fad among ex-guardsmen and aristocratic loafers’ (Breward, 2016: 135) - began wearing ankle socks in vibrant colours or garish patterns in the early 1950s (Cohn, 1971).

By 1968, a significant number of the British subculture known as hard mods had evolved into what became known as skinheads (Marshall, 1994). With their skin-tight jeans intentionally cropped to reveal their tall boots, the skinheads established a style of dress that became synonymous with violence to the public and the media. While fighting at football matches in the United Kingdom can be traced back to before the First World War (Dunning et al., 1984), by the late 1960s, it had become increasingly visible and its perpetrators more conspicuous by their dress. Skinheads quickly became the focus of a moral panic, which Richard Allen exploited in a series of pulp paperbacks: *Skinhead*, *Suedehead*, *Boot Boys*, and *Terrace Terrors* (1970, 1971, 1972, 1975), which provide insight into the rapidly changing fashions on the terraces in the early 1970s. The transformation of protagonist Joe Hawkins is described on the back cover of *Suedehead*:

A young and brutal bovver boy called Joe Hawkins caused outrage when he was first introduced to the world in the smash hit, *Skinhead*. Now Joe has grown his hair and swapped his boots and braces for a velvet-collared Abercrombie coat. His aggro days are over ... but his city-slicker days are just beginning. (Allen 1971: 112)

The recurring theme in *Suedehead* is self-reinvention through dress. In the first chapter, Hawkins rejects his working-class skinhead uniform as being too visible. Instead, he adopts the attire of a middle-class stockbroker via the precise tailoring of an Abercrombie, a heavy wool tailored overcoat that became known as a ‘Crombie.’ This, however, is merely a cover for the continued violence he commits:

He pulled his electric-green socks on...His socks were as important as the Crombie overcoat. Even in summer he felt it necessary to sport the coat. There were suedeheads who did not take kindly to bowlers and umbrellas, he knew. But none of the fraternity would ever be caught dead in ‘ordinary’ socks. Regardless of all those

statements to the contrary each Suedehead had a large part of the skinhead left in his symbolic attitude towards recognition. (Allen, 1971: 93)

Hawkins' overgarments serve as a masquerade of hegemonic masculinity and respectability, yet they are betrayed by his undergarments, his electric-green socks signalling his true deviant nature. This description is echoed in an interview with Nobby, a Preston North End fan, in *Northern Monkeys* who recalls his transition from skinhead to suedehead:

A Crombie overcoat (almost always a snide<sup>1</sup>) was worn in winter months with a tie pin and silk hankie in the top pocket – red to match your red socks, and then various colours from bright yellow to orange to fluorescent green followed. (Routledge, 2019: 57)

This shift away from the hypermasculine uniform of the booted skinhead toward a more refined, inconspicuous appearance was driven in part by some football grounds banning men wearing boots (Routledge, 2019: 56). This pivotal moment of transition is recalled by an impressionable young fan, who later became a casual:

My first experience of football gangs was in a game at Brighton against a London team, no one was allowed into the ground wearing Dr Martens boots, outside the North Stand was a mass of feet less black and brown boots. (Brown and Harvey, 2006: 87)

The adoption of normative dress codes as the ultimate transgressive form of clothing foreshadowed a watershed moment in the development of the casual aesthetic. In 1973 David Bowie killed off his alter ego Ziggy Stardust, who had become a cultural phenomenon disrupting and subverting gender norms through his appearance in the previous year. Three years later, in the film *The Man Who Fell to Earth* (1976) and then on the cover of *Low* (1977), his look had been radically stripped back, with Bowie dressed in a seemingly ordinary duffle coat. MacKenzie argues that Bowie's adoption of the duffle coat was pivotal in developing the casuals' style (2019). Kevin Sampson, who wore a wedge haircut, a duffle coat, and a pair of Pod shoes on the Kop (the home end at Liverpool Football Club's ground) in 1977, recalled in an interview with MacKenzie: 'You'd go to places like Derby and

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<sup>1</sup> A fake or counterfeit item.

Middlesbrough and they'd die laughing, calling you queers for the way you dressed' (2019: 33).

Everyday dress, in this case, the duffle coat, had been queered by its associations with Bowie, and a new emerging subculture was harnessing the power of this subversion. These men also understood the carnivalesque role that their approach to dress could play in undermining hierarchical structures through bricolage. The carnivalesque nature of football has been extensively documented (Giulianotti, 1991; Pearson, 2012) for its ability to 'transcend all hierarchic differences, of all ranks and status' (Bakhtin, 1984: 246). In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin argues 'One of the indispensable elements of the folk festival was travesty, that is, the renewal of clothes and of the social image. Another essential element was a reversal of the hierarchic levels: the jester was proclaimed king...' (1984: 81). The casuals' travesty in appropriating and distorting the leisure class's iconic brands (for example, Burberry, Lacoste, Sergio Tacchini) exemplifies their carnivalesque mode of transgression. In *Fashion Crimes: Dressing for Deviance* (Turney, 2020) focuses on casuals and the fashioning of the 'Handy dandy'; she argues: 'Here, power is obtained through subversion; both social and cultural norms are upturned, the ordinary becomes extraordinary and vice versa, and innocuous clothing becomes invested with fear and violence; it becomes a sign of the 'hard man' (Turney, 2020: 81).

If the duffle coat was one of the first garments to be appropriated by the casuals, then socks were also soon to also become subverted as part of their attire and a means of identifying a fellow dresser. Numerous accounts (Thornton, 2003; Hough, 2007; Routledge, 2019) recall the popularity of white towelling socks with men in the late 1970s and how they served as an easy way to distinguish the general population from a clued-up casual. Recalling one of the British band the Stone Roses' earliest performances in a club called Clouds in the town of Preston in England's North East that descended into mob violence, Routledge describes how they '...looked upon the local club-goers of Clouds as backward, white sock wearers' (2019: 307). Whereas the casuals were far more adventurous in their experimentation with footwear, as this Manchester City football fan recalls: 'I remember well the time we wore yellow leg warmers with burgundy keks which we very bravely wore against Cardiff that elicited a raucous reaction from the deerstalker wearing masses in front of us!' (Routledge, 2019: 231). While socks appear harmless, they could also be weaponised, as an account from a Queens Park Rangers football casual reveals: 'Some of the lads put pool balls in socks ready to charge out...' (Cas, 2021: 18), echoing the actions of Ray Winston's



character Carlin in the film *Scum* (1979), who also made a makeshift cosh from a sock filled with two snooker balls to attack another borstal inmate.

In the preceding narratives, socks have been positioned as a provocative garment, partially concealed but serving as a transitional locus, allowing a glimpse into the internal and thus a means of assessing, judging, dismissing, or attacking other men.

The dress codes of British menswear are rooted in their evolution from military uniforms. When men wear their uniforms correctly, they communicate shared ideas about their status, rank, team, or class. However, civilians frequently subvert these meanings by undermining or violating established dress norms through the use of accessories such as socks, ties, and hats. Thus, members of the British Sock Fetish Council are part of a continuum of men that have employed socks as a means of signalling subversive and disruptive behaviour.

### **Formation of the British Sock Fetish Council**

The British Sock Fetish Council (BSFC) was founded on 19 November 2011 by 35-year-old Newcastle United fan Reuven Fletcher. Interviewed in 2015 by the online news site ChronicleLive, Fletcher discusses the BSFC's origins:

‘I met friends I had made on Twitter but before meeting them I went to a well known clothes shop in Manchester called Oi Polloi and bought a pair of socks.

‘When I met up with them one of the lads asked what I had been buying. I showed him my brown Burlington socks, he said he also liked socks and showed me his Falke Fair Isle ones.’

When Reuven got home, new pal Matt Wright from Greater Manchester, tweeted him. And their tweets mentioned their sock fetish.

He said: ‘Before we knew it, other people were joining in. I got membership cards printed and 100 people joined. A few of us started to meet at football matches around the country and it just grew.’ (Robson, 2015: n.pag.)

There is no documentation as to how the group's name was chosen. Given the association with football, it seems reasonable to assume that an acronym ending in FC was used so that the uninitiated might think that the BSFC referred to a football club. However, the full name of the British Sock Fetish Club is also a misnomer. Its members do not have a sexual fetishism for socks. Instead, their use of the term fetish demonstrates the subversion of expected gender norms to create a hybrid approach to masculinities. As Bridges and Pascoe

state: “Hybrid masculinities” refer to the selective incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and – at times – femininities into privileged men’s gender performances and identities’ (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 246). By 2014, the BSFC had grown to 1,000 members, with most active participants being white, working-class, heterosexual, and between the ages of 30 and 50. Most of these men self-identified as casuals, and their occupations included printers, electricians, social workers, warehouse workers, academics, NHS managers, oil rig workers, and postmen. While research on older men and their relationship to fashion is increasing (Sadkowska et al., 2015; 2017; Twigg, 2020; Almila and Zeilig, 2021), the BSFC participants represent an under-researched group within dress studies due to the intersectionality of their age, class, and sexual orientation.

While individual football firms had previously established private message boards online, the early 2000s introduction of more general forums such as *80s Casuals* and *Terrace Retro* enabled casuals from various football firms to communicate and share images of their clothing. Ste Connor, a journalist, recalled, ‘The internet was becoming an increasingly influential mode of communication, with like-minded souls coming together to discuss their obsessions on an array of messageboards covering topics such as football, music, clothes and training shoes’ (cited in Thornton, 2003: 263). Twitter was launched in 2006, and by 2011 had grown in popularity among casuals in the United Kingdom as a way to share information about what they were wearing, new clothing purchases, and the latest football news. Twitter's use of hashtags and algorithms to present users with content that is similar to their own quickly helped to establish a large community of casuals on the site with shared interests.

Analysis of Twitter shows that the first use of the hashtag *#BSFC* in relation to socks was on 25 December 2011, and the first use of the hashtag with an accompanying image was on 30 December 2011. A self-portrait shows an unidentified man's legs cropped above the knees on top of a floral duvet (Figure 1). His legs are naked except for a long pair of knee-length socks in a striking graphic pattern in shades of black, grey, and red. The image is captioned:

My knee high socks. Setting trends, not following them.

Thirty minutes later, after this original tweet was sent, it is retweeted by another user with the additional text:

< prospective #bsfc member?



**Donuts**

@MmmD0nuts



RT @lolwarlol: My knee high socks. Setting trends, not following them. < prospective #bsfc member?



11:44 PM · Dec 30, 2011 · Echofon

Figure 1: *A tweet featuring a perspective BSFC member's knee-high socks, 30 December 2011. © Laurence Waring.*

Given that in the United Kingdom, the interval between Christmas and New Year's Eve is frequently taken as a holiday and that most men are gifted socks during this season, it is unsurprising that the BSFC began to flourish during this period. For British football fans, the Boxing Day and New Year's Day fixtures are a highlight of the football season and provide an opportunity to parade their newly acquired Christmas 'clobber.' In the first two months, most tweets and images about the BSFC were posted by men in England's North East, specifically Newcastle United fans. However, what began as an inside joke between two friends on Twitter quickly gained traction among other casuals online and was formalised in February 2012 when the BSFC began issuing paper membership cards to anyone who requested them (Figure 2). The front of the card featured a crest of two crossed socks;

beneath it, the council's locations were listed as Newcastle upon Tyne, Manchester, Wrexham, and New York, as well as the BSFC's motto, 'In pursuit of fine foot apparel.'



Figure 2: British Sock Fetish Council membership card, 2012. © Andrew Groves.

### **One-upmanship within online spaces**

As methods of constructing, presenting, and consuming menswear have moved away from the physical towards existing and emerging digital spaces, it 'has changed the way people express their subcultural embodiment' (Sklar et al., 2021: 16). This shift has resulted in new understandings of the relationship between 'Style—Fashion—Dress' (Tulloch 2010). Access to these digital spaces has enabled researchers to develop new perspectives in a range of fields using netnography, including casuals (Guțu, 2017), online menswear forums (Lellock, 2018), and connoisseurs of classic menswear (Weiner, 2019).

It has been suggested that social media has facilitated new modes of participation and education about subcultures, frequently in highly visual yet anonymous ways (Sklar et al., 2021). Previously, when casuals encountered other men dressed similarly to themselves on a match day who they did not know, it was usually a member of a rival football firm, which could be a precursor to violence (Routledge, 2019: 147). However, the digital space became a relatively safe location for casuals to engage with other like-minded men. Pearson (2012)

refers to this emerging online environment for football fans as carnival by proxy. The BSFC's online activities provided a space for participation and an opportunity for younger men to observe the dress activities of older casuals who were valued for their knowledge and social capital. The emphasis predominantly on socks and trainers was a relatively inexpensive way for these men to participate. This was aided by the adidas originals series' continued popularity (reissues of adidas vintage trainer designs), which appealed to both older casuals and an emerging youth market drawn to the subculture. At £70, these reissues enabled some collectors to amass upwards of 50 pairs (Ritchie, 2017).



*Figure 3: A compilation of members' entries for #SocksOutSaturday, 2015. © Reuven Fletcher.*

As 2012 progressed, several men began tweeting images of their socks juxtaposed creatively with their footwear. However, the appearance of the hashtag #SocksOutSaturday in February 2013 resulted in a surge of participatory engagement with the BSFC on Twitter,

with hundreds of men uploading images of their socks and shoes to the site (Figure 3). The images men shared followed two distinct aesthetic approaches, both of which emphasised the wearer's anonymity. Whether cropped, pixelated, or heavily blacked out, this emphasis on anonymity is a common visual element used by casuals online in their self-presentation. It is, in part, a response to the police routinely capturing surveillance imagery of football match attendees and correlating this with online imagery as a means of identifying participants in hooliganism. While anonymity may be justified for some individuals, for the most, it is a stylistic allusion prompted by a desire for the cultural capital associated with criminal activity.

The first photographic approach takes a downward angle, capturing the wearer's jacket's bottom, followed by their jeans, socks, and shoes. The second, more popular style crops the image from the mid-calf down, revealing the bottom of the wearer's jeans, which are typically inched up slightly to reveal more of the wearer's sock and trainers or shoes. Members developed a shared visual language through their repeated use of these two distinct approaches to image construction. This self-imposed limitation on how the dressed body was represented allowed viewers to focus exclusively on the combination of jackets, jeans, socks, and footwear. What is striking about this user-generated photography is the complexity incorporated into most images. While the initial emphasis was on matching socks and shoes, the imagery quickly expanded to focus on accessories, stance, and surroundings.

Props such as cans of craft IPA beer, record sleeves, Lambretta scooters, glasses of Burgundy wine, books about the Suffragette movement, and copies of *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (an Italian daily sports newspaper) begin to appear in photographs. Various backgrounds are used to add texture and colour to the composition, either in contrast or tonality, such as linoleum, parquet floors, mosaic tiling, and zigzag-patterned carpets, as well as external surfaces such as tarmac, concrete, or paving. Football terraces, pubs, boating lakes, bridges, beer gardens, pebbled beaches, and swimming pools are among the locations used. Most notably, the yellow safety line on the edge of railway platforms is repeatedly used as a framing device for these images of trainers and socks, evoking the football away day when rival firms travelled by train to distant towns. As with the sock, this demarcation can be interpreted as another liminal zone, denoting the distinction between the external and internal, between safety and danger, and between home and away.

These men are constructing elaborate self-portraits containing, as Demetriou noted, 'hybrid configurations of gender practice' for the consumption and approval of other men through their image-making activities (2001: 351). While these hybrid masculinities

demonstrate a softening of dominant masculinities, they are also performative in nature, designed to elicit a precise response of approval from a targeted audience. Indeed, as Demetriou argues:

Hybridization in the realm of representation and in concrete, everyday gender practices makes the hegemonic bloc appear less oppressive and more egalitarian...Moreover, hybridization is a very effective strategy because it uses 'the subversive, messy form of camouflage' in order to produce something new and unrecognizable... (Demetriou, 2001)

The participatory nature of the activity of the BSFC brought out the competitiveness within these men that was reinforced by social media. Twitter and other digital media platforms have rapidly become gamified, with visible metrics such as retweets, likes, and comments signifying social standing and peer acceptance. Their peers' affirmation of individual activity contributes to constructing and reinforcing the group's accepted dress codes and masculine identities. As noted by Connell and Messerschmidt 'hegemonic masculinity is not a self-reproducing form, whether through "habitus" or any other mechanism. To sustain a given pattern of hegemony requires the policing of men' (2005: 16). Notably, as participants competed to outperform one another in one-upmanship, the images indicate an increase in the number of males photographed wearing knee-high socks and exposing their upper calves. Due to the difficulty of capturing these images, a second person would have been required to take the photograph. These men are not simply pairing their trainers with socks they already own; for some of these men, the sophistication of their trainers' colourways necessitated explicitly searching for a sock that matched flawlessly with that colour scheme. The more intricate the various colours of the wearer's footwear, the more complex the combinations made. For example, a New Balance 574 trainer in rust, stone, and white was paired perfectly with a long-hooped sock in red, terracotta, and white.

### **Cultural production and hybrid masculinities**

While research into football hooliganism has frequently focused on its association with right-wing politics and extremism (Back, Crabbe and Solomos, 2001; Garland and Rowe, 2001; Treadwell and Garland, 2011), the BSFC's activities and cultural production were notable for their emphasis on left-wing ideology and iconography. This included the support of several

charities, including Hope Not Hate, the Orgreave Truth and Justice Campaign, Wimbledon Food Bank, and Women's Aid (Robson, 2015).



Figure 4: A selection of BSFC stickers, 2014. © Andrew Groves.

The BSFC was comprised of highly skilled practitioners who developed and disseminated their values, practices, and shared beliefs via a variety of mediums, revealing a complex, politically left-leaning membership. Their creative and commercial output included graphic design, photography, prose, and the creation of stickers, socks, and badges for the BSFC. The first objects members produced were stickers with photoshopped artwork that appropriated political, cultural, and industrial imagery (Figure 4). These were distributed to members and soon began to appear at football grounds throughout the country. The stickers featured left-wing symbolism, including images of the May 1968 French protests, the Salford Lads Club (a working-class youth club founded in 1904 in Greater Manchester), a Hammer and Sickle, the International Brigade, and Soviet propaganda posters. The incorporation of Soviet iconography celebrating the worker could be interpreted as a desire to embrace reassuring depictions of hegemonic masculinity in a post-industrial Britain. It did, however,



coincide with a resurgence of interest in Russian fashion in the West, as exemplified by Moscow designer Gosha Rubchinskiy, whose streetwear was distributed by Comme des Garçons. Rubchinskiy's designs incorporated traditional Russian iconography and drew inspiration from football's casual culture. The BSFC's usage of Soviet imagery therefore can be seen as being prescient of contemporary high-fashion trends. However, as evidenced by an early sticker that reworked Trainspotting's Choose life speech, their use of cultural references was also self-aware and at times irreverent:

Choose BSFC. Choose a Sock. Choose a Pantherella. Choose a Falke. Choose a fucking big Trickett. Choose a Scott Nichols, Viyella, Capricorn Mohair Socks and Burlington Knee High Socks. Choose good quality, no polyester. Choose cotton and wool Socks at least blended Socks. Choose Pringles. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching shoes. Choose a fucking expensive technical jacket in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose Happy Socks and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting in that pub watching mind-numbing spirit-crushing bellends, pouring fucking weak pish lager into their mouths. Choose not rotting away at the end of it all, poncing to your last in a happy home, nothing more than fine crafted hosiery to your hearts content, fucked up on real ale you have brewed yourself.

Choose the future. Choose Socks.

Barry and Phillips observed that males categorise their fashion behaviour into two distinct categories: labour or play.

Characterizing fashion as labor allows men to link the dignity and traditional masculinity of work to their fashion behaviors and helps to alleviate the gender identity tension arising from behaviors that could be perceived as feminine.’ (2016:449, original emphasis). While those that characterized their behaviour as play ‘do not need to justify their fashion behaviors as labor, but appear to experience more freedom to transgress gender boundaries when engaged in play activities.

(2016: 451)

However, the BSFC's activities can be interpreted as a means of navigating between the two. Within their dress practices, casuals have historically prioritised functional designer outerwear, most notably from Italian sportswear brands such as Stone Island or C.P. Company. These garments draw heavily on the functionality and protective characteristics of

military uniforms in their design, situating casuals within a hegemonic framework of traditional masculine roles. This could be interpreted as a continuation of the Teddy Boys' use of formal tailoring and the skinheads' adoption of stripped-back workwear. As with both these subcultures, this masculinity was purposefully undermined and queered within the BSFC by the emphasis on wearing garish and brightly coloured socks. This playfulness, combined with the outerwear's hypermasculinity, created a point of sartorial conflict. This tension also manifested itself in other aspects of the group's activity.



*Figure 5: BSFC meeting, London, February 2014. © Andrew Groves.*

While the BSFC supported progressive politics and protest iconography, its linguistic structure was derived from a hierarchical hegemonic system. Members assumed fictitious roles, with the founder of the BSFC serving as Chairman and other members as the board of directors. This language extended to their meetings; in June 2014, members gathered in Newcastle for the BSFC Party Conference, and later in October for the Autumn Conference in Salford (see Figure 5). This use of language further positioned the group's engagement with fashion and dress as male labour. 'By characterizing their interest in fashion as labor, men's performance of masculinity becomes compliant with cultural norms: men are supposed to work and to value work' (Barry and Phillips, 2016: 449). The BSFC extended their discourse around labour by producing several socks for members that thematically appropriated industrial, political, or social narratives in their design and presentation.



Figure 6: British Sock Fetish Council Malmo socks, 2015. © Reuven Fletcher.

The 'Malmo' sock, which was released in May 2014, was inspired by the adidas Malmo trainer from the late 1970s but featured a communist hammer and sickle with the words BSFC underneath (Figure 6). This was followed by the 'Internationale' socks produced by Marko John's, a British sock manufacturer. These socks were woven in the colours of the Spanish Republic's flag to honour 'the brave men and women of the International Brigades who went to fight for democracy and against fascism in the Spanish Civil War.' The BSFC then partnered with Corgi Socks, a company founded in 1892 in Ammanford, Wales, that

initially manufactured thigh-high woollen stockings for local miners before expanding to produce finer socks for these men to wear to chapel on Sundays. The company created socks for the BSFC with a yellow and black diagonal pattern inspired by the interior of Manchester's defunct Hacienda nightclub, which was once owned by Factory records. Finally, in 2015, they released a 'Suffragette' sock in the British women's suffrage movement's colours of green, white, and purple; a sock inspired by a miner's banner from Ashington, Northumbria; and a 'Putin' sock in a rainbow colourway. The artwork for this final sock depicted a shirtless Vladimir Putin riding a horse through Red Square, surrounded by a sea of rainbow flags and banners bearing the hammer and sickle.

All these examples demonstrate that socks perform a specific function for the BSFC in addition to conveying style. They are deliberately culturally loaded artefacts that express a complex and, at times, contradictory range of connotations about work, leisure, and labour that are unique to this group of men. Indeed, while these men's external outerwear continues to enforce gender conformity, their use of underwear, specifically their socks, to co-opt a variety of political discourses ranging from gay rights to women's rights, can be interpreted as an example of negotiated inclusive masculinity. One of the core tenets of Anderson's inclusive masculinity theory (2009) is that as homophobia declines, homophobia ceases to be an efficient means of regulating masculinity since it no longer stigmatises heterosexual men. In their activity the BSFC echo recent research on how male bodybuilders utilise Instagram to negotiate inclusive masculinities through hegemonic masculine bodies (Marshall, et al., 2020). We are accustomed to viewing masculine power as a unified whole devoid of otherness and contradiction. Yet hegemonic masculinity reproduces itself exactly through its hybrid and ostensibly contradictory substance (Demetriou, 2001). As Bridges and Pascoe argue: 'Hybrid masculine practices often work in ways that create some discursive distance between White, straight men and "hegemonic masculinity.'" However, as men are distanced from hegemonic masculinity, they also (often more subtly) align themselves with it' (2014: 250).

Given the contradictory nature of this activity and its proclivity to 'disclose' a person's true intentions, it is unsurprising that men have consistently chosen one of the most overlooked elements of their dress for its location. This has aided men in keeping this conduct almost unnoticed, semi-hidden, and rarely discussed. This threshold region is a recurrent site of subversion, and in the case of the British Sock Fetish Council members, it has enabled their gender practices to function as a strategy for hybridising hegemonic masculinity in order to continue benefiting from it.

## Conclusion

Although socks have long been associated with subcultural dress, little has been written about their subversive qualities. Socks occupy the liminal space between internal and external, serving as a site of sartorial transgression within menswear and a means of queering hegemonic masculinity through its hybridization of gender practices. Their deployment as a seditious garment by casuals continues a long tradition of specific groups of men who have positioned socks as the locus for deviancy and travesty in their dress. The BSFC are the latest group of men to invest significance and meaning in an often-overlooked item of menswear. This research establishes how these men employ a variety of digital and creative skills to build cultural and social capital, thereby mediating their position and standing within their community. It demonstrates how members of the BSFC used dress to assemble individual and group identities revealing a highly complex approach to the construction and negotiation of masculinities disseminated across a broad age range in physical and digital environments. These findings shed new insight on an aspect of dress for casuals, a subcultural group that has received relatively little attention within fashion research on their usage of dress, despite their pervasive influence on British menswear over the last 40 years. As MacKenzie argues: ‘Casuals are responsible for one of the most persistent and pervasive fashions in Britain’ (2019: 38). Comprised primarily of older, White, working-class heterosexual men, many of whom have a history of petty criminality and hooliganism they appear to exemplify the opposite of current academic interests within fashion research. Nonetheless, their embracing of inclusive and hybrid masculinities, as demonstrated by their gender practices and their use of socks to communicate complex concepts about dress and masculinity, establishes them as deserving further examination.

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