

Reworking Masculinity at Gucci: Tom Ford, Fashion Imagery and the Emergence of the Metrosexual Ideal

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Introduction

Tom Ford started his career at Gucci as a head designer in 1991, but it was in 1994, when he took over as creative director, that the brand's image was revived through his revolutionary aesthetic. At a time when Gucci was struggling commercially and creatively, Ford introduced an aesthetic defined by glamour, eroticism and sensuality that radically repositioned the brand within global fashion culture (Blazio-Licorish, 2025). This marked a decisive turning point in contemporary fashion through his aesthetic of glamour, eroticism, and sensuality. There has been considerable critical attention focused on Ford's transformation of womenswear, but it is his approach to Gucci's menswear that revolutionised cultural ideas of gender identity.

During this time, male identity was increasingly impacted by fashion, advertising, and consumer culture (Edwards, 1997). This period departed from earlier ideals of masculine restraint and moved towards greater self-awareness, grooming and bodily display. Fashion advertising became a key in which these changing masculine identities were normalised. Ford introduced a new visual language that blended dominance with desire, sharp tailoring with soft tactility, and traditional masculine poses with fabrics traditionally coded as feminine. These images positioned masculinity as something that could be styled and consumed rather than simply assumed.

Tom Ford's campaigns showcased masculine and confident body language, but despite this, the materials used - satin, velvet, silk, and sheer textures - reveal a profound traditional feminisation of the male image (Entwistle, 2015). This tension between hyper masculinity and historically feminine fabric has received limited academic attention. However, the campaigns sit at the centre of shifts in how masculinity was being performed and visually constructed in the 1990s. Theorists argue that gender is not a fixed biological essence but a set of stylised acts, social scripts, and aesthetics (Butler, 1990). Ford's work at Gucci engaged with and amplified these changing performances.

This essay examines the research question: to what extent did Tom Ford's Gucci contribute to the feminisation of masculinity and the emergence of the metrosexual ideal in 1990s and early 2000s fashion imagery? I argue that Ford's menswear created a new form of masculinity that appeared dominant yet was materially and aesthetically softened through sensuality, tactility, and erotic display. Ford consequently helped shape what Mark Simpson later coined the metrosexual: a man defined by consumption, grooming and an openness to traditionally feminine-coded forms of pleasure (Simpson, 1994).

This essay draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, Alison Bancroft's psychoanalytic reading of fashion and desire, Joanne Entwistle's work on fashion as the production of gendered bodies, Tim Edwards' analysis of consumer masculinity and Jay McCauley Bowstead's research on contemporary menswear. These perspectives and ideas define masculinity as fluid, constructed and shaped by visual culture (Butler, 1990; Bancroft, 2012; Entwistle, 2015; Edwards, 1997; Bowstead, 2018).

The analysis focuses on close visual readings of selected menswear campaigns produced during Tom Ford's time at Gucci in the late 1990s and early 2000s, drawing on the Visual Analysis Toolkit and Discourse Analysis Toolkit provided by the Creative Industries unit. By examining pose, gaze, bodily presentation, styling, and surface detail, the essay considers how masculinity is visually constructed within fashion advertising. Within this approach, fabrics such as silk, velvet, satin, and sheer textiles are treated as visual and symbolic elements that contribute to the gendered meanings of the images, rather than as objects of material analysis in themselves. Through this lens, the essay explores how Ford's campaigns can be read as merging traditionally masculine and feminine codes, producing a hybrid model of masculinity that participates in the broader cultural emergence of the metrosexual ideal at the end of the twentieth century.

Theoretical framework

A key foundation for this essay is the understanding that gender is not a biological fact, but a cultural construct that is expressed through dress and bodily presentation. Joanne Entwistle argues that clothing plays a crucial role in defining gendered bodies, shaping how people experience and are represented within society. Entwistle states that "Clothes draw attention to the sex of the wearer so that one can tell, usually at first glance, whether they are a man or a woman" (Entwistle, 2015). Historical examples of dress indicate that traits considered traditionally feminine today, such as silk, velvet, and lace, were once prominent in upper-class masculine dress, challenging the societal norm that sensuality and softness are stereotypically feminine characteristics. Entwistle's interpretation of John Carl Flügel's "Great Masculine Renunciation" illustrates how modern Western masculinity came to be defined through restraint, conservatism and the rejection of sensual materials, positioning ornamentation and bodily display as feminine (Entwistle, 2015). The history of male dressing establishes the tension at the core of Tom Ford's work. While his menswear welcomes tactile, sensual fabrics historically associated with masculinity, modern cultural fundamentals view these materials as feminine. Therefore, Entwistle's stance indicates that masculinity is constructed and performed through aesthetics rather than reflecting a natural inner identity.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity reframes masculinity as a repetition of stylised acts rather than a biological identity. As claimed by Butler, "gender is the repeated stylisation of the body" (Butler, 1990). Tom Ford's Gucci campaigns are therefore seen as displays of masculinity that connect the traditionally masculine characteristics of dominance, confidence, and physical presence, with traditionally feminine characteristics of sensuality communicated through fabric and erotic display. Butler's theories help explain how these contradictions function visually: the traditionally masculine poses and the traditionally feminine materials do not cancel each other out; instead display gender as fluid and constructed. Her theory thus allows this essay to understand Ford's menswear not only as fashion imagery but as a means for gender norms to be reinterpreted and disrupted.

In the 1990s, masculinity experienced a significant shift linked to consumerism. Tim Edwards argues that men became more aware of themselves as self-aestheticising subjects, engaging in practices of grooming, styling and bodily awareness that were previously associated with traditional femininity. Edwards addresses the rise of a narcissistic masculine subject who is both the observer and the object of their own gaze (Edwards, 1997). This change in men's attitudes provides important context for understanding Ford's impact in the 1990s. His polished, eroticised representation of male bodies aligns with Edwards' view that masculinity was becoming more self-conscious.

Observing these shifts in masculinity, Mark Simpson's theory of the metrosexual provides an effective concept for understanding the cultural shift during the 1990s. Simpson coined the term as a description for a man who was progressively interested in consumption, grooming, self-image and embraced actions traditionally viewed as feminine (Simpson, 1994). The metrosexual male is defined to be not as a rejection of masculinity, but by a reinterpretation of it, in which appearance becomes central to masculine identity. This shift can be viewed as aligned with the growing incorporation of the male body in advertising and fashion imagery, where men are positioned as objects of desire. Simpson's theory is particularly significant to Tom Ford's menswear at Gucci as it consistently displayed the male body as erotic and polished. Ford's campaigns depict men who are confident and dominant in posture, yet highly stylised and sensual in material, reflecting the metrosexual man's comfort with traditionally feminine-coded aesthetics and self-aestheticisation. Therefore, Ford's Gucci can be viewed as contributing to and shaping the metrosexual ideal, exhibiting a template for masculinity that is consumer-orientated, image-conscious, and open to traditionally feminine coded forms of self-expression.

Contemporary menswear scholarship texts further highlight a softening of masculine aesthetics and an increased emphasis on sensuality and bodily display. Jay McCauley Bowstead argues that late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century

menswear moved away from conventional displays of masculinity towards more fluid and expressive forms (Bowstead, 2018). Bowstead emphasises a developing focus on the male body as a ground for vulnerability and aesthetic focus, in which fabric, silhouette and styling play an important role in communicating changing gender identities. This shift provides an important basis for understanding Tom Ford's menswear at Gucci. The transformation of aesthetic can be understood through Alison Bancroft's psychoanalytic approach to fashion, which frames dress and bodily presentation as central to the expression of desire (Bancroft, 2012). Bancroft argues that fashion operates beyond function, engaging unconscious fantasies and impulses through texture and bodily exposure. Therefore, Ford's Gucci campaigns can be seen as a purposefully eroticised construct of masculinity, where the male body is positioned to be looked at and desired. Bowstead and Bancroft both provide a framework for understanding Ford's work as part of a wider cultural moment where masculinity became increasingly sexual and open to forms of desire traditionally associated with femininity.

These theoretical perspectives provided a framework for understating masculinity as a constructed and performative identity rather than a fixed biological distinction. Entwistle's work establishes dress as a key mechanism in which gendered bodies are understood and produced, while Butler's theory of performativity explains how gender is determined through a repetition of visual and bodily acts. Edwards and Simpson put these ideas into the cultural context of the 1990s. Bancroft's psychoanalytic approach deepens this framework by accounting for the role of desire and eroticism in fashion imagery. Together, these theories allow for the analysis of tailoring, fabric, pose and bodily exposure to determine how they contribute to the reconfiguration of masculinity across Ford's work.

Methodology

The research in this essay uses a qualitative descriptive methodology combining visual analysis and discourse analysis to explore Tom Ford's campaigns for Gucci during the 1990s and early 2000s. These methods allow for close attention to visual detail while analysing the images through a broader cultural, historical, and ideological lens.

The images selected for this research focus on three key campaigns during Tom Ford's time at Gucci: 1995, 1997 and 2003. I chose these campaigns as they emphasise the development of Ford's visual language and his evolving approach to masculinity in fashion imagery. Campaign imagery as primary material is used instead of runway looks as it is a highly controlled and widely circulated form of visual communication. The consistency of Mario Testino as the photographer for each campaign supports the analysis as it allows for shifts in representation without any

major changes in photographic style. This research looks at how masculinity progressively evolves at Gucci, moving from subtle destabilisation to overt eroticism.

The primary methodological approach in this essay is visual analysis, drawing on the Visual Analysis Toolkit provided by the Cultural and Historical Studies department at London College of Fashion. Visual analysis allows the researcher to take an active role in questioning what images mean and what they represent. Stuart Hall argues that representation involves the active process of selecting, structuring, and shaping meaning (Hall, 1997). This essay investigates pose, gaze, bodily presentation, fabric, texture, and styling used in Tom Ford's Gucci campaigns. These components are analysed to investigate how masculinity is visually constructed, aestheticised and eroticised within fashion imagery.

The process of analysis follows the toolkit's emphasis on description, contextualisation, and interpretation. The images are first described in detail to establish what is visually present and then placed in their cultural context, including the shift in cultural norms around gender representation in the 1990s and early 2000s. Interpretation then utilises theoretical frameworks from gender and fashion studies to explore how meaning is produced through visual language.

This research involves elements of discourse analysis communicated by the Discourse Analysis Toolkit provided by the Cultural and Historical Studies department at London College of Fashion. Discourse analysis investigates how fashion imagery has wider ideological and cultural meanings, particularly in relation to gender, the body and desire. Michel Foucault's understanding of discourse as productive rather than reflective considers Gucci's campaigns as not simply depicting masculinity but actively contributing to the construction and circulation of particular masculine ideals (Foucault, 1977).

This methodology focuses on what the image represents, rather than analysing audience reception. The Discourse Analysis Toolkit outlines that the aim is not to assess how images are interpreted by the viewer, but to instead examine how cultural texts establish ideas as natural or common sense. In this essay, this method is used to explore how Tom Ford's Gucci campaigns normalise a form of masculinity that blends dominance, sensuality, and self-aestheticisation.

This research has limitations due to its reliance on interpretive analysis based on theoretical frameworks from fashion and gender studies. The analysis is based on archival fashion imagery therefore how the campaigns were received by the audience at the time, cannot be considered. This study focuses on representation rather than production processes, meaning that it does not address the intentions of Tom Ford

or Mario Testino. These limitations do not undermine the analysis, they instead situate it within a critical framework that prioritises visual meaning and interpretation.

By using both visual and discourse analysis, this methodology allows for a layered examination of Tom Ford's Gucci imagery as both aesthetic objects and cultural texts. This approach supports the investigation of how Gucci's campaigns contributed to the emergence of the metrosexual ideal and the feminisation of traditional masculinity in fashion culture.

Analysis



Figure 1, Gucci 1995. (Testino, 1995)

Tom Ford's first campaign for Gucci as creative director in 1995 (Figure 1), photographed by Mario Testino, marks the emergence of a visual language that deliberately blurs the distinctions between menswear and womenswear. The male models and female model are styled in sharply tailored suits that emphasise the figure, share similar silhouettes, bold colours, and fabrics, creating limited distinction between masculine and feminine dress. The campaign introduces tailoring as a shared aesthetic code as opposed to using clothing to reinforce difference in gender, indicating that elegance and desirability are not exclusively traits traditionally coded as feminine.

Visually, the styling uses minimal conventional techniques, such as pose, that are traditionally used to distinguish gender in fashion imagery. The male and female models are posed with similar body language and the tailoring accentuates and

frames the models' figures coherently. Historically, the suit is a symbol of masculine authority but with this campaign, it has been recontextualised as a fluid garment that can be both feminine and masculine across gender boundaries. This stylistic approach destabilises the traditional idea that clothing naturally expresses biological difference and instead frames gender as something that is produced through visual context.

Joanne Entwistle's theory of gendered bodies being produced through dress is particularly useful in understanding this campaign (Entwistle, 2015). Entwistle argues that clothing plays an active role in shaping how bodies are read, experienced, and understood within society: "Dress is the means by which bodies are made social and given meaning" (Entwistle, 2015). Historically, the tailored suit has been a symbol of masculine power, professionalism, and restraint, however; in this campaign, this symbolism is disrupted by Ford's use of tailoring on both male and female bodies without significant alteration.

This disruption aligns with Entwistle's discussion of John Carl Flügel's concept of the "Great Masculine Renunciation," in which men's dress became "increasingly sober, uniform and restrained" (Entwistle, 2015). The male body is not yet overtly eroticised in Ford's 1995 campaign, but the campaign begins to loosen the boundaries created by the renunciation. The tailoring in this campaign is elegant, fitted, and attractive on both genders, which subtly reintroduces aesthetic pleasure and bodily display into menswear.

This campaign establishes a foundation for Ford's future work at Gucci, where the male body becomes the focal point for eroticism, sensuality, and aesthetic display. The 1995 campaign normalises the idea that masculinity can incorporate desirability and stylisation through its use of shared tailoring that minimises the distinctions between womenswear and menswear. This prepares the viewer for more explicit feminisation of masculinity that emerges in Ford's later campaigns for Gucci.



Figure 2, Spring/Summer 1997. (Testino, 1997)

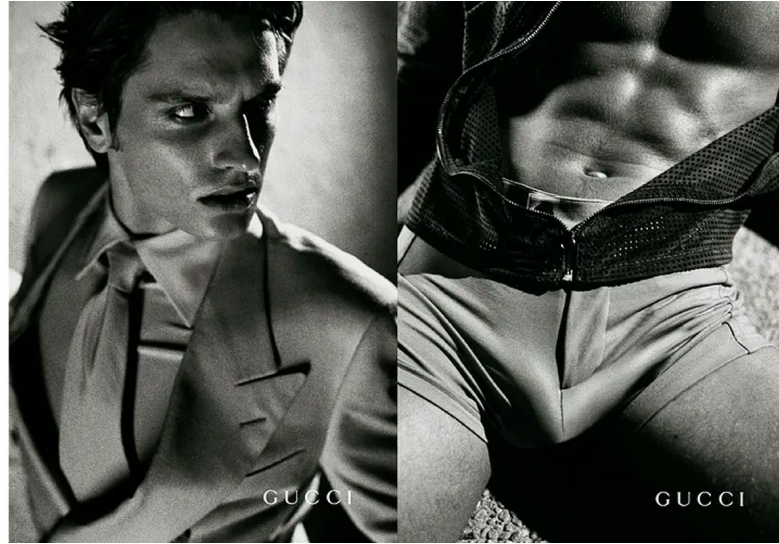


Figure 3, Spring/Summer 1997. (Testino, 1997)

The Gucci Spring/Summer 1997 image (Figure 2), shot by Mario Testino, marks a shift towards the explicit eroticisation of the male body. Unlike the 1995 campaign where the line between masculine and feminine was blurred through similar tailoring, this image places the male body at the focal point, emphasising Ford's exploration of masculinity.

The models are shot in a rough outdoor environment and are lying directly on the dirt or sand. The set summons associations with nature and physical strength, traditional masculine stereotypes rooted in endurance and dominance. However, the masculine framing contradicts the way the male body is styled and presented. The focal point of the image, established through lighting and positioning, is the male model's exposed skin, muscular definition, and curved torso. The illuminated body invites prolonged visual engagement, positioning the male model as an object of erotic attention.

Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity helps to explain the tension in this image. Butler argues that "gender is the repeated stylisation of the body" (Butler, 1990). While masculinity is performed through physical presence and setting, the feminised way the body is shown disrupts traditional gender expectations by communicating masculinity as constructed through stylised acts rather than biological certainty (Butler, 1990). This campaign does not reject masculinity but instead adapts it, acknowledging dominance and erotic display's coexistence.

This eroticised construction of masculinity through the exposure of the male body is further developed within the same Spring/Summer 1997 campaign. Unlike the first image analysed in this campaign, this photograph (figure 3) situates the model in a

more stylised setting, where desire is produced through fabric and styling rather than landscape and pose. The composition of this image draws the viewer's attention to the torso and lower abdomen, making the model's face secondary. Deliberate tension between concealment and display is created through the unzipped mesh top exposing the skin, and the slim-fitting shorts that accentuate the model's groin.

Joanne Entwistle's argument that gendered bodies are produced through dress helps frame this image (Entwistle, 2015). Softness and tactility are emphasised over the stereotypical masculine traits of strength or protection through the mesh fabric and close fit which draws attention to the surface of the body. The styling encourages the viewer to focus on texture and form rather than using clothing to assert control or authority, conveying that masculinity here is communicated through vulnerability and bodily display.

Alison Bancroft's psychoanalytic reading of fashion considers clothing as a way desire is expressed rather than simply worn: "Fashion engages desire at the level of surface" (Bancroft, 2012). The male body in this campaign is positioned to be looked and lingered over through the exposure of the torso, sheen and lightness of the fabric. This technique mirrors strategies historically associated with female lingerie and fashion advertising, in which the body is stylised and eroticised through emphasis on texture and exposure. The male body, in this context, is not just present within the image but is aestheticised for the gaze.

Both images analysed from the Spring/Summer 1997 campaign demonstrate a shift from the subtle destabilisation of gender seen in Ford's earlier work to a more explicit eroticisation of masculinity. This progression reinforces Ford's role in shaping a new visual language of masculinity that embraces sensuality and self-display. This visual logic aligns with Mark Simpson's idea of the metrosexual, where the male body becomes increasingly foregrounded, aestheticised and consumed in fashion imagery (Simpson, 1994). As Simpson notes, "the male body has become increasingly visible as an object of consumption" (Simpson, 1994). Ford's Gucci, through this campaign, contributes to a shift in masculine representation where the male body can be both powerful and desirable through a lens of fashion imagery traditionally associated with women.



Figure 4, Spring/Summer 2003. (Testino, 2003)

Tom Ford's Spring/Summer 2003 Gucci campaign (figure 4), shot by Mario Testino shows the most explicit development of Ford's exploration of masculinity, power, and desire. The image features a female model standing while a male model kneels directly in front of her pubic area where the shaved "G" is visible. This positioning establishes a hierarchy between the two bodies, where the female is in a position of control and authority and the male is positioned lower than her, physically and symbolically.

Kneeling is a posture historically associated with submission and vulnerability, qualities that are rarely aligned with traditional masculinity. The male model's gaze is directed towards the female body, rather than towards the camera, reinforcing his role as an object rather than the controlling subject. The female's body, in contrast, is upright and still which conveys dominance and composure. This reverses conventional gender roles often seen in fashion imagery.

This feminised construction of masculinity is reinforced through the styling. The male model is wearing silk bomber jacket and white trousers which emphasise softness and tactility. Masculinity is aligned with sensuality and visual appeal through the contrast of the soft material and the traditional expectation of structured or functional menswear.

Judith Butler's theory contextualises this image by framing gender as something produced through the repetition of gesture, pose and visual code, rather than a fixed biological identity (Butler, 1990). In this image, masculinity is performed through submission and vulnerability, emphasising that these qualities are not inherently feminine but assigned.

Discussion: Reworking Masculinity at Gucci

These campaigns analysed together reveal a deliberate progression of masculinity within Tom Ford's Gucci. The campaigns form a visual trajectory where masculinity gradually moves away from restraint and authority and evolves into an expression of style, eroticism, and vulnerability. This shift is subtly shown in the 1995 campaign, where the gender boundaries are destabilised through the shared tailoring and equivalence between the male and female models. Masculinity in this image is positioned as aesthetically conscious.

This intensifies in the Spring/Summer 1997 campaign as the male body becomes the focal point of erotic attention. In these images, the skin, texture and body shape is emphasised reflecting the shift in masculine ideals described by Flügel's "Great Masculine Renunciation" and towards a form of masculinity that embraces ornamentation, sensuality and display. This shift aligns with Entwistle's argument that gender is produced through dress and bodily presentation, as well as Butler's theory of gender performativity.

Ford's explicit visual language in the 2003 campaign reaches its climax as masculinity is aligned with vulnerability and submission. The development in this campaign reflects the cultural context of masculinity described by Edwards and Simpson. Ford's campaigns actively contribute to this shift by normalising masculinity that is desirable.

In these campaigns, Ford constructs masculinity as fluid, performative and embedded in visual language. The strategic use of tailoring, fabric, pose and bodily exposure position Gucci as a site where masculinity is not only represented but reshaped. The progression from shared tailoring to erotic display and then to vulnerability indicates that fashion imagery functions as a powerful tool for redefining gender norms. Ford's work at Gucci plays an important role in the emergence of the metrosexual ideal, positioning masculinity as something that is styled, consumed, and continually reimagined.

Conclusion

This essay examines the extent to which Tom Ford's Gucci contributed to the feminisation of masculinity and the emergence of the metrosexual ideal in 1990s and early 2000s fashion imagery. Through the analysis of three key Gucci campaigns from

1995, 1997 and 2003, shot by Mario Testino, the research demonstrates that Ford's work reshaped how masculinity was visually constructed and culturally understood.

The analysis demonstrates a clear progression in Ford's representation of masculinity. The 1995 campaign introduced a subtle destabilisation of traditional gender boundaries through shared tailoring, positioning masculinity as aesthetically conscious. In the 1997 campaign, the destabilisation intensified into the eroticisation of the male body and men were repositioned as objects of desire within fashion imagery. In the 2003 campaign, Ford's provocative visual language reached its climax where masculinity was aligned with vulnerability and submission, challenging traditional hierarchies of gender and dominance.

This essay shows that masculinity in Ford's Gucci is constructed through dress, pose and visual language by drawing of the theoretical frameworks of Entwistle, Butler, Edwards, Simpson, Bowstead, and Bancroft. The campaigns show that masculinity can incorporate sensuality, bodily display, and desirability—qualities historically coded as feminine—without abandoning confidence or presence.

Tom Ford's Gucci ultimately played a formative role in normalising a form of masculinity that was visible, eroticised and aesthetically self-aware. Through the use of tailoring, fabric, and bodily exposure, Ford positioned the male body as a focal point of desire in fashion imagery. Ford's contribution to masculinity was instrumental in shaping the metrosexual ideal, where masculinity became something to be styled and consumed. Tom Ford's Gucci plays a significant role in the cultural transformation of male identity at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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