From ‘he gets lots of hot girlfriends’ to ‘he sounds girlie’: young people’s talk about Justin Bieber and contemporary masculinities

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Contemporary masculinities, youth and ‘celebrity talk’

- **Social constructionist** approach to masculinities
- Masculinities as plural
- Approaches that enable us to explore **power relations**
- Hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987)
- Critiques of Connell
- Inclusive masculinity (Anderson, 2009; McCormack 2012)
Contemporary masculinities, youth and ‘celebrity talk’

• We are interrogating the ‘boundary maintenance work’ around gender and sexual identities (Martino 1999) being performed in young men and women’s talk about celebrity

• We locate young people’s ‘celebrity talk’ as a space for the discursive negotiation of the legitimacy of particular masculinities

• ‘Celebrity talk’ provides a unique lens through which to interrogate shifts and continuities in contemporary masculinities

• Exploring two examples from our group interview data to examine the use of disgust and humour in the construction of masculinities

• What do disgust and laughter open up and/or close down?
Context

Wider **ESRC funded** study of celebrity and young people’s aspiration

Group and individual interviews with about **150 young people** aged 14-17 in England

Textual analysis of 12 ‘case study’ celebrities

Focus on two extracts from **group interviews**:

- Mixed gender year 12 group in inner city Manchester school
- All male year 12 group at rural SW school

“We don’t mind having haters. As long as we have our girls, we are strong.”
Overview: How Bieber & 1D were discussed

• Generated lots of discussion
• Mainly engendered negative responses - but not always
• **Key themes:**
  • Anxieties around **maturity** – ‘Bieber the brat’; childish fan as Other (gendered)
  • Perceived **failed** performance of the ‘**bad boy**’ – the ‘Disney’ syndrome
  • Questioning whether **fame is deserved** and ‘authenticity’
  • Moral debates about their **love lives** and ‘irresponsibility’
  • Accusations of **jealousy among ‘haters’**

These two examples allow us to interrogate the **texture of contemporary masculinities** and how these are regulated; and to **engage in theoretical debates** around masculinities
Proximity and uneasy categories: Policing via disgust

Affect and ‘disgusting celebrities’

The role of *aversive emotions* in reproducing social inequalities and regulating borders (Tyler 2013, Ahmed 2004, Probyn 2004)

A guttural, aversive emotion’ associated with sickening feelings. Experienced physically but ‘saturated with socially stigmatizing meanings and values’ (Ngai 2005: 11|) and ‘histories of articulation’ (Ahmed 2004) which bind signs of disgust to objects.

‘Disgust reactions are always contingent and relational, revealing less about the disgusted individual or the thing deemed disgusting than about the culture in which disgust is experiences and performed.’ (Tyler 2013:p 23)
Example 1:

Anonymous I hate Justin Bieber.

Kim How come?

Anonymous: Okay, right. I know the word but I don’t want to say it. [laughs] He’s um [very long pause] Okay.

Kim Give it a go.

Anonymous Okay. Singers, right now. Singers, like rappers, whatever, they’re from the category of rappers, his is a little bit, I can’t [mumbles]

Kadija He is trying to be a bad boy! [laughs]

Anonymous Okay. He himself, it is like his voice is, okay, he’s [long pause and laughter from girls]

Anzyi Okay he’s not gone through puberty

Anonymous Okay. [sighs] Okay. Ill say it. He is famous too fast. I don't think he is good at singing. The lyrics of his songs are rubbish, I hate them all. They are so like, aargh! So bad. So so bad

Kadija They’re catchy though I’ll give you that, that is why he is just annoying/
Anonymous His lyrics are sad. But he’s not a boy, but if I say he’s not a boy then you know, I would say he was a girl but I don’t, I don't want to be disrespectful that way.

Anzyi Yeah he’s gay. [laughs]

Anonymous Yeah! [to Anzyi]. That’s the word

Kadija I don’t think he’s gay but he sounds gay.

Anonymous He’s not gay. Yes [to Kadija]! He sounds like he’s a, urgghhh.

Kim What do you mean by that though?

Kadija His voice is high pitched.

Anzyi When we say he sounds gay, It’s not that he’s gay. It is not. He sounds girly. [extended emphasis on girly] [Anonymous Yes!].

Anzyi Because gay is like, you are attracted to guys. But I wouldn't use that word for it.

Kim So what, he sounds feminine or?

Kadija Yes very like feminine like and the way he puts/

Anzyi The way he tries to rap with that voice too...Basically his voice hasn’t broke, he hasn’t reached adolescence yet.
Disgust: an outcome of anxieties about proximity and a consciousness of being within the realm of ‘uneasy categories’,
The **performativity** of aversive emotions (Ahmed 2004); disgust: a means to make **identity claims**; boundary affirmation (Tyler 2013)

**Connell** (1995: 79): those who inhabit subordinate masculinities are ‘expelled from the circle of legitimacy’, associated with **femininity**, constructed through a ‘rich **vocabulary of abuse**: wimp, nerd, sissy…the symbolic blurring with femininity is obvious’.

Centrality of **developmental discourse** – a ‘common-sense’ passage from boyhood to manhood which reproduces normative ideas of gender

Awareness of the **unacceptability of homophobic** discourse yet anxiety ensues because of his association with the feminine, homosexuality and ‘childishness’
‘Cruel pleasures’?
Laughter, ridicule and discipline

"One might suppose that ridicule is universally useful both as a means of socialization and as a means of preserving everyday social order through the disciplines of embarrassment" (Billig, 2005: 235)

"There is a paradox: the same mechanism that ensures social compliance also expresses pleasure at subversion" (Billig, 2005: 234)
Example 2: ‘One Direction are in my heart’

Heather: You’re writing something.
Will: I was just... doodling.

[laughter from group]
Heather: Oh, you just put like a little love heart on One Direction.
Will: Yes.
Heather: So what is this thing about One Direction?
Will: Nothing.
Heather: No, go on.

[laughter]
Will: I don’t know. I’ve just been forced to.
Heather: So how do you get forced to like something?
Will: Go out with women, I guess.

[laughter]
Male: Did someone just grab your arm and make you?
Will: It’s the thumbscrews. You have to. Otherwise you get tortured if you don’t. No, I’m joking. I’m not like [inaudible mention of ‘going back to Jimmy Saville’]

[laughter]
Male: Like Will Smith. I’m sure he rocks.
Heather: You think Will Smith is sound. Right?
Male: He’s probably a decent guy, right.
Will: He’s sexy. I mean
Heather: Is he? So you like Zac Efron and One Direction. Yeah.

[laughter]

Harry: Is there something you want to tell us? [laughter]
Will: From a guy’s point of view I think Will Smith is just.
Heather: Right. So okay, who else do you think? So Will Smith is sexy? Who else is sexy?
Will: Tom Daley….Apart from the old [pause] socks.

[laughter]

Heather: I hadn’t heard that. That’s good that I know that now.
Male: What about Scrubs? [whispering]
Will: Turk.
Heather: You think he’s sexier than.
Male: Why are you choosing all the guys?

[laughter]

Will: Well, it would be weird if you wanted to be a woman wouldn’t it?
Male: No we’re talking about who’s sexy now.
Will: Yeah I know but.
‘The money, the girls’

Archibold: Twilight is just a crime.
Will: It’s all. It’s also the perfect way to pick up women.

Will: Got to be One Direction.
Heather: That’s the job you’d like? Why?
Will: The money, the girls.
Conclusion.....?

Some evidence of ‘shifts ’ and complexity in how gender is performed, but clear boundary work at play in which both the feminine and homosexuality are Othered.

Celebrity talk is a useful lens to interrogate how gender and sexuality are regulated but may also provide spaces to fleetingly occupy alternative positions.

Importance of attending to context: gender regimes and performative space of the group interview.
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