

'Justin Bieber Sounds Girlie': Young People's Celebrity Talk and Contemporary Masculinities

by **Kim Allen, Laura Harvey and Heather Mendick**

University of Leeds; University of Surrey; Brunel University

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Abstract

In this article, we explore the ways that contemporary young masculinities are performed and regulated through young people's relationship with celebrity. We address the relative paucity of work on young men's engagements with popular culture. Drawing on qualitative data from group interviews with 148 young people (aged 14-17) in England, we identify 'celebrity talk' as a site in which gender identities are governed, negotiated and resisted. Specifically we argue that celebrity as a space of imagination can bring to the study of masculinities a focus on their affective and collective mobilisation. Unpicking young men's and women's talk about Canadian pop star Justin Bieber and British boyband One Direction, we show how disgust and humour operate as discursive-affective practices which open up and close down certain meanings and identities. We conclude that while there have been shifts in the ways that masculinities are performed and regulated, hierarchies of masculinities anchored through hegemonic masculinity remain significant.

Keywords: *Affect, Celebrity, Youth, Masculinity, Sexuality, Gender*

Introduction

1.1 Studies of young women's engagement with music, magazines and celebrity demonstrate that popular culture constructs and regulates gender but also that girls actively use these texts to make sense of their identities (Allen 2011; Duits 2010; Jackson et al. 2013; Read 2011; Walkerdine 1997). These studies have focused on the 'doing' of femininities within and through the popular. Yet scholars have paid remarkably little attention either to young men's engagements with popular culture or to popular constructions of young masculinities. In this paper, we take our lead from research that has begun to reveal the complex ways that popular culture informs both young women's and young men's identities; and how it is central to the construction of femininities and masculinities (Allen & Mendick 2013; Buckingham & Bragg 2004; Cann 2014; Nayak & Kehily 2008). Specifically we show that celebrity as a space of imagination can bring to the study of young masculinities a focus on their affective and collective mobilisation. Using data from 24 group interviews with 148 young people aged 14-17 in England, we attend to the role of disgust and humour in performances of masculinities and the ways that gendered identities are governed, negotiated and resisted. To begin, we elaborate our social constructionist approach to gender.

Doing masculinities: fighting, fucking, football and frolicking puppies

2.1 Our social constructionist approach to gender builds on a body of masculinities research in sociology and discursive psychology which views masculinities as plural, situated, shifting and *always* infused by power relations (for example, Barnes 2012; Connell 1995; Frosh et al. 2002; Mac an Ghail 1994). Masculinities (and femininities) are produced through discourses. A discursive approach sees talk as collective meanings and social practices, *not* transparent reflections of inner attitudes or outer realities (MacLure 2003; Potter & Wetherell 1987). These studies understand men's and boy's gender identities as shaped by normative discourses which are socially, culturally and historically specific. They also define masculinities as places in gender relations which are not exclusively occupied by men (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005; Halberstam 1998; Mendick 2006).

2.2 We use Connell's (1995) framework of a hierarchy of multiple masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity 'embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 1995: 77). While

Connell identifies hegemonic masculinity as a dominant 'type', she does not locate it as fixed or narrow or identify it with a specific set of traits. Rather, drawing on Gramsci, Connell argues that particular forms of masculinity emerge as hegemonic within particular gender regimes through ongoing struggle and contestation. Central to this model of masculinity is an opposition to and avoidance of femininity and homosexuality, where associations with these risk marginalisation, subordination and expulsion 'from the circle of legitimacy' (Connell 1995: 79). Thus heteronormativity plays a central role in the construction of gender identities (Butler 1990).

2.3 In attending to the operation of power within schools, scholarship using Connell's framework is concerned with how 'boys are incited to adopt certain practices of masculinity and hence to display themselves as incumbents of particular categories of masculinity on particular occasions' (Martino 1999: 240). Hegemonic masculinity is understood as contextual but has been associated in its traditional form with muscularity, aggression, the objectification of women and homophobia: encapsulated by Mac an Ghaill (1994: 56) as the three Fs of 'fighting, fucking and football'. Empirically developing the shift in Connell's work towards attending to the contingency and cultural specificity of hegemonic masculinities, this body of work attends to the possibilities for young men to contest hegemonic forms of masculinity and take up alternative modes of 'doing man' in particular contexts. This includes models of masculinity that are 'less dependent on the cultural resources of homophobia or misogyny' (Haywood & Mac an Ghaill 2012: 578).

2.4 Recent work on inclusive masculinity theory has sought to problematise the idea that young men's behaviours are structured by a 'restrictive heteromale ethos that is heavily policed by homophobic discourse and strict gender norms' (McCormack 2011: 97). Attending to the presence of tactility, closeness and 'pro-gay' attitudes among heterosexual men, Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2011) point to the changing nature and function of homophobic talk. For example, they suggest that, while homophobic language still features within young men's social interactions (for example, in the use of the term 'gay'), it is not (usually) homophobic in intent neither can it be taken as evidence of underlying homophobic attitudes. Interestingly, McCormack (2012) has pointed to the behaviours of young male celebrities, including English-Irish five-piece boyband One Direction, as evidence of the social status of inclusive masculinities. He points to the ways the group embrace a 'gentle tactility and open displays of emotion' to the extent that a *Sunday Times* journalist reported how "They tousled each other's hair and jostled and caressed one another like a bunch of frolicking puppies".

2.5 This inclusive masculinities approach usefully draws attention to changes in gendered power relations. However, as Connell & Messerschmidt (2005: 848) argue, 'hegemony may be accomplished by the incorporation of such [nonhegemonic] masculinities into a functioning gender order rather than by their active oppression in the form of discredit and violence. In practice, both incorporation and oppression can occur together'. Thus, we use our analysis of young people's celebrity talk to argue that these shifts are better understood as part of an ongoing struggle than as evidence of a move to non-hierarchical patterns of masculinities.

Imaginary boys: celebrity and the collective mobilisation of emotion

3.1 In this paper we examine how collective policing of the boundaries of masculinities takes place through young people's talk about male celebrities who function symbolically as 'imaginary boys' (Martino 1999) within participants' social field. Interested in examining the shifts and continuities in masculinities discussed above, we draw on our data to explore how far celebrity talk creates spaces for alternative masculinities to be enacted, attending to challenges to the legitimacy of such alternatives.

3.2 Celebrity talk is more than just talk about celebrity; it offers a lens through which to interrogate modes of contemporary selfhood and their negotiation. (Harvey *et al* 2015; Mendick *et al*, 2015) Forming part of a broader mediascape through which 'engagements between gender and youth occur' (Kehily & Nayak 2008: 35), celebrity provides a set of discursive-affective practices through which young people engage in 'identity work' (Epstein & Johnson 1998). These practices are neither arbitrary nor entirely volitional, but are negotiated 'within a matrix of social and historical forces enshrined in the ideological arenas of ... family, schooling, media, work and so forth' (Nayak & Kehily 2008: 5). Locating young people's celebrity talk as 'performance practices' through which they position self and others (Duits 2010: 249), we will show that analysing this provides a useful window into the ways that young people manage their own and others' gendered identities, and an opportunity to contend with theoretical debates about the shape and texture of contemporary masculinities.

3.3 As noted earlier, while a wealth of research identifies popular culture as an important space for the consumption, performance and regulation of femininities, very little work focuses on boys' (or girls') engagements with, and performances of, masculinities within and through the popular. That which does however illuminates what a turn to popular culture (and celebrity specifically) can add empirically and conceptually to sociological enquires into masculinity and youth. For example, Cann's (2014) recent work on young people's taste cultures reveals how boys' cultural practices were rendered 'acceptable' in group settings by adhering to forms of

hegemonic masculinity anchored in physicality and heterosexuality, such as expressing interest in 'macho' male celebrities like martial arts film star Chuck Norris. Relatedly, participants expressing non-gender appropriate tastes were Othered by their peers 'often through homophobic means'. For example, boys who liked cultural texts inscribed as 'feminine' (such as US television teen drama *Glee*) were accused of being 'gay' and placed outside the 'normal' taste articulations of 'typical boys' (Cann 2014: 25; see also Nayak & Kehily 2008). As we develop below, the emotional texture of young people's engagements with masculinities within popular culture provides insights into the possibilities and limits of young men's gender play.

3.4 We view celebrity as a discursive and disciplinary field in which social distinctions and hierarchies are (re)produced not just in relation to gender but also social class, race and nationality. As Tyler and Bennett argue, 'celebrity is a key vehicle through which value is distributed in public culture, and is instrumental in practices of distinction-making between individuals and groups in everyday life' (2010: 389; see also Mendick *et al.* 2015). We also draw on approaches to popular culture that see it as a field that invites affective investments and responses among those who engage with it, including those who distance themselves from it (Jensen & Ringrose 2014; Skeggs & Wood 2012; Tyler 2013). Helpfully, this work moves us from theories of fandom to consider the ambivalent, adverse and hostile reactions that celebrity and popular culture generate within everyday social practices. For example, Skeggs and Wood's (2012) study of Reality Television demonstrates how audiences are invited to evaluate and Other working class participants, arguing that the affective responses generated by these programmes (including disgust, contempt and fascination) work to (re)establish social hierarchies and distinctions. Likewise, Beer and Penfold-Mounce (2009) examine how, in the contemporary mediascape, celebrity assembles melodramatic narratives which cultivate particularly imaginative responses among the public (drawing here on the earlier work of Ing Ang (1985)). They argue that seemingly banal public discussions about a celebrity's behaviour are worthy of the attention of sociologists concerned with questions of subjectivity, culture and social divisions.

3.5 In this paper, we focus on disgust and humour among the discursive-affective practices generated by celebrity. Conceptualising these as everyday practices of social meaning-making that involve embodied and emotional aspects, our analytical approach is informed by discursive psychological and rhetorical work that explores the operation of power in everyday sense-making (Potter & Wetherell 1987; Billig 1996; 2005; Wetherell 2012). In particular, we work with Wetherell's (2012) contention that bodily affects are always already interwoven into the discursive, and are situated in the mundane practices of interpersonal relationships. Such work takes a fine-grain approach to data, observing the social construction of meanings and identities in everyday interactions. As Wetherell argues, close examination of qualitative data enables the identification of discursive-affective repertoires, or patterns of meaning, some of which are stable or sedimented, while others are more transient and localised. Disgust and humour appear repeatedly across our dataset, enabling us to explore both patterns in their operation and the detail of the moments in which they surfaced during interviews. As discursive-affective practices, we are interested in what disgust and humour do in the young people's discussions: What meanings and identities are opened up or closed down (Langdridge *et al.* 2012)? Or, as Wetherell (1998: 388) asks, 'Why this utterance here?'. While both disgust and laughter are felt as 'natural', physical expressions of an inner state, we understand both to be social, serving rhetorical and performative purposes. Our concern then is with *what can be said and in what conditions* rather than with who can say it.

3.6 In exploring the role of disgust within young people's celebrity talk, we draw on feminist cultural analysis attentive to the role of aversive emotions in the construction of identities and in processes of social exclusion and distinction (Ahmed 2004; Tyler 2013). Thus, we understand instances of disgust as identity claims and as community forming: by showing that I am disgusted by another thing or person, I am making a claim about who I am ('I am not that'). Disgust is relational, requiring recognition and acknowledgement by others. In expressing that something is disgusting, we are inviting others to join with us in excluding the disgusting object. Analysing expressions of disgust within interactions between our participants involves asking: What or who is deemed disgusting and why? What stigmatising meanings have made this object 'disgusting'? What work is this expression of disgust 'doing' in this moment?

3.7 In exploring the function of humour, we draw on Billig's (2005) critical analysis of laughter and ridicule as rhetorical. He maps how humour is socially learned. From childhood, laughter is used to teach us social norms but also to teach us that ridicule and embarrassment are responses to the breaking of those social rules. Humour's role in social regulation is paradoxical: laughter can be both subversive, allowing an apparent challenge to norms, while simultaneously reinforcing compliance with them. Thus, both embarrassment and ridicule are central practices in the maintenance of the social order. This is not to say that this order is fixed, but rather that rhetoric is a space in which hegemony is contested. Taking this approach enables an analysis of ongoing struggles around masculinities.

The study

- 4.1 This paper draws on a larger study of 'The role of celebrity in young people's classed and gendered aspirations' funded by the UK's Economic and Social Research Council (see <http://www.celebyouth.org/>). We combined group and individual interviews with 148 young people aged 14 to 17 with textual case studies of 12 celebrities. In this paper, we focus on the group interviews, exploring celebrity talk for the discursive-affective practices through which contemporary masculinities are performed and policed. Other studies of youth and masculinities have identified groups as a useful space to explore how masculinities are produced through struggle and interaction (Edley & Wetherell, 1998; Frosh et al. 2002). Here, we argue that to attend to the role of contestation and rhetoric in the (re)production of masculinities, group interviews provide the most fruitful data to do so. Further, mixed-gender group interviews provide opportunities to explore the role of young women in the relational construction of masculinities – an area often overlooked in studies of masculinity (Cann 2014; Connell & Messerschmidt 2005).
- 4.2 In winter 2012-13, we conducted group interviews across six 11-18 co-educational state schools; two each in London, a rural area in South-West England and Manchester (a city in North-West England). We purposively sampled schools using national data on Free School Meals, attainment and ethnicity to ensure that participants were reflective of local demographics. In each school, we carried out four group interviews, two with students aged 14-15 and two with students aged 16-17. Most groups contained six students and all but one was mixed gender. Interviews lasted approximately 50 minutes. We began by asking participants to identify celebrities who they most liked and/or disliked, moving on to ask them to: describe an 'ideal celebrity'; talk about what makes someone a celebrity; and elaborate how they consume celebrity. Although these topics were covered in all groups, we allowed the discussion to be led by participants. These were followed by individual interviews with around a third of the participants.
- 4.3 Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, checked and thematically coded by every member of the research team. Participants were given the opportunity to select their own pseudonyms and these are used in this article. Several participants chose pseudonyms from celebrity culture and some female pupils selected male names and vice versa. Some of the voices were not identifiable and in these cases we have simply labelled the participant 'Male' or 'Female'.
- 4.4 The analysis below is therefore drawn from a systematic coding of the entire group interview dataset. Thematic codes were organised into seven key groups (Behaviours, Routes to Fame, Difference, Celebrities, Genres, Responses), with a range of sub-codes within each (see Mendick et al. 2013). Coded data were developed into coding summaries, attending to the discursive patterning of the data. Through this process, gender and sexuality emerged as key themes in terms of how participants talked about themselves and about celebrities. Alongside Gender and Sexuality (within 'Difference'), the other key sub-codes from which this paper draws are: Disgust and Hate, and Love ('Responses'); and Justin Bieber ('Celebrities').
- 4.5 The discursive-affective practices of disgust and humour ran through our data on gender and sexuality. While disgust was predominantly directed towards female celebrities, two young male celebrities were also subject to collective performances of disgust (and humour): Canadian popstar Justin Bieber and British boyband One Direction. Bieber was discussed, often at length, in 21 of the 24 group interviews. One Direction were not selected as a case study with their own sub-code, but were often discussed alongside Bieber and in a similar way, being mentioned in 16 of the 24 interviews. While there was some positive discussion of these celebrities, the dominant tenor of the group talk was negative. Both Bieber and One Direction were frequently grouped within the most 'hated' celebrities identified by participants and the focus of much discussion. It is to the talk about these celebrities that we now turn. We begin by introducing thematic patterns across the whole dataset, highlighting the operation of disgust and humour together in the group celebrity talk. While these two discursive-affective practices often appeared side-by-side, one was usually foregrounded. Following this overview, we look at two data extracts in detail to examine how disgust and humour respectively operate as practices through which masculinities are performed and policed. This fine-grained analysis enables us to interrogate how normative gender identities are actively constructed and reproduced as well as the limits and possibilities for transgressing these.

'I hate them so much': Group talk about Justin Bieber and One Direction

- 5.1 Expressing dislike or hatred of Bieber and One Direction was a regular feature across the group interviews and was often community forming, as participants collectively generated consensus around the expulsion of these celebrities from the realm of 'appropriate' cultural taste. In the following quote, participants from one group interview expressed a sentiment that was common across the dataset:

Alisha: Oh I hate One Direction. I hate them so much.

Interviewer: This is really interesting cos' I went to another school and they all hate One Direction as well. So are they just like...?

Homer: No one likes them, that's why.

Jack: They're really annoying.
(14-15, London)

5.2 Likewise, in another group interview, two male participants explain that Bieber is so disliked he is banned from peer conversations:

Male: We don't talk about Justin Bieber.
Archibold No. You just don't talk about him.
(16-17, South-West of England)

The 'we' mobilises a collective, implicitly excluding anyone who holds dissenting views. Yet, ironically, Bieber is talked about; he must be in order to locate him outside their cultural realm.

5.3 Instances of contesting this positioning were rare, and when they did occur they were highly policed. Some young women who expressed being attracted to Bieber and/or One Direction or liking their music were silenced or criticised by male and female peers (they were however more able to express these positive views in individual interviews). For example, a London group had defined a group of celebrities they hated and placed Bieber in this. When Amelia (female) interrupts this, saying she neither likes nor hates him, Homer (male) instructs her: 'shut up ... just hate him'. While Homer's instruction to Amelia to 'hate' Bieber seemed to be intended as humorous, it was expressed forcefully and repeated. Similarly, in a group interview in another school, several female participants had discussed at length their interest in One Direction, as well as the young adult fiction and film franchise *Twilight*. Ben – the only male participant – mocked these cultural figures and texts, referring to *Twilight* as 'all sappy and crap'. At the end of the interview, Ben claimed the final word by asserting the status of the band as a collective object of hate:

Interviewer: Right. Maybe we should stop there. Anything else you want to say before I turn [the recorder] off?
Ben: We all hate One Direction. [group laughter]
(14-15, South-West of England)

5.4 For male participants, expressing a positive engagement with these celebrities was particularly rare, and when it was expressed, was penalised and/or accompanied by qualifications or disclaimers. In the following extract, we see a group articulate the compulsory position of hating Bieber. When Balotelli (male) states 'everyone's gotta hate him', another male participant, Lexus interrupts this consensus:

Louise: Justin Bieber. I hate Justin Bieber.
Balotelli: Yeah, everyone's gotta hate him.
Interviewer: Why has everyone got to hate him?
Balotelli: Don't know. He's just like, I think he's one of the most loved and hated guys.
Lexus: He's just, he's got some good tracks though. [followed by group laughter]
Interviewer: Oh okay. So you like some of the stuff he does?
Lexus: Only a few though, not like a lot.
(16-17, Manchester)

5.5 The laughter here is important. As we explore in more detail later, '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). Through the laughter generated by Lexus' admission that he likes some of Bieber's music, ridicule keeps him – and the normative gender order - in check. Following this reaction we see Lexus revise and downplay his interest in Bieber. Lexus also mobilises qualifications ('He's got some good [music] tracks though'). Resonating with patterns across the dataset, male participants who expressed liking for Bieber required an explanation – such as appreciating his turn to produce more 'mature' hip hop music, or respecting his success with women. For example, in another group, Edward disrupts the hate consensus generated by his peers by saying that he sees Bieber as an 'ideal celebrity'.

Edward: Okay. Okay. I know this is going to sound bad here, considering I'm a guy. But the ideal celebrity right now is Justin Bieber, alright [bangs desk repeatedly]. Cos' he's, he's getting what he wants, end of discussion. He knows that the guys are going to hate on him, no matter what he does innit?
Male: Selina Gomez! [loud overlapping talk, disagreement]
Edward: I personally think. No let me... [talking over the others]
Interviewer: Okay. Let Edward talk.
Edward: He knows that guys are going to hate him, yeah, so he's going to continue making songs that the chicks are going to like, and he is going to continue getting more chicks than any other guy on this planet.
(16-17, London)

5.6 Edward's interruption is prefaced with a disclaimer ('I know this is going to sound bad...'), which works rhetorically to ward off criticism, as he acknowledges the dominant narrative about Bieber and states his own gendered position. As with the previous extract, it provokes peer disagreement which almost silences Edward

save for the interviewer steering the discussion to allow him to speak. Edward goes on to justify his position by asserting admiration for Bieber's financial and romantic success ('getting more chicks than any other guy on this planet'). He is thus able to take an opposing position to 'the guys' that 'hate on him' by presenting Bieber as a heterosexually desirable and successful star and thus, arguably, affirming his own heterosexuality and desire for wealth. The appearance of such disclaimers resonates with Cann's (2014) work in which boys could only openly express liking feminine texts by 'ensuring that the reasons for the preference are understood to be masculine' (2014: 29). That such justifications are required highlights the limits to gender play and fluidity.

5.7 Key to Bieber and One Direction's positioning by participants is their alignment with the feminine. This appeared in two key ways. First, they were associated with 'feminised' and thus trivialised forms of cultural consumption, expressed in accusations of their 'cheesy' status, and through discussions of their young female followers or 'fangirls'. Their fans – Beliebers or Directioners – were variously described as 'weirdos', 'pathetic' and 'crazy', childlike in their vulnerability, fanatical excess and obsessiveness. The psycho-pathological language deployed by participants is reminiscent of the historical positioning of teenage girls as inappropriate and Othered consumers of culture (McRobbie and Garber 1976). Our research echoes the studies discussed earlier that identify how masculinities are produced through distancing from 'feminised' cultural forms.

5.8 The second way that Bieber and One Direction are associated with the feminine is through discourses of childhood/adulthood and 'growing up', revealing how anxieties around maturity are central to the collective boundary work through which masculinities are enacted and policed. These celebrities were located outside of 'appropriately' adult modes of masculinity, denoted through their perceived 'brat'-like behaviour and Bieber's embodied physicality of a 'puny' and child-like body. Bieber was especially criticised for his failed attempts to pass as a 'bad boy', unable to break from the shackles of his child star image^[1]. This sense of 'fakeness' in relation to performances of masculinity was entwined with accusations of inauthenticity related to their association with 'manufactured' pop music.

5.9 In this group interview, Mat has named Bieber in a list of celebrities he likes. In the rhetorical moves that follow, Mat attempts to justify this decision through disclaimers that privilege hegemonic masculinity based in physical strength and heterosexuality:

Interviewer: Mat did you put Justin Bieber [as liked]?

Mat: Mhm.

Interviewer: Yeah. And why do you like Justin Bieber, is that- is that a genuine...?

Mat: Yeah it is genuine. [laughs]

Dory: I like Justin Bieber.

Mat: Everyone always hates on him ... I mean he doesn't help himself the fact that he brings out like perfume and stuff, I mean he could cut down a bit of that, and perhaps hit the gym a bit more, you know.

Interviewer: Why? Why would he ...

Mat: Because he is a bit scrawny and so on. Yeah he's got little muscles but it's cute, so you can let him off, but he's- he's a good singer. And he gets lots of hot girlfriends, [laughing from one girl] Selena Gomez, yeah. ... I would like to be Justin Bieber because look how many, how popular he is. All the girls he gets, how rich he is.

(14-15, South-West of England)

5.10 Like Edward above, it does not seem possible for Mat to straightforwardly claim he likes Bieber without providing gendered justifications and disclaimers. Mat distances himself from Bieber's feminised 'little muscles' and perfume, in contrast claiming identification with the celebrity's heterosexual desirability and wealth, so aligning with normative constructions of masculinity.

5.11 Intense and violent responses to Bieber and One Direction were present in the data, as several participants imagined destroying or hurting them. In the following extract, Syndicate (male) expresses his extreme distaste for both Bieber and One Direction, generating criticism from the young women in the group (Babatunde and Hanna):

Syndicate: I would go to a Justin Bieber concert if someone could kill them for me.

Interviewer: Kill One Direction?

Syndicate: Yeah.

Babatunde: Whoah!

Syndicate: Like every single member?

Hanna: Oh, that's very mean. ...

Babatunde: Very extreme Syndicate.

Interviewer: So you don't like One Direction more than Justin Bieber?

Babatunde: That is very mean.

Syndicate: Yeah. I can put up with him more than them.

(14-15, London)

5.12 These practices of disgust and humour symbolically eliminate Bieber and One Direction from the

participant's cultural realm; these acts allow participants to distance themselves from these celebrities' and their alternative masculinities. As we have argued, they can be understood as reactions to Bieber and One Direction's perceived violation of hegemonic forms of masculinity and stable gender categories. We explore this further through detailed analysis of two data extracts in the next sections.

'He's not a boy': Bieber, disgust and the policing of masculinity

- 6.1** Disgust and contempt were linked in the dataset to gender and the body, acting to distance young people from that which is inscribed as 'excessively feminine'. Female celebrities who generated such reactions included Kim Kardashian, Katie Price, Nicki Minaj and YouTube micro-celebrity 'Tampon Girl', celebrities who were read as 'excessively' feminine in relation to their bodies or sexual conduct, or whose fame was located *in* the female body (see [Allen 2013](#); [Harvey et al. 2015](#); [Mendick 2013](#)). Bieber and One Direction were the only two male celebrities who generated similarly intense aversive reactions. The lengthy extract below, presented at length, is illustrative of the strong aversive discursive-affective practice of disgust that infused talk about Bieber and the centrality of gender to this.
- 6.2** This extract comes from a group interview with 16-17 year-old students from Manchester. Their school is located in a multi-ethnic area with high levels of deprivation. All students in the group below were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds with several born outside of the UK. Participants had been asked by the interviewer which celebrities they did not like and why. Two female students, Kadija and Anzyi, initiate the conversation about Bieber and are the most vocal participants in the ensuing discussion, highlighting the role of young women in the collective construction and regulation of masculinity. A male participant, Anonymous, then joins the discussion and attempts to articulate why Bieber is hated:
- Kadija: And Justin Bieber because [smiles], just don't get me started on how much I hate Justin Bieber, he's a girl.
[laughter]
Interviewer: He's a girl?
Kadija: Yeah, Miss. He's like, I don't know why girls like him.
Interviewer: Why? What he is too- too boyish?
Kadija: He is just.
Anonymous: He's just weird.
Kadija: No.
Anzyi: He just can't sing.
Kadija: He can't sing and, I don't know, when he was like 13 or something he sounded like a girl...
Anonymous: Yeah, [first in my list of] dislikes, um Justin Bieber.
Interviewer: Justin Bieber. Okay, so there was a few people who said Justin Bieber, again is it, what are you, why don't you like him?
Anonymous: Okay, right. I know the word but I don't want to say it. [laughs] He's um [long pause]
Okay.
Interviewer: 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]
Interviewer: He's trying to be a bad boy? Is that it?
Anonymous: Okay. He himself, it is like his voice is, okay, he's [long pause]
[laughter from girls]
Interviewer: Go on say what.
[mumbling by girls]
Anzyi: Okay he's not gone through puberty.
Anonymous: Okay. [sighs] Okay. I'll 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, argh! 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: He's gay. [laughs]
Anonymous: Yeah, that's the word
Interviewer: What did you say?
Anzyi: He's gay.
Kadija: I don't think he's gay.
Anonymous: He's not gay. Yes that is the word. He sounds like, urgh!
Interviewer: 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 girlie. [emphasis on girlie]
Anonymous: Yes.
Anzyi: Because gay is like, you are attracted to guys. But I wouldn't use that word for it.
Interviewer: 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.
Kadija: Yeah it doesn't work. It doesn't go.

Anzyi: Basically his voice hasn't broke, he hasn't reached adolescence yet.
 Anonymous: He also has
 Interviewer: But you have female rappers, right?
 Kadija: Yeah.
 Anzyi: But they sound more manly than he does.
 [group laughter]
 Interviewer: Okay. Right. So he just can't pull it off?
 Anzyi: No. He's got a very soft voice. I don't think his voice is made for singing.

6.3 Disgust is guttural and aversive. It is associated with expressions of revulsion and nausea and evokes visceral reactions of 'recoiling' and turning away from that which is deemed threatening in its proximity (Rhys-Taylor 2013; Tyler 2013). We can recognise this in Anonymous' 'argh' and 'urgh' responses to Bieber's ambiguous gender/sexuality. The researcher who conducted this interview also noted the physical, corporeal manifestations of this in Anonymous' body language and facial expressions that expressed unease and a desire to physically distance himself from the object of discussion. As common throughout our dataset, such reactions are accompanied by laughter.

6.4 The participants emphasise Bieber's 'soft' 'girlie' voice, and express a sense of unease about how to place him ('he's not a boy, but if I say he's not a boy then you know, I would say he was a girl'). As indicated previously, disgust is rooted in anxieties about the threat of proximity and a consciousness of being within the realm of uneasy categories. It is perhaps Bieber's ambiguous location in relation to normative and 'stable' categories of gender that generates these reactions. Bieber disrupts the boundaries that keep gender in place, and in doing so threatens contamination and is rendered abject:

The abject has ... come to be associated with those bodily fluids, people, objects and places that are couched as unclean, impure and even immoral. The abject disturbs "identity, system, order" (Kristeva 1982: 4) and provokes the desire to expel the unclean to an outside, to create boundaries in order to establish the certainty of the self. (Kenway et al. 2006: 120)

6.5 The group's positioning of Bieber as Other and subordinate to 'hegemonic masculinities' is rooted in his associations with *both* femininity (discussed earlier) *and* homosexuality, as when the young women say, 'he sounds gay' and 'feminine like'. His masculinity is constructed as inauthentic: as '*trying to be a bad boy*' (emphasis added). Through his placement in proximity to the feminine (his 'soft'-ness and 'girlie'-ness) and the mobilisation of homophobic discourses, Bieber is 'expelled from the circle of [masculine] legitimacy' (Connell 1995: 79): He is not 'properly masculine' (Phoenix & Frosh 2001: 27). Yet, we see that Bieber is not simply subordinated because of his associations with femininity and homosexuality. Revealing the participants' anxiety about Bieber's ambiguity in relation to gender norms, this extract suggests that masculinity is also produced through a policing of the boundaries of gender, in which bodies are required to 'fit' into binary categories in order to be seen as legitimate.

6.6 The participants' difficulty in articulating their discomfort is displayed through the lengthy pauses, semi-verbal sounds, hesitations and recurring laughter. When Anonymous says 'I don't want to be disrespectful' by calling Bieber either gay or a girl, we see him and the group acknowledge a broader shift in society's attitudes to gender and sexuality, and an awareness that public expressions of homophobia are no longer acceptable. Similarly, Anzyi abandons the term 'gay' for Bieber on the grounds that it means 'you are attracted to guys', suggesting she too is uncomfortable using it as a generalised insult. This acknowledgement speaks to shifts in the direction of greater cultural acceptance of homosexuality. However, following a discursive approach, we cannot simply treat these statements as transparent reflections of internal individual attitudes and intentions. Indeed, we must be cautious with reading young men's (and women's) avoidance of homophobic talk as signs of a reduction of homophobia per se. Rather, this may speak to their need to express liberal, mature or even 'cosmopolitan' or 'metropolitan' discourses of gender and sexuality (Cann 2014; Ingram & Waller 2014). In addition, such desire to avoid being seen to say anything deemed offensive must be understood in the context of the interview itself as a social location inscribed with power relations informing what is say-able. This includes the power dynamics between the participants and the adult researcher, and as a result of the interviews taking place within the institutional spaces of a school.

6.7 Discourses of age and maturity are also central to how gender is policed in this talk. Discussions of Bieber's 'high pitched' voice and how 'he's not gone through puberty' call upon dominant developmental discourses of the gendered passage from childhood to adulthood (Lesko 2001). This talk about Bieber draws on a notion of maturity that is dependent on heteronormative markers of male adulthood, including dating girls, engaging in heterosex, and developing a deep voice and a muscular body. The positioning of Bieber as not having gone through puberty – 'his voice hasn't broke, he hasn't reached adolescence' – is a reinforcement of this normative story through celebrity talk. Bieber has literally 'grown up' in the public eye and it is his failure to do so, figuratively if not literally, that features in their talk.

6.8 In this section, we have shown how disgust constructs boundaries – establishing who we are through directing disgust towards those Others (and parts of ourselves) that we cannot bear. This talk about Bieber, and specifically his expulsion from legitimate masculinity, functions within practices of collective 'identity work' as a mechanism through which to claim a secure gender via dis-identifying from those who represent gender instability and ambiguity. In the next section we look at what happens when one of our young male participants performed instability and ambiguity himself, focusing on the role of humour.

'It's the perfect way to pick up women': One Direction, humour and the limits of gender play

7.1 The next data extract comes from an interview with 16-17 year-old students from a rural school in the South West of England. This was the only group composed entirely of male students. They were mainly white and working-class. The extract, which centres on one participant Will, is split into two parts for the purposes of our analysis as we show how humour both makes possible and polices Will's gender play.

7.2 The interviewer had asked the group to identify their most liked and hated celebrities. As participants called out names, the interviewer had written these on strips of paper and placed them on the table around which they were seated. Will had introduced a number of male celebrities who are viewed as sex symbols, including One Direction, Hollywood actor and musician Will Smith, and actor Zac Efron from Disney's *High School Musical* film series. Shortly afterwards, the interviewer observed him taking one of the strips of paper and writing on it:

Extract Part 1

Interviewer: You're writing something.

Will: I was just [pause] doodling. [group laughter]

Interviewer: [looking at the strip of paper that Will has now abandoned] Oh, you just put like a little love heart on One Direction.

Will: Yes.

Interviewer: So what is this thing about One Direction?

Will: Nothing.

Interviewer: No, go on. [group laughter]

Will: I don't know. I've just been forced to.

Interviewer: So how do you get forced to like something?

Will: Go out with women, I guess. [group 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. [group laughter]

...

Male: Like Will Smith. I'm sure he rocks.

Interviewer: You think Will Smith is sound. Right?

Male: He's probably a decent guy, right.

Will: He's sexy. I mean

Interviewer: Is he? So you like Zac Efron and One Direction. Yeah. [group laughter]

Harry: Is there something you want to tell us? [group laughter]

Will: From a guy's point of view I think Will Smith is just.

Interviewer: Right. So okay, who else do you think? So Will Smith is sexy? Who else is sexy?

Will: [Olympic diver] Tom Daley. Apart from the old [pause] socks [that he reputedly puts down his trunks]. [group laughter] ...

Male: What about [TV comedy] *Scrubs*? [whispering]

Will: Turk [a character in TV show *Scrubs*].

Interviewer: You think he's sexier than.

Male: Why are you choosing all the guys? [group 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.

7.3 As Billig (2005: 234) notes regarding laughter: 'There is a paradox: the same mechanism that ensures social compliance also expresses pleasure at subversion'. Thus, in this extract, we argue that humour opens up a space for Will to express desire towards male celebrities. His drawing of a love heart next to the name One Direction (Figure 1) was followed with his writing the word 'hot' and a representation of a 'six-pack'² on the Will Smith strip of paper (Figure 2).

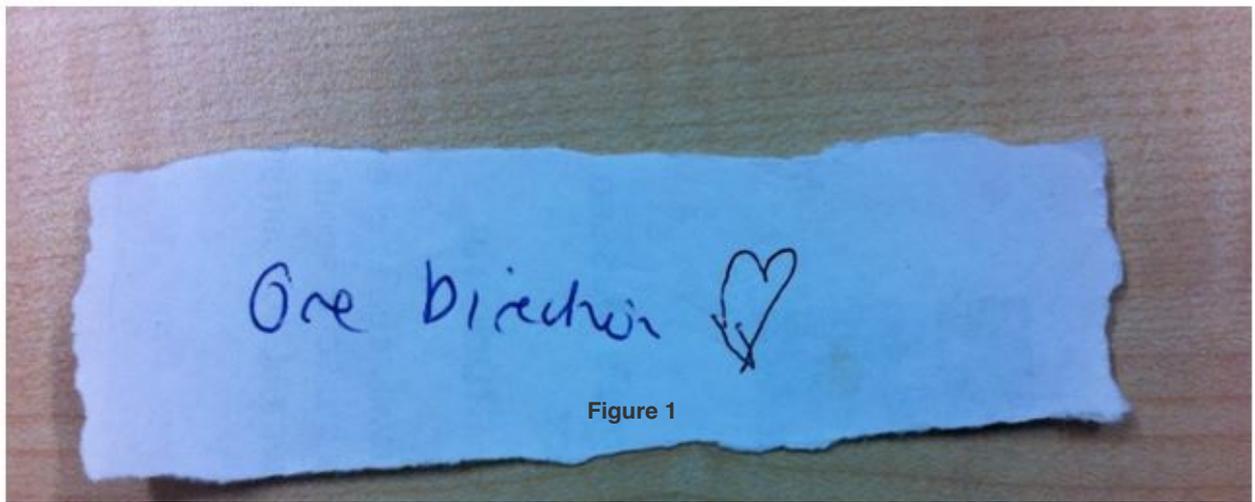


Figure 1

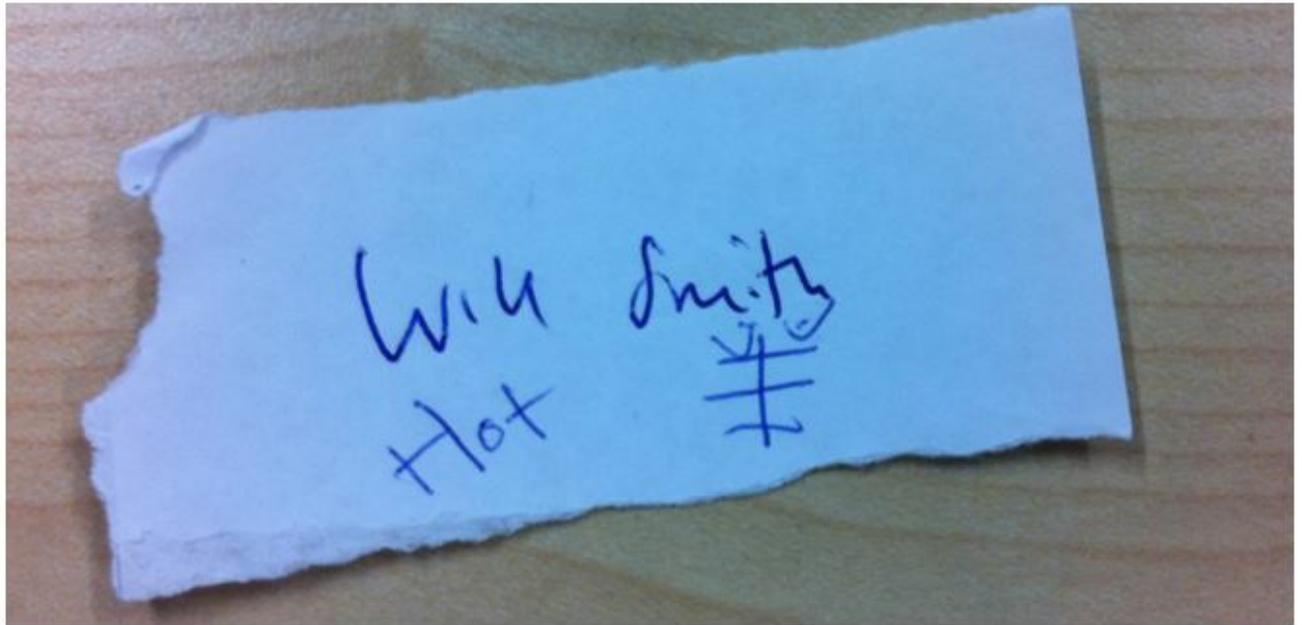


Figure 2

7.4

Indeed, he selected Will Smith as his pseudonym, suggesting a complicated relationship between desire and identification. In this respect we would agree with Anderson (2009) and McCormack (2011) that there are shifts in the role of homophobia in the construction of masculinities. It is possible for Will to express 'love' for One Direction and to say that he thinks that Will Smith is 'hot' and 'sexy' without enacting or provoking from his peers any overt homophobia or misogyny. As Wetherell and Potter (1992) showed in their analysis of the shifting construction of racism however, language is not transparent. We can read the laughter in this interaction as performing a regulatory function that reveals the limitations placed on the masculinities Will is able to occupy safely and the fluidity in gender performances more generally. Indeed, the laughter here signals an awareness of, and pleasure in, Will transgressing gender rules. It is 'funny' for the group that Will puts a love heart on the paper with One Direction on it, and chooses 'all the guys', including a reference to Tom Daley's enhanced swimming trunks. But, just as laughter allows for the subversion of the normative, it simultaneously reinforces it by calling attention to the social rules that have been broken.

7.5 Upon describing Will Smith as 'sexy', the interviewer asks 'Is he? So you like Zac Efron and One Direction. Yeah' and Harry asks Will 'is there something you want to tell us?' The interviewer's comment perhaps draws attention to Will's alternative position in a way that Harry picks up. Again, it is important to note that Harry does not use homophobic language to denounce Will: he (like the other participants) neither calls him offensive names nor reacts to him violently. Indeed, Harry and Will shared a chair as there were not enough placed around the table. Through this discussion, Harry did not get up and move (although he did at one point jokingly exclaim to Will 'get your hand off me'). While this points to shifts in lesbian and gay visibility and rights over the last few decades, we also see discomfort in the initial unplaceability of Will upon his expressing 'desire' for male celebrities. Indeed, this expression of (potential) same-gender desire is quickly diffused through two rhetorical strategies echoing those discussed earlier in relation to the talk about Bieber's success with women. First, Will associates this with (his) heterosexual masculinity. Early in the dialogue, Will claims that he has been 'forced to like' these celebrities by 'go[ing] out with women' (though the addition of 'I guess' after this last claim maintains some ambiguity in Will's desire). Second, he distances himself from femininity, when another participant asks Will 'Why are you choosing all the guys?' provoking laughter, he replies 'Well, it would be weird if you wanted to be a woman wouldn't it?'

7.6 Harry's question 'is there something you want to tell us?' recalls the 'coming out' story (Plummer 1995). Indeed 'There's something I want to say' is the title of Olympic swimmer Tom Daley's 2013 video in which he revealed that he is in a same-gender relationship (see Mendick *et al.* 2014). While expressed by Harry as a joke, we suggest it also carries a threat as it resembles more what someone in authority might say to elicit a confession, than a supportive invitation to come out. 'Coming out' therefore appears as both possibility and regulatory tool: Will must be placed. The role of this categorisation in his masculinity can be seen in the lines of dialogue that follow. Will's response (partly) confirms the heteronormative gender order. Like Edward, discussed earlier, it is from 'a guy's point of view' that he likes Will Smith, but then again, insistently, he returns to choosing guys as sexy, suggesting that this regulation remains unstable, for now. However, Will's hints that it is women who have 'forced' him to like One Direction are later elaborated when he again explains why he likes those cultural texts and celebrities deemed 'feminine' including One Direction and Twilight:

Extract Part 2

Archibald: *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.

Interviewer: That's the job you'd like? Why?

Will: The money, the girls.

7.7 Will's claim that liking One Direction, *Twilight* and Zac Efron can serve as a form of romantic heterosexual capital which offers him 'the perfect way to pick up women' places him safely back within the dominant gender regime, anchored by hegemonic masculinity. This echoes O'Neill's (2010) recent work on male 'Seduction Communities' in which heterosexual men are encouraged by trainers to accrue knowledge of 'women's genres' in order to facilitate the successful seduction of women. As with the use of disclaimers discussed earlier, by defending his knowledge in this way, Will's transgressive desires are qualified with markers that assert his desire for women – helping to smooth over and re-stabilise the heteronormative order within the group.

7.8 As Barnes (2012: 242) notes, 'humour is an integral part of the maintenance of a hierarchical structure of relational masculinities'. Here we have suggested that laughter operates in nuanced ways as boys negotiate the borders of legitimate masculinities. Through using humour, Will can play with masculinity and fleetingly occupy alternative positions. However, humour also allows for coherence to be restored and hierarchies of masculinities to be reaffirmed.

Conclusion

8.1 In this paper, we have shown that celebrity is a space of imagination and so it can bring to the study of masculinity a focus on the affective and its collective mobilisation. Attentive to the role of discursive-affective practices in the construction of contemporary masculinities, we have demonstrated how disgust and laughter operate in opening up and closing down certain meanings and identities (Langdrige *et al.* 2013). As such, we concur with Gill (2008) that analyses of culture, gender, subjectivity and social change must pay attention to the affective. Our analyses of these complicated moments of collective identity construction speak to some shifts in the ways in which masculinities are performed and regulated. However they also reveal the continued operation of hierarchies of masculinities operating within the specific contexts in which these participants are located, and which remain anchored through hegemonic masculinity. These findings remind us that 'challenges to hegemony are common, and so are adjustments in the face of these challenges' (Connell & Messerschmidt 2005: 835). Taking a fine-grained approach to these data extracts, we have illuminated the discursive and rhetorical work undertaken by participants in order to maintain intelligibility when engaging in 'softer' – or more feminised – forms

of masculinity, and highlighted the presence of subtle forms of homophobic and anti-feminine discourse which police the boundaries of acceptable masculinity.

8.2 Much work has attended to how young women 'do gender' through engaging with popular culture. Meanwhile, studies of young masculinities have predominantly focused on educational sites as a space in which gender identities are performed and regulated. Intervening in this field, this paper addresses the paucity of work on young men's relationship with popular culture. Specifically, we have argued that 'celebrity talk' operates as significant space in which the validation (and othering) of different masculinities are achieved, but also where the norms proscribing the limits of the publicly-validated form of hegemonic masculinity can be transgressed, albeit fleetingly. Young men's (and women's) engagements with celebrity and popular culture provide ripe sites for sociological enquires into young masculinities.

8.3 We also argue that our research has implications for those working outside of academia. Rather than relegate it from the classroom, celebrity can be used generatively and productively within work with young people. Discussions with young people about 'imaginary boys' within their cultural realm may provide a useful jumping off point for more personalised discussions about individual young people's lives and concerns, including those related to gender and sexuality. As part of the project we created resources using interview data which are publicly available for youth practitioners to use in their work (see <http://celebyouth.org/mythbusting/>). In this way, we hope to contribute to a broader project committed to understanding the contemporary gender order and challenging the existing hierarchies which frame the possibilities for 'doing man'.

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Notes

1 Bieber released his first single aged 15 years old.

2 A 'six-pack' is a colloquial term used to refer to well-defined abdominal muscles, and is associated with a 'desirable' masculinity and traditional masculine values of athleticism, strength and physicality but also highly aestheticized.

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