‘Hey man, how’s u?’: Masculine Speech and Straight-Acting Gay Men Online

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This article explores how gay men in the UK reflect upon the speech practices of those who refer to themselves as “straight-acting” on hook-up apps. Using interview data from eight informants, this article identifies cultural and social models of hegemonic masculinity that gay men are perceived to take inspiration from to masculinise their speech and outlines the linguistic conventions and patterns that straight-acting gay men are said to enact. It is suggested that straight-acting gay men draw on the figure of the “lad” in British culture and emulate some of their speech practices to increase their proximity to a hegemonic masculinity, but that they also speak in short, blunt, and non-conversational manners to other app users to remain socially indirect and inexpressive. Using sexual scripting theory and style-shifting as theoretical frameworks, this article also suggests that gay men emulate a “straight-acting” style if a sexual hook-up is sought as opposed to dates or friends. This has potential implications for the self-worth of marginalised, effeminate gay men using hook-up apps, and also contributes to previous literature on gay masculinities, hook-up app usage and interactive practices, highlighting the intersections between hegemonic and subordinated masculinities.

Keywords: gay men; straight-acting; masculinity; speech; online; Grindr

Introduction

Gender is constituted via a series of repeated, stylised performative acts that come to produce meaning and the ‘appearance of substance’ (Butler, 1990 [2nd ed., 1999], 33), including speech. Sociolinguists have argued that identities are shaped by speech; with regards to masculinity, certain speech practices may be coded as masculine (Kiesling, 2005) but, as with most linguistic strategies, this is highly dependent upon context and setting (Bell, 1984, 2001). Connell’s (1995) model of hegemonic masculinity lists competitive behaviours, a reluctance to display emotion, sexual promiscuity and

vulgarity, and the subordination of women and homosexuality as masculine characteristics, among others. These traits can be evidenced in the speech practices of certain groups of men, such as banter in the case of British lads and "laddism" (Benwell, 2001, 2003, 2005; Nichols, 2018).

Whereas research has shown there is little evidence to suggest speech styles can indicate an individual's sexuality, or that there is a universal style of speech that is "gay" (Munson & Babel, 2007; Levon, 2007, 2014), historical accounts evidence speech adaptations as integral to the creation of certain gay identities (Chauncey, 1994) and communities (Newton, 1972; Baker, 2019). Strategic changes to speech styles and patterns have also been used to masculinise certain gay identities (Levine, 1998), which has carried through into digital communication with the development of online gay spaces (Campbell, 2004; King, 2011). Other distinct speech styles between gay men online have also been theorised as a means of making a queer break from conventional notions of dating and self-branding (Roach, 2015).

Using interview data collected as part of a doctoral research project, this article combines methodological and theoretical frameworks from the fields of cultural studies and sociolinguistics to discuss the ways in which gay men within the UK reflect upon the online speech practices of those gay men who identify as "straight-acting" (Clarkson, 2006; Eguchi, 2010). This refers to a performative presentation of the self where those gay men identifying as such believe there is little about the ways in which they behave or act that could lead to them being read as "gay", where "gay" is regularly conflated with "effeminate". As such, "straight-acting" is heavily invested in masculinity and hegemony (Sarson, 2020). This article aims to identify cultural discourses of masculinity that gay men draw upon to theorise straight-acting speech practices; discuss the speech conventions and styles that gay men assign to the straight-

acting identity specifically; analyse the ways in which gay men consider their online speech to become scripted and their styles to shift towards "straight-acting" based upon desired outcomes and changes in audience; and consider the implications for gay men who do not fit this masculine identity.

Hegemonic masculinity

Hegemonic masculinity is 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy' (Connell, 2005, 77) guaranteeing the dominance of men over women. The concept has been criticised (MacInnes, 1998) due to its initial ambiguity, which has resulted in the term representing essentialist models of "masculinity" comprised of stereotypically "male" traits. Whitehead (2002) signals this is a misappropriation overlooking the crucial element of Connell's definition of a *currently accepted* answer. This stresses that hegemonic masculinity is not static but, as Kiesling (2005) highlights, is about a 'fluidity, contestability, and variety of masculinities' (701). Connell (2005) has addressed these criticisms, stating that masculinity is not a 'fixed entity embedded in the body or personality traits of individuals' but that masculinities are a configuration of social practices that 'can differ according to the gender relations in a particular social setting' (122). This distinction holds purchase here as the online social practices that will be discussed occur among subjects subordinated by hegemonic masculinity: gay men. The embodiment of gender occurs differently between gay men across social settings and hegemonic masculinity can be used to make sense of these social practices, highlighting that, despite hegemonic masculinity's proximity to homophobia (Connell, 2005), some gay men have a complicated relationship with it.

Indeed, scholars have identified "homomasculinity", representing behaviours among some gay men that emulate the processes of hegemonic masculinity where an

embodiment of gender that is more stereotypically masculine is afforded a higher cultural value (Clarkson, 2006; Borgeson & Valeri, 2015). Straight-acting gay men define themselves 'in opposition to cultural stereotypes of gay men that conflate femininity with homosexuality' (Clarkson, 2006, 192). Where heterosexuality cannot be realised, performances perceived as readably "straight" among some gay men take on the position of hegemonic masculinity; "straightness" becomes equivalent to "masculine", devaluing effeminate gay men (Eguchi, 2010; Sarson, 2020).

The social practices and embodiments of gendered identities that come to represent masculinities can be framed by Butler's (1999) theorisation of gender as 'not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body' (xv). As such, hegemonic masculinity lacks any substantial claims to "authentic" masculinity, but this does not mean that the attachment of value and privilege to masculinity (in both heterosexual and homosexual contexts) does not produce tangible structures of power as an effect.

The aim of this article is to analyse and discuss how straight-acting gay men are perceived to chat online, how this relates to the privileging of masculinity and its power structures, and to question why straight-acting gay men might converse in a certain style online. A consideration of masculine discourses will now be undertaken.

Masculine discourse(s)

Cultural discourses are 'culturally shared ways of thinking […] and speaking' produced through 'the social practices, talks, thoughts, and desires of the people using them' (Kiesling, 2005, 697). Cultural discourses draw on assumptions as to how the world operates and allow for individual subjects to make sense of their lived experiences. In line with Butler's (1999) performative theorisation of gender, men are subjects

influenced by cultural discourses of "masculinity" but are equally 'active participants in the discourses' development and reinscription' (Kiesling, 2005, 697).

Hegemonic masculinity allows for the consideration of multiple masculinities, following and producing their own cultural discourses (Connell, 1995). Whereas there can be competing cultural discourses of masculinity, and even those that challenge and refute the hegemonic model, Kiesling (2005) ultimately argues that all men are affected by these discourses as they become measured against them 'positively or negatively depending on the evaluator's stance' (698).

To maintain focus for the purposes of this article, discourses relevant to the later discussion of data will now be considered: lads and banter, and a brief outline of gay cultural discourses with regards to speech.

Lads and banter

Edwards (2006) explains that the "lad" identity 'represented a return to reactionary, *pre*-feminist values of sex, sport and drinking and the relatively male-only world of pubs, pornography and football' (34, original emphasis). Men's lifestyle magazines embodied much of what British lad culture represented. Banter was a central component of the magazines and remains important to the cultural discourses of lads and "laddism". Benwell (2001) writes that it is 'a particular teasing form of masculine exchange' (21), citing Easthope's (1990) definition of an 'aggressive […] form in which the masculine ego asserts itself' (88). Banter's inherent humour targets 'the "other" (frequently women or gay men)' (Benwell, 2001, 21), however both Benwell (2003, 2005) and Easthope (1990) also note that, between lads, it is used to maintain a 'close, intimate and personal understanding of the person who is the butt of the attack' (Easthope, 1990, 88). The exchange of insults between lads as banter (McDowell and Schaffner, 2011) upholds a rigid ordering of gendered social norms and cultural discourses (Kotthoff,

2005).

Banter is important for group belonging, however Nichols (2018) also notes that, among the older men in her study of lad culture within a rugby club, there was an understanding that after having said something offensive and/or sexist, they ought not to. Nichols theorises this as *mischievous masculinity* but, as she notes, this may be informed by her presence as a female researcher. This illustrates a switch in style based upon the appropriateness of the social situation and its audience, which Coupland (2011) explains is founded in 'communicative *constraint* – when a speaker feels the weight of some social norm […] [attached] to "inappropriate" linguistic behaviour in a particular context' (139). Additional considerations relating to style-shifting will be considered in the discussion of data.

Whereas banter is not as fixed in its use as has been theorised, this does not detract from the gendered consequences that such modes of communication can have. But, where banter often consists of traits redolent of hegemonic masculinity such as the objectification of women, vulgarity, and the denigration of femininity (Connell, 1995; Francis, 1999), not all of these traits have to be present all of the time. Some can shift or become more attuned to changing social and cultural contexts. As such, banter can be adopted by gay men through adherence to some conventions while substituting others.

Speech and gay male identity

Speech became a central component to a homosexual identity located in a violation of normative gender conventions. Chauncey (1994) recounts the significance of speech to the construction of effeminate gay identities in 20th Century New York. Citing an insistence on referring to each other with 'women's names and pronouns' to 'govern their social and sexual interactions' (56), speech could be deployed strategically when in the company of other gay men and dropped when needing to conceal one's

homosexuality. These points are supported by Hayes (1981) but, as Darsey (1981) signals, this strategy is not exclusive to gay men. In addition, Baker (2002, 2019) has theorised Polari – a 'secret language mostly used by gay men and lesbians' (2002, 1) in Britain during the 20th Century – as a 'gay language' (17) covertly signalling a gay identity to other gay men and establishing communities. Newton (1972) makes similar observations about the use of campy speech among drag queens and effeminate gay men. It is important to note that these styles pertain to specific cohorts and identities; despite a popular perception (Munson & Babel, 2007), research shows little support for any universal gay speech style (Levon, 2007, 2014).

As effeminacy became less relied on as a strategy to signal homosexuality, gay men embraced a more masculine embodiment of their identities. Levine (1998) recalls how an effeminate manner of chat among gay men known as 'dishing' was 'regarded appropriate for women […] [and] included bitchy retorts, vicious putdowns, and malicious gossip' (72). Eckhaus & Ben-Hador (2019) discuss the gendering of gossip and chitchat as being commonly tied to women and therefore feminine, however both Cameron (1997) and Benwell (2001) signal otherwise. Keen to form a masculine identity, Levine (1998) recounts how 'dishing' became 'dicking' and that 'dick signified the masculinization of dish and also the goal of gay masculinity' (73). 'Dicking' concerned the discussion of sexual exploits and was seen as a means of gay men 'proving their masculine prowess' (ibid.). Arguably, this still falls within the common remit of gossip; whereas men and women gossip equally but about different things (Eckhaus and Ben-Hador, 2019), men tend to masculinise their gossip in ways consistent with hegemonic masculinity. The masculinisation of gossip becomes a performance of masculinity *about* masculinity (Benwell, 2001). 'Dicking' borrowed manners of speaking from heterosexual men (Levine, 1998). The imitation of

heterosexual men's speech is also used as one means of gaining entry to subcultures that would normally resist homosexual members (Borgeson and Valeri, 2015).

Similar to Levine (1998), Hennen (2008) also traces the shift between 'playful, campy "girl talk"' (172) of gay leathermen in the 1970s to a more mature culture by the 1980s. Of the gay bear subculture, Hennen notes how some bears use 'a variety of voices that incorporate growls and grunts' (121) into their speech.

However, an equally important distinction to bear in mind is also the historical significance of non-verbal modes of communication between gay men when looking to hook-up. Glances, winks, smiles and subtle gestures are all significant when cruising for sex both in public spaces (cottages, public toilets and parks, for instance) and those spaces deemed private but open to members of the public willing to become "members" (saunas, darkrooms, and other sex-on-premises venues) (McInnes and Bollen, 2000). Non-verbal means of initiating contact and sex rooted in pre-digital modes of cruising have carried through into their online counterparts where men can now send a "woof" on Scruff, a "tap" on Grindr, an "oink" on BarebackRT, a "cruise" on Recon and a "wink" on ManHunt to other users of each respective platform. These are all standardised push-alerts sent to the recipient requiring the instigator to type no original text of their own and are intended to be expressions of interest. The crossovers between these impersonal, pseudonymous practices between the historical offline and the contemporary online regarding cottaging and cruising are also discussed by Light (2016) who takes the cruising website/app Squirt as an object of study.

Whereas the historical contexts vary, and the subcultural identities differ, what this literature demonstrates is the importance of communicative practices in the construction of gay identities and communities. The advent of hook-up apps provides these identities and communities with new spaces in which to communicate.

Embodying chat and gay masculinities online

Ross (2005) states that the digital arena provides a space where 'a person can *type* without *doing*, or *do* without *being*' (344, original emphasis). Through chatting online, where temporal gaps allow for greater consideration of typed responses, identities can become flexible and unfixed. Consistent with Attwood's (2009) work, hook-up apps for gay men provide the opportunity to construct an identity via chat that is either a true reflection of the offline self, a slightly modified version of the offline self, or an identity that is removed completely from the offline self. This echoes Gagnon and Simon's (1973) *sexual scripting*. Adopting a performative metaphor, this concept proposed that sexual behaviours follow internalised social scripts, and sexual acts are likely to follow these schemas; this concept will be applied to my discussion. Within the digital realm, King (2011) also highlights the importance of performativity and considers chat platforms as akin to physical rooms: "new" online spaces can draw on "recognisable" environments within which discursive bodies materialise. As a result, whereas the chat room can have 'sexuality […] woven into the fabric of the place' (in this instance, gay and/or queer sexuality), heteronormative models of gender are 'not easily ignored' and become 'felt in the discourses of sexual subject positions' (King, 2011, 23). To be sexually desired in these online "rooms" depends upon 'discursively locating oneself squarely in the sexual subject position 'man' while performing masculine gender' (ibid., 24).

This is evidenced among other online interactions specific to gay men. Campbell (2004) states that there is 'a particular economy of language in online chatting – a vernacular to the virtual' (102). The concept of an economy necessarily draws on notions of currency and value, which in turn parallels Connell's (1995) hegemonic masculinity. The recognised conventions between gay men of chatting "like a man" in

Campbell's (2004) research largely resided in a focus on biological sex and the male body, with penises, penis size, muscularity, libido and sexual stamina regularly referred to. Masculinity was maintained via the regulation and removal of those communicating in a way deemed effeminate: terms or expressions such as '"dear" or "darling"' were considered 'disruptive to the group dynamics' (Campbell, 2004, 129). This demonstrates a continuation of masculinising speech among some gay men into the digital arena, and conventions of hegemonic masculinity are drawn on to achieve this.

Hook-up apps are unfixed from the stationary computer and can be accessed anywhere, anytime provided there is sufficient internet connection. As indicated by King (2011), masculinity is significantly important to many gay men when constructing their hook-up app profiles (Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016; Ravenhill & de Visser, 2016; Roth, 2014). Miller (2015) demonstrates the privileging of masculinity on hook-up apps for gay men, and Rodriguez et al. (2016) support this through their research identifying the linguistic importance gay men place upon their own and other's bodies. The latter study draws attention to the tendency for gay men to use the term "masculine" as an identifier while never specifically explaining what is meant by it, suggesting that the meanings associated with it 'do not differ from the collective meanings of masculinity' (Rodriguez et al., 2016, 256). More recent research from Miller (2018) also evidences language surrounding fitness, sports, and the athletic body as commonly used to self-present as masculine in profile biographies. This article seeks to expand on some of these findings within the British context regarding perceptions of the use of language informed by specific discourses of masculinity, as well as identifying perceived conversational styles and strategic exclusions of certain digital markers that produce meaning in relation to masculinity.

Hook-up apps help to reproduce and reinforce sexual scripts, with Race (2014) claiming that sexual desires expressed via online chat 'are not only stated but co-constructed in conversational format' (503). Roach (2015) acknowledges 'discursive conventions' of short exchanges in gay men's sex-seeking behaviours online. To be more conversational is a liability due to the mixed messages that would be sent out, where being conversational is tied to an investment in establishing friendly connections or a desire to date. This is also supported by Licoppe et al. (2016) who describe a 'linguistic ideology' developed by Grindr users; this ideology is informed by an understanding that Grindr is for quick sexual gratification and therefore ''friendly' conversation […] [is] unfit for Grindr users […] [who] want to avoid any relational build up' (2555) lest it be misinterpreted as long-term-dating chat rather than short-term-sex chat. Roach (2015) considers these short exchanges between men to be a form of bypassing the discursive conventions of romance and dating that render oneself commodifiable, by speaking with 'bluntness [and] eschew[ing] […] conversational niceties' (57). This acts as a potential method of disrupting the marketisation of identity by flattening discourses that would otherwise be invested in selling oneself. The literature cited here indicates that "selling oneself" would likely mean "selling oneself as masculine".

After outlining the research methods, the rest of this article will discuss the perceived proximity of straight-acting gay men's online speech to masculine discourses surroundinng "the lad"; reflections on the conversational styles regarded as masculine by straight-acting gay men on hook-up apps; the scripted nature of online masculine speech, and its adoption by those who wish to utilise it for sexual gain.

Research methods

The data presented in this article is taken from a doctoral research project that commenced in September 2016.

A researcher profile was created on Grindr and Hornet, displaying a profile picture of myself and a short bio explaining my position as a doctoral researcher, my institutional affiliation, and my sole interest in talking to men about the straight-acting identity and masculinity. These were considered important factors to include based on other users' perceptions of the trustworthiness of a hook-up app profile (Albury & Byron, 2016). Whereas initial interactions were made on the respective apps, potential informants were directed to a website that explained the project in more detail and outlined the research ethics.

Informants were sampled via three methods. Initially, a sample of Grindr and Hornet users was selected based upon references to the term "straight-acting" in their profile. As this process continued, other terms such as "masculine" and/or "masc" became noticeably recurrent and so, following a snowball sampling method, these were included too. Finally, informants were sampled based upon convenience regarding those who engaged with the researcher profile first, expressing a willingness to participate. Names and identifying data were anonymised, and the right to withdraw participation and information was communicated on both the project website and prior to interview.

Data from semi-structured interviews conducted with eight informants is cited in this discussion, and they were all users of the hook-up apps Grindr and/or Hornet at the time of interview. The age of informants ranged from 22 to 36, with an average age of 26. They were all resident in the UK. Interviews consisted of open questioning, largely relying on descriptive, example questions and mini-tour questions (Spradley, 1979). Questions relevant to this article included informants' understanding of masculinity;

how they would describe the online identities of gay men identifying as "straight-acting"; and what their experiences of chatting online either *as* a straight-acting gay man, or *to* a straight-acting gay man, have been.

Whereas connections were made via hook-up apps, the interviews were conducted via Skype on a project-specific account, FaceTime, or phone calls. One interview was carried out in person by virtue of close geographic proximity. Relevant colleagues were informed of the time and location of the meeting held in a public place. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed in full. Recordings and transcriptions were encrypted and stored securely on an external hard drive.

An inductive, grounded theory approach with no preconceived hypotheses was employed and following a process of open coding, common themes and patterns were identified within the qualitative data that led to the conceptual framing within the following discussion.

Lad's lads

Within the British context, there is a tendency for gay men to use the term "lad" when describing straight-acting gay men (Sarson, 2020). Banter as a speech convention is a central component of the lad identity among straight men, contributing towards its association with masculinity (Benwell, 2001, 2003, 2005). This continues to be the case with straight-acting gay men, and their offline involvement in banter is said to carry through into online chat. Richard (25), who identifies as "straight-acting" in his Grindr profile, said:

> I think probably us lads tend to have different banter […] I think my banter online is probably a little bit more harsh and a little bit more… I think boys just tend to

> have that… tend to grate each other a bit more in my opinion […] when I start a conversation with somebody [online] I say "mate" and stuff a lot.

Richard's response shows how he considers his banter to become harsher in online conversations, which coincides with Nodin et al.'s (2014) research showing that men's online chat can become coarser due to the virtual degree of separation. Gay hook-up app users value masculinity in a partner (Miller, 2015) and so, for straight-acting gay men who are invested in "laddish" masculinity, banter can increase the masculine value of an online identity and increase one's perceived proximity to "straightness". Whereas Richard's reference to "boys" stands in opposition to "men", which may be more traditionally aligned with hegemonic masculinity, it continues to feed into the lad identity, signifying youth. The use of the word "mate" to refer to other app users reinforces a relational arrangement that is both unromantic and is far removed from feminine terms that some gay men refer to each other with. There are parallels with the work of Kiesling (2005, 2004) into language use and homosociality between heterosexual male students in American fraternities. Kiesling (2005) suggests the repeated use of the casual term "dude" is indicative of "coolness", which 'allows for the expression of homosocial desire without the speaker's coming across as "too earnest" in his desire' (721). These fraternal bonds are built on an assumption of heterosexuality, and homosociality must never become homosexuality – "coolness" as a linguistic device helps to maintain this. Whereas gay hook-up apps assume homosexuality, "cool" stances and terms that enact 'social indirectness' (Kiesling, 2005, 721) could help to sustain the straight-acting performance, imbuing them with a homo*social* quality reminiscent of heterosexual men even though the outcomes aspired towards (a sexual hook-up) are distinct.

Humour was said to play a role in banter for other straight-acting gay men online, and this also seemed to stem from their offline involvement with other groups of men considered to be lads:

> Being straight-acting just comes natural to me because I'm more… I've just been brought up more around lads, like around more lads and guys […] so my banter online is more… a bit more like, cheeky […] a bit more like straightforward, direct, to the point. (Tariq, 26)

To be "cheeky" has crossovers with Nichols's (2018) reference to mischievousness among the straight lads in her research and as part of the tone in which jokes and exchanges are made. Straight-acting gay men may adopt discursive conventions of banter and "laddism" in order to perform their masculine identities online and support the perceived "straightness" of their digital performances. This contributes to research that argues speech can be a vehicle for gay men to associate themselves with traditionally heterosexual masculinities that would usually seek to exclude them (Borgeson and Valeri, 2015).There are also environmental factors in the learning of banter and a manner of speaking for straight-acting gay men exemplified by Tariq's claim to having been brought up among other men that he describes as lads, which impacts upon the way he interacts online with other gay men.

Speaking in ways that are straightforward and direct, as stated by Tariq, was a recurring theme of chat characterised as "laddish" and "straight-acting" online. In some instances, this was also considered to contribute to the perception of belonging to the lad identity:

> Interviewer: How do straight-acting gay men talk to you on Grindr?

> Karl (36 years): Probably like, "hey man, how are you?" […] just straightforward… just a bit like, laddy.

What these varying testimonies suggest is a continued link between banter, the lad identity, and masculinity, and its adoption by some straight-acting gay men as a discourse through which to conceptualise their online communications. Nichols (2018) states that banter is used among lads to show belonging to the cultural group, and the same is indicated here in terms of performing a straight-acting identity. However, both Tariq and Karl identify being "straightforward" as a perceived speech characteristic of straight-acting gay men online, which is not specifically tied to "laddism" and banter. This style will now be explored further.

'They never ask how you are!'

The previous section referred to Kiesling's (2005) "coolness" and social indirectness as linguistic methods through which heterosexual men form social bonds while remaining distant enough to avoid accusations of homosexuality. Reflections from informants indicated similar patterns within the perceived conversational styles of straight-acting gay men to maintain proximity to "straightness"; this regularly drew criticism, frustration, and was framed negatively by those who desire connections beyond performing "straightness". This style was founded in a notion of being "straightforward" and non-conversational.

Roach (2015) contends that 'discursive exchanges' on apps such as Grindr 'reduce dialogue to a series of churlish grunts and crass propositions' (57). This reduced dialogue hollows out subjectivity, allowing for the trafficking of surface types rather than identities online, bypassing a branding of oneself framed by neoliberal notions of dating. Roach's specific analysis is founded in a reading of hook-up apps as facilitating

exactly that: short-term, sexual hook-ups. However, gay men use hook-up apps for many reasons (Gudelunas, 2012). For some informants who were asked to reflect on their experiences with straight-acting gay men online, there were crossovers with the speech style identified by Roach. Specific phrases and styles that straight-acting gay men are said to adopt online were given by Tom (22):

> Very badly punctuated, erm, short, to the point, not very engaging, not very conversational, erm, very very uninteresting […] Like, it's just straight to the point […] "can you accom? No. Ok, bye". They never ask how you are!

A similar account was described by Maxwell (23):

> Oh my God it's like talking to someone without a fucking soul, like "hi, you ok, good, you…" everything's so blunt, text talk […] it kind of comes across so blunt. (Maxwell, 23)

The testimony is largely critical and indicates a desire among some gay men for conversations that are less removed and more about forming a connection rather than humouring the performative speech of straight-acting gay men online – a performance easily recognised by Tom and Maxwell. Tom indicates that there is a lack of investment in other users at a caring level and suggests that in his experiences, where straight-acting gay men chat online, they are largely looking for sex. This same level of remove is communicated by Maxwell too, who suggests both straight-acting gay men – and by extension, their conversations – have no "soul". Kiesling's (2005) "coolness" suggests a level of familiarity, however his use of the term 'social indirectness' perhaps feels more applicable in these instances as showing interest in how other app users are feeling and engaging in conversation may be perceived as '"too earnest"' (721) and emotionally involved – traits not associated with masculinity.

When Mitch (29) (who describes himself as being "into straight-acting guys" in his Grindr bio) was asked for his reflections on the ways in which those who he finds sexually desirable speak online, he said:

> Dry, one-worded […] it's just very plain. There's no… you know what I mean? It's very small answers, very simple: "Hey man, how's u?", that.

The implications of these testimonies suggest there is a perception among some gay men that a short, non-conversational and emotionless style of chat enacted by straight-acting gay men online is seen as directly contributing to the performed masculinity of their identity. This is consonant with historical accounts of the relationship between gay men, speech and masculinity as outlined by Levine (1998); digital technologies have allowed for different means through which this speech style can be communicated since the posthumous publication of Levine's work. Maxwell's reference to "text talk" is coupled with bluntness, and this is further echoed by Mitch with regards to the abbreviated "u" in place of "you" demonstrating a blunter approach and a lack of effort invested into the online conversation. Whereas McCulloch (2019) argues that similar online practices of shortening words signal informality and familiarity, they do not seem to be received in the same manner here. One point of speculation on the part of Tom and Maxwell (who do not state they are "into straight-acting guys" like Mitch does) is that they may associate this perceived conversational style with the performance of hegemonic masculinity and this is not something they are prepared to humour or be enamoured by, particularly given the negative framing of their accounts.

Roach's (2015) suggestion that the hollowing out of content from online chat bypasses conventional notions of commodifying oneself in the online dating market may be true. However, if some gay men connect this form of online speech with

masculinity and being straight-acting, this suggests a negation of Roach's claim that non-conversational practices remove subjectivity and commodification given what is known about the hegemonic value placed in masculinity on gay hook-up apps (Miller, 2015, 2018; Miller & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). This blunt style may actually be ascribing subjective value to app users via its perception as masculine.

Other informants who do not consider themselves to be straight-acting but who use apps for hooking up identified similar linguistic characteristics and enacted them in certain contexts. The implications of this will now be considered.

Scripting the straight act

As interviews developed, there was an indication that the style of online speech discussed so far was so tied to masculinity that some gay men who do not consider themselves to be straight-acting, or even necessarily masculine, adopted it in order to improve their chances of hooking up. My contention is that this manner of typing and chatting online is recognised as a script and, like most scripts, can then be rehearsed and performed by social actors – in this instance, gay men wishing to act straight in order to secure sex with other men via hook-up apps.

Pioneered by Gagnon and Simon (1973), scripting happens at three interactive levels: the social level, referring to how the wider cultural environment informs scripted behaviour; the interpersonal, which is the process through which an individual alters their scripted behaviour based upon a change in social environment; and the intrapsychic, consisting of fantasies, memories, and mental rehearsals of scripts, enabling individuals to better navigate the social and the interpersonal.

Some gay men claimed to utilise the conventions of the speech style outlined in this article with the intention of enhancing their perceived masculinity to better their

chances of sex. Jonathan (24) admitted to occasionally adopting "straight-acting" online speech for these purposes:

> If I'm trying to get laid I'll use more like the language I would use if I was talking to my straight friends or my brothers' friends and that, I wouldn't be so verbose […] I'll just be like short and to the point.

All three levels of Gagnon and Simon's (1973) scripting theory are enacted here. Jonathan has an understanding that masculinity is a sexually desirable trait for some gay men (the social level); a desire for a hook-up rather than a conversation alters the social situation, which impacts upon the script (the interpersonal level); as such, a recourse to memories of speaking with straight friends leads to mental rehearsals and subsequent enactments of a conversational style in keeping with that of straight-acting gay men (the intrapsychic). In order to "get laid", he alters his scripted speech to that of having a conversation with straight men. By extension, the men that he chats with are spoken to as though they are straight. Roach (2015) suggests that gay men who speak in a non-conversational manner online in order to get straight to the point of hooking-up is 'to learn a new language' (57). But the indications from Jonathan are that, rather than learning a new language, gay men can strategically draw on familiar, existing scripts and exercise them in new contexts (as McCulloch [2019] also suggests of online speech). These scripts flatter the desires of some gay men to be regarded as masculine and treated as straight, implying that "straight-talking" is more sexually desirable than to speak in its opposite (expressively, more conversationally and with affectation, which may be considered "gay-talking" and/or effeminate).

Specific examples of a change in scripted online speech were offered along with what not to do if a "straight-acting" script is to be maintained. When Jonathan was asked how he would speak online to be perceived as masculine and straight-acting, he

exemplified Ross's (2005) notions of typing without doing and doing without being. He said:

> So like how I'd talk to my brothers really… like, say "what you sayin'?", I wouldn't really use punctuation, and I don't really use emojis.

Mitch (29) alluded to similar behaviours. When asked if there was anything he was conscious about when chatting online and signalling a straight-acting identity, he responded:

> Do you know what, yeah. Saying that, punctuation. I don't know if that's just me but, I suppose when you're writing instead of talking, if you use certain punctuation marks it can make it seem like, I don't know, like expressive […] it's exclamation marks that make it look the gayest, I think.

Tying punctuation – specifically exclamation marks – and emojis with being "expressive" suggests that this is considered to inject too much personality, colour, and emotion into online chat. By extension, and by drawing on earlier work by Lakoff (1973) that suggested women are expected to speak in a more expressive style that is meant to be 'mindless, endless, high-pitched and silly' (82), it could be inferred that expressive online speech littered with exclamation marks and emojis is critiqued here for the same reasons where "the gayest" is synonymous with "the most effeminate". For some gay men, the fear of being labelled "effeminate" because of their sexuality – where "gay" is still regularly equated with "feminine" (Halperin, 2012) – may be so great that aspiring towards hegemonic masculinity is preferable, despite the latter's relationship with homophobia. "Gayness" and looking "the gayest" becomes flattened into a singular identity with its own parameters that straight-acting men can script their

own online speech against, distancing themselves from a style that is considered to look "gay".

However, a conscious decision to switch between different online speech styles (masculine and less masculine) was signalled by Isaac (28). When asked if he could describe the way in which his language alters online based upon whether he is trying to convey masculinity, he said:

> [I'm] more short and confident with people I guess. So rather than just beating around the bush if you're looking for a hook-up, just being more forward […] Whereas if you're online looking for dates, chat, that kind of thing, you wouldn't necessarily be like that, so you'd tailor your language a little bit.

Isaac draws on notions of directness and being "forward" cited previously and refers to this style of speech as being "confident" – a marker of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995) and also of seeking sex as argued by Licoppe et al. (2016). However, it is clear that Isaac does not always employ this method of chatting online – only when he is looking for a hook-up. In addition, style-shifting is enacted where Bell's (1984) framework of *audience design* seems particularly relevant, where speech is controlled based upon specific social contexts and those within them (their audiences). Bell (1984, 2001) argues that speakers can switch the design of their speech styles based upon who they are addressing, but also claims that shifts in style in response to specific topics or settings can be motivated by audience members' schematic associations with said topics or settings. Beyond a change in style that responds to a certain situation, Bell signals an "initiative" change where the shift in speech style itself manifests a change in a given situation. Within the context of gay men and "gay speech" specifically, Podesva (2007) notes how the use of falsetto is more prominent in certain social settings with certain audiences than others; it relays an expressive meaning 'used to construct a diva persona

and perhaps a gay identity' (497) in a social situation where it could be considered more appropriate (a social gathering with other gay friends). The use of falsetto was less present in other situations where it might be considered less appropriate (in Podesva's instance, the workplace and when the participant was speaking with his father). Isaac shows that his online speech and conversational style follows two distinct types based upon his intentions with other app users. The masculine style is employed when sex is the aim, further establishing the link between masculinity and sexual desire among gay men. This exemplifies Bell's (1984, 2001) *referee design*: referees are absent third persons who influence speakers to communicate in certain ways – in this case, the "referee" is a masculine gay man, who Isaac shifts his conversation style towards in order to identify with him. The situation Isaac is in when altering his online speech to masculinity is a digital arena – an app – the purpose of which is largely regarded as facilitating sex, referring back to the points previously made about an audience's underlying understandings of a setting. Isaac's relation to it is someone sometimes looking for sex and his linguistic style relating to its additional audience members switches based upon whether sex is the primary motivator (in which case a more masculine script is deployed), or whether he is looking for dates or chat (in which case he claims to be more conversational). What the collective testimonies presented in this section signal is that gay men enact scripted speech in order to appear masculine or straight-acting and this script has specific conventions of style. These scripts are often followed when those adopting them are looking for a sexual hook-up and can be just as easily switched to others when there is a focus on dating, chatting, and making friends.

Conclusion

According to Rodriguez et al. (2016), masculinities operate across a continuum ranging

from ‘extreme to moderate to deficient’ (260) and this article has argued that straight-acting gay men continue to be conceptualised on the extreme end of the spectrum. This article has presented reflections on linguistic styles, conventions and practices that gay men associate with performing the straight-acting identity on hook-up apps. The discourses of masculinity surrounding lads and banter as a specific speech style appear salient in the minds of gay men when theorising the straight-acting identity, indicating a culturally specific source of social inspiration for the construction of this specific model of gay masculinity. Remaining socially indirect and communicating in a constrained manner online – refraining from expression, being conversational, and demonstrating any kind of emotional investment – are also considered to be instrumental to the linguistic construction of a straight-acting identity online, leading to frustration among those gay men wanting to form connections beyond hook-ups. In turn, this suggests that the straight-acting identity invests in masculinity to enhance sexual desirability. Through the use of sexual scripting and style-shifting as theoretical frameworks, this article has helped to further position “straight-acting” as a performative construct that remains ultimately unattainable in line with hegemonic masculinity. It has indicated that gay men who do not fit the straight-acting identity are aware of interactional strategies to shift their speech styles with the aim of appearing more masculine and, in turn, signal that they are more interested in a quick sexual hook-up when adopting that style.

This article concurs with the conclusions drawn by others (Eguchi, 2010; Ward, 2008) that hegemonic masculinity is adapted among some gay men to represent a form of “homomasculinity”, and that this is implemented and enacted within the networked spaces of hook-up apps. It builds on the work of Rodriguez et al. (2016) and Miller (2015, 2018) to suggest that a process of “mascing” (that is, a ‘policing that reinforces a masculine elite’ on gay hook-up apps [Rodriguez et al., 2016, 260]) is considered by

some gay men to operate at the level of online conversations, extending beyond the profile elements that these scholars have analysed (profile bios and "about me" sections). Despite hegemonic masculinity's position to homophobia, reflections on the perceived linguistic styles of straight-acting gay men indicate an investment in social and cultural power structures to accrue value in the sexual marketplace of hook-up apps. This article contends that, whereas internalised homophobia may be at play, the overt homophobia of hegemonic masculinity is supplanted by overt effeminophobia by straight-acting gay men, which other gay men are able to identify in practices of online communication. The implications of this for effeminate, marginalised gay men, and for those who do not employ a masculine speech style online, may be the experience of further stigmatisation and subordination potentially leading to feelings of decreased self-worth and sexual desirability.

As this article has drawn on the reflective testimonies of gay hook-up app users, further research should now aim to analyse actual online conversations that take place within hook-up apps to assess whether there is any corroboration with the qualitative data presented here. In addition, cultural reference points and discourses that gay men have used to theorise straightness and masculinity within this article are specific to the UK ("lads", for instance). Further research may also wish to identify which models of masculinity straight-acting gay men in other geographical locations draw upon linguistically (fraternity men and "dudes" in the US, for example) to inform their reflections on speech style and actual online practices.

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