

'It's not the fact they claim benefits but their useless, lazy, drug taking lifestyles we despise': Analysing audience responses to Benefits Street using live tweets

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'It's not the fact they claim benefits but their useless, lazy, drug taking lifestyles we despise': Analysing audience responses to *Benefits Street* using live tweets

Abstract:

This paper capitalises on the instantaneity of Twitter as a communicative medium by analysing live audience responses to the second series of the controversial television programme *Benefits Street*. We examine the discourses and representation of social class drawn upon in public reactions to the program. We compiled a corpus of live tweets that were sent during the first airing of each episode of *Benefits Street II*, which included the hashtags #BenefitsStreet and/or #BenefitStreet. Our corpus comprises 11,623 tweets sourced from over four thousand Twitter accounts. Drawing on techniques from corpus-based discourse analysis, and contrasting our findings to an earlier study on *Benefits Street* by Baker and McEnery (2015a), we offer an insight into viewers' discursive constructions of benefit claimants not just as scroungers, but as a more generally morally inadequate and flawed underclass. We argue that poverty porn programmes such as *Benefits Street* encourage viewers to see any positive representations of benefits claimants as exceptions to the rule.

Keywords: Twitter, audience response, corpus-based discourse analysis, *Benefits Street*, reality TV

1. Introduction

The television programme *Benefits Street*, which first aired on Channel 4 in 2014, documented the lives of benefit claimants resident on James Turner Street in Birmingham, England. It mostly portrayed benefits claimants in a negative light, filming shoplifting, arrests, attempts to buy drugs, and a release from prison, and focussed on narratives in which people were dependent on welfare payments and seemed to lack the motivation to seek employment. Due to this focus, the programme was branded a form of 'poverty porn' (Jensen, 2014; Mooney, 2011), where the daily lives of benefits recipients are presented as mass media entertainment (see also Biressi and Nunn, 2014; Brooker et al., 2015). *Benefits Street* has been repeatedly criticised for its sensational depiction of benefits recipients and its reinforcement of negative stereotypes about the British working class (Fisher, 2014; Moran, 2016; Valley, 2014). Series one generated 950 public complaints to regulatory body Ofcom, although ultimately no action was taken. Initially, the programme's producers struggled to find a location to film the second series after residents in several potential areas, including Middlesbrough and Stockton, registered their displeasure. On Dixon Street, Stockton-on-Tees residents allegedly 'chased, pelted eggs and threw a bucket of water over the research team from Love Productions' (Cain, 2014). Despite these protests, however, the second series of *Benefits Street* was eventually filmed in Kingston Road, Stockton-on-Tees, England and aired as four hour-long episodes on Channel 4 between the 11th May and 1st June 2015. Like series one, series two depicted participants' involvement in crime (e.g. drug dealing and attending court hearings), but it also focussed on more positive topics, such as parenting, work, community and friendships.

Previous work on the first series of *Benefits Street* concentrated on social class, audience response and stance negotiation. Baker and McEnery (2015a) analysed Twitter responses to *Benefits Street I*, focussing on three main discourses: an 'idle poor' discourse, a 'poor as victims' discourse, and a 'rich get richer' discourse. [Anonymous, xxxx] analysed how focus group participants constructed their own stance and attributed stance to others

through naming and agency practices, the negotiation of opinion, and stake inoculation. They showed that the need to construct group membership was potentially stronger than the need to state one's own opinion about *Benefits Street I*. The focus groups worked collaboratively and used the individuals in *Benefits Street I* to construct an overarchingly negative stereotype of those on benefits. Similarly, [Anonymous, xxxx] investigated how the focus group participants talked specifically about money and social class.

In the present paper, we turn our attention to the second series (henceforth *Benefits Street II*). We capitalised on the instantaneity of Twitter to collect and analyse live audience responses to *Benefits Street II* by compiling a corpus of tweets sent using the hashtags #BenefitsStreet and/or #BenefitStreet during the first airing of each episode of series two (see section 3). Our corpus facilitates an analysis of the different discourses used by tweeters when discussing poverty porn programming, and furthermore our data constitutes unprompted, immediate audience response. Analysing live tweets gave us access to the instantaneous reactions of 4086 different Twitter users who responded directly to scenes from *Benefits Street II*. This is a much larger number than we could access through other methods of data collection and provides us with data which has not been influenced by the researchers' aims; the Twitter users gave their opinions voluntarily through their choice to tweet about the programme. Furthermore, as Twitter provides users with a relatively high level of anonymity they are less likely to be concerned with achieving group-solidarity and positive face needs (c.f. Brown and Levinson, 1987) than in comparable face-to-face interaction (see Anonymous, xxxx).¹ Our combination of corpus analysis and close discourse analysis of tweets facilitates the investigation of public responses to discuss *Benefits Street II* and allows comparison with the first series, drawing on work by Baker and McEneaney (2015a), Anonymous (xxxx) and Anonymous (xxxx).

We consider which discourses, occurring as expressions of underlying ideologies, tweeters draw upon when discussing *Benefits Street II*. Examples include scrounger/idle poor discourses and neoliberal discourses related to the notion that poverty is a result of individual failures. We also found it particularly useful to draw on Bauman's notion of 'flawed consumerism' where 'the poor of a consumer society are socially defined, and self-defined, first and foremost as blemished, defective, faulty and deficient – in other words, inadequate – consumers' (Bauman 2004:38) because many tweets refer to those participating on Benefits Street prioritising luxury goods over basic necessities. We furthermore interrogate whether tweeters single out the behaviours/actions of particular individuals depicted on *Benefits Street II* and discuss how such people are evaluated. The following section contextualises this work within wider research on the representation/evaluation of benefits recipients in the UK, whilst also considering existing work using Twitter as a data source. We detail the construction and contents of our corpus in section 3 and explain the methods that we have used. Section 4 contains our analysis, which is an example of corpus-based discourse analysis, and section 5 considers how our work adds to the growing body of literature focused on public reactions to media representations of benefits recipients and the related burgeoning field of linguistics-based poverty research (c.f. Biressi, 2011; Couldry, 2011; Hancock and Mooney, 2013; Anonymous, xxx).

2. Analysing tweets as audience response

¹ However, it is worth noting that Schirra et al. (2014), discussed below, suggest that tweeters assume some form of online community.

The last 40 years has seen a shift in cultural studies research, with viewers, readers, and consumers increasingly seen as the primary source of meaning-making in any encounter between text and audience. Morley's seminal study of *Nationwide* (1980) and Lull's study of family TV viewing (1990) offered early ethnographic accounts of television audiences engaged in the construction of meaning, challenging more typical conceptions of viewers as passive receivers of culture. More recent research has continued this work in light of technological developments, in particular considering the affordances of web 2.0 and the new opportunities and internet platforms offered to audiences as they engage with different forms of (mass) media, such as television (Bruns and Burgess, 2011; Wood and Baughman, 2012), literary texts (Page and Thomas, 2011; Anonymous, 2016), and online news articles (Henrich and Holmes, 2013).

The present study uses Twitter as a data source to examine audience response to a television programme. Tweets provide insight into the discursive negotiation and dynamics of social reality. Live tweets are especially unique in this respect, as they allow the researcher to capture and analyse a socially-situated and socially-constructed meaning-making process that unfolds and develops as tweeters attend to an event occurring in real time, such as a television show. As tweets have timestamps and can thus be traced back to a specific time, we can make a fairly accurate estimate of the scene, or even particular shot, that viewers were reacting to when tweeting. This allows for a greater understanding of what viewers tend to pick up on scene-by-scene and how they make sense of the programme overall. The discursive context in which these tweets occur, then, allows for further insight into the socially-situated nature of that meaning-making practice.

Audiences use Twitter to engage in ambient affiliation; that is, 'to talk about the same topic at the same time' (Zappavigna, 2014: 211). Cultural products, such as television programmes, are one popular topic of discussion on social media. The social and economic hierarchies that exist in the offline socio-political landscape are reflected, reinforced (Page, 2012) and reshaped on online platforms such as Twitter, making it an interesting platform for study. As Page (2012) shows, tweeters' strategic use of hashtags plays an especially important role in this. Hashtags are searchable and therefore visible to others who are interested in tweets written about the same topic. The aggregation of tweets with the same hashtag can furthermore create a 'polyphonic backchannel' and provide researchers with audience response information to a television programme in real time (Page, 2012: 111; see also Anstead and O'Loughlin, 2010), further adding to the performative and socially-situated aspect of these tweets. For example, Schirra et al. (2014) examined the motivations for live tweeting across a season of a television show. They note that serial live tweeters tend to be motivated by a 'desire to feel connected to a larger community that is interested in the show' (Schirra et al., 2014: 2441). Brooker et al.'s (2015) quantitative sociological analysis of the hashtag #benefitsstreet following the airing of *Benefits Street I*, showed how people appropriated Twitter for largely negative socio-political talk on and stereotyping of benefits claimants and poor people.

Baker and McEnery (2015a) showed the fruitfulness of analysing a corpus of tweets to identify prevalent discourses relating to *Benefits Street I*. They used two key search terms (*Benefits Street* and *Benefits Britain*) to source 81,100 tweets over a week-long period in February 2014, which coincided with the end of the first series of *Benefits Street* and a subsequent televised debate about the programme and benefits receipt more broadly. Their analysis begins with the generation of positive keywords - words which were statistically more frequent in the corpus under investigation than in a comparable reference corpus of general tweets - which they use to identify different categories that were prominent in their

data (for example, social groups, finances, work and government, etc.). For the present paper, the same reference corpus of tweets has been used, which facilitates direct comparison between their data and ours. Baker and McEnery identify three main discourses in their data: an ‘idle poor’ discourse, which depicts ‘the poor as feckless and undeserving’ (2015a: 250), a ‘poor as victims’ discourse, where some form of sympathy is expressed for those ‘victimised by the current system’ (2015a: 254), and a ‘rich get richer’ discourse, which contrasts the economic standing of those on benefits with the perceived wealth of others - particularly bankers (2015a: 257). They conclude that whilst the three main discourses are clearly separate, what links them together is an underlying ‘sense of anger and outrage that *somebody else* is benefiting unfairly from the current wealth distribution system’ (2015a: 262). The findings of the present paper are related to these discourses to determine if they were also used in response to *Benefits Street II*. We consider the following research questions:

1. What discourses do tweeters draw upon when responding to *Benefits Street II*?
2. Has there been a change in the discourses used to discuss *Benefits Street* on Twitter between series one and series two?
3. Can the key themes in our corpus illuminate wider debates about benefits receipt and social class?

3. Data and Methodology

To compile our corpus, we collected all tweets that included the hashtags #BenefitsStreet and #BenefitStreet on the 11th, 18th, 25th May and 1st June - the original broadcast dates of each episode of *Benefits Street II*². We used these hashtags to ensure that our corpus was comprised of tweets directly relating to the TV programme. In order to focus on immediate audience response, we manually thinned our dataset to include only those tweets posted between 9 and 10pm - when the show was aired - on each day of broadcast (henceforth ‘live tweets’). This is not to say that tweets responding to later airings of each episode are not also audience response. However, we chose to look at the initial airings to ensure that the tweets we collected were not influenced by others who may have already seen the programme. The tweets sent during the first airings are as close as possible to immediate audience response because they are nearest to the point of tweeters initially experiencing the programme. We established which tweets fell into our timeframe using their timestamps, taking the first tweet occurring after 21:00 and the last tweet occurring at 22:00. A summary of our data is given in Table 1.

Table 1
Overview of Twitter corpus

	Ep 1 11/05/15	Ep 2 18/05/15	Ep 3 25/05/15	Ep 4 01/06/15	Total
No of Tweets	5814	2026	977	2826	11643
No of Handles	1281	1020	347	1892	4540
Av. Tweets per Handle	4.54	1.99	2.82	1.49	2.56

² Tweets were collected manually by searching Twitter for our chosen hashtags on our selected days. We initially downloaded all tweets that included our hashtags on these days and then manually narrowed our corpus to those tweets that had timestamps which corresponded with the airing of each episode.

No tweets retweeted	1444	537	384	624	2989
No of retweets total	19407	8,234	2817	6446	36904
Average no retweets	13	15	7	10	12
No tweets favourited	2976	1129	583	1482	6170
No of favourites total	22108	7120	2418	9640	41286
Average no favourites	0.13	0.16	0.24	0.15	0.15

Whilst we cannot guarantee that all tweets in our corpus were produced by people actually watching *Benefits Street II*, it is fair to assume that the vast majority of tweeters posting about this topic at this time were actively engaged in viewing the programme. Close reading of the data confirms this position, as tweets such as ‘Julie is a good human #BenefitsStreet’, and ‘What’s he say?! #BenefitsStreet’ respond directly to what was occurring on screen at the time of posting. Furthermore, such tweets show the socially-situated nature of tweeting, as tweeters seemed to assume that others were watching the programme and would be able to interpret their tweets without additional information/context. It was assumed, for example, that people reading a tweet would understand who Julie was. Furthermore, references to ‘Orange Dot’ - a name given to one participant in *Benefits Street II* - is an intertextual echo of ‘White Dee’, who was a prominent participant in the first series of the programme. Whilst there may be some tweets in our corpus posted by those not watching the programme, they likely represent an extremely small minority and should not, therefore, influence our findings unduly.

To avoid skewing our analysis, we chose to remove retweets from our data (following Baker and McEnergy, 2015a: 246). However, we have provided this information in Table 1 to show that tweeters were not just reacting directly to *Benefits Street* but were also interacting with others who were tweeting about the programme. We removed emojis from our corpus to facilitate linguistic analysis using corpus software. This was unfortunate, as emojis can perform both pragmatic (Danesi, 2017) and semantic functions, and their analysis would be fruitful. However, a consideration of the semiotic value of emojis is beyond the scope of the present paper. Table 1 also shows that each episode received a different number of tweets, with the majority occurring in response to episode one. The number of tweets declines, reaching its lowest point in response to episode three, before picking up again in response to the final episode. There are 11,643 tweets in the corpus, with a total word count of 147,154.

In order to establish the core themes in our corpus and to compare our work to existing scholarship, we drew on the well-established methods of corpus-based discourse analysis (Baker et al., 2008; Baker and McEnergy, 2015b; Upton and Cohen, 2009). We began by generating a list of keywords - words which were statistically salient in our corpus compared to the reference corpus of tweets used by Baker and McEnergy. The reference corpus contained 81,000 English language tweets sampled from February 2014 (c.f. Baker and McEnergy 2015a:247). The keywords were calculated using AntConc (Anthony, 2014) - Log-likelihood with a threshold value of 15.00 ($p < 0.0001$) and a minimum frequency of 5. Following Baker and McEnergy (2015a), the lexical keywords in the top 100 keywords were manually grouped into categories (Table 2).

Table 2
Semantic groupings of lexical items in top 100 keywords

The programme	<i>benefitsstreet, benefitstreet, camera, cameras, channel, documentary, factor, film, filmed, filming, programme, programmes, reality, series, show, showing, shows, subtitles, telly, tv, watch, watching, xfactor</i>
The media	<i>media, news, photographers, press, propaganda, reporters</i>
Evaluation (incl. intensifiers)	<i>absolute, absolutely, arse, bloody, cunt, cunts, fucking, genuine, lazy, piss, poor, scrounger, scroungers, scum, scumbags, taking, twat, twats, vile, vulnerable</i>
Social actors	<i>Cameron, community, Cunningham, Dee, Dot, Lee, Maxwell, Maxwells, Neil, Orange, OrangeDot, Reagan, Regan, residents, ripReagan, Sue</i>
Benefits	<i>allowance, benefit, benefits, claim, claimants, claiming, cuts, DLA, dole, JSA, sanctioned, sanctions, system, welfare</i>
Government/ Law	<i>Cameron, court, DWP, election, government, IDS, Labour, MP, police, propaganda, tax, taxes, Tories, Tory</i>
Drugs/smoking	<i>bong, cannabis, dealer, dealing, diazepam, drug, drugs, fags, selling, smoking, weed</i>
Location	<i>Britain, country, estate, Kingston, local, Stockton, street, Tees, Teeside, UK</i>
Kinship	<i>bloke, child, kids, lad, mam, mum, people, son, society, woman</i>
Emotions	<i>emotional, heartbreaking, loss, poor, rip, sad, spirit</i>
Twitter handles ³	<i>gazettelive, georgeaylett, doleanimators, inactualefact, kthopkins, retweeted</i>
Money	<i>afford, money, paid, pay, paying, poverty</i>
Goods/ Appearance	<i>Adidas, bike, sunbeds, tan, vest</i>
Work	<i>job, unemployed, work, working</i>
Health	<i>disability, disabled, DLA, memory, needs</i>

As expected, many of the keywords related to the programme itself, with further sets concerning the media and the programme's location. Evaluative keywords (*cunt, scrounger, scum, vulnerable*) accounted for 20% of the top 100 keywords, which, although they were not all negative, suggests that Twitter was a fertile ground for evaluating *Benefits Street II* participants and benefits recipients more widely. References to drugs/smoking, and goods/appearance, which are examined in detail in section 4.2, also support this conclusion. The proper nouns in Table 2 (Maxwell, Julie, Reagan) determine the key social actors in the corpus (see section 4.1). Keywords also clustered to a lesser extent into the semantic fields of government and benefits receipt, money, employment, and health. The identification of these keyword categories acted as a starting point for close analysis of the corpus.

We combined our corpus-based approach with close reading. In order to make the analysis manageable we used a random number generator and took a 10% sample of tweets from each of the four episodes. Whilst our analysis is supported by corpus tools, the analysis below is structured around the key themes that emerged when we grouped our tweets thematically. We used keywords to direct our close reading (section 4.1) and to identify potential indices of social class (section 4.2). Corpus tools, therefore, facilitate the interrogation of patterns within the corpus, which can lead to the identification of repeated linguistic traces of discourses as realisations of underlying ideologies. We begin our analysis, with a consideration of the earliest tweets in our corpus - those posted within the

³We chose to keep twitter handles in our corpus in order to highlight which people tweeted or were tweeted about repeatedly.

first few minutes of episode one - as they illuminate the tweeters' awareness of the wider social context surrounding *Benefits Street II*.

4. Analysis

An analysis of the live tweets at the beginning of the first episode of *Benefits Street II* reveals how tweeters may feel placed in a larger community of people interested not only in this new series, but also in the first series of the programme (c.f. Schirra et al., 2014). Tweeters seem to model their understanding of the beginning of episode one on their socially-situated and predominantly-negative view of *Benefits Street I*. Rather than focus on the current series, many of the tweets at the start of *Benefits Street II* are about what viewers *expect* to happen in series two, and these expectations are often based on reactions to, and perceptions of, series one. Example (1), for instance, indicates that the tweeter has not started watching series two but 'knows' that their reaction will be negative, while in (2) direct reference is made to White Dee, who participated in *Benefits Street I*.

- 1) #BenefitsStreet dare I even begin to watch knowing this is going to frustrate and anger me soooooo much
- 2) No White Dees this time, please. We don't need to be making celebrities out of these scumbags. #BenefitsStreet

Overall, the tweets produced during episode one were largely negative in tone. They were mostly used to generalise all benefits claimants as belonging to a specific class of people, to express negative feelings towards those watching the programme or towards the programme itself (example 1), and as a vehicle for political commentary (3-4).

- 3) If you want to see why the Tories won the election watch #BenefitsStreet
- 4) To celebrate the #Tories win, Iain Duncan Smith proudly brings you a brand new series of #BenefitsStreet #IDS #DWP Pure Propaganda TV
- 5) I don't know why I watch #BenefitsStreet it just winds me up #getajob
- 6) #BenefitsStreet is on, Cup of tea and Twitter!

A number of tweeters also questioned their own motives for watching (5), while others described it as a form of self-indulgence (6). Such tweets demonstrate that the audience did not begin to watch *Benefits Street II* isolated from preconceived notions about what they were about to see. As such, the tweets act not only as direct audience response to *Benefits Street II*, but also as a response to wider cultural norms about benefits receipt in the UK more generally. Furthermore, the use of additional hashtags such as '#Tories' and '#DWP' give an indication of the broader context of *Benefits Street II*, as episode one aired just four days after the Conservative party won the 2015 UK general election.

4.1 Identifying discourses

In aiming to draw out the discourses used by tweeters responding to *Benefits Street II*, we combined elements of corpus analysis, such as keywords, with the insights of close reading. In addition to Baker and McEnery's (2015a) discourses mentioned above, we also found examples of Bauman's flawed consumerism where those participating on *Benefits Street* were chastised for prioritising cigarettes, alcohol, and drugs (see 7-10), as well as high-priced electrical goods, over basic necessities. We found evidence of scrounger discourses, negative evaluation of individuals, generalisations about benefits claimants, questions of

hygiene and morals, and contrasting positive evaluations which acted as the exception that proves a rule. But in particular, we found that the spending habits of those on *Benefits Street II* were a repeated site of negative evaluation.

- 7) They are all struggling to pay bills and buy food. But where do they get their cigarettes from?! #benefitsstreet
- 8) @DanielVetr Poor...fags,beer,dogs,house,benefits they don't deserve and drug dealing...yes they're so poor @KTHopkins #BenefitsStreet
- 9) Funny how they have no money but are somehow smoking weed all the time #BenefitsStreet
- 10) #BenefitsStreet They can afford Eggs!!..

Many of these examples refer to particular consumables and their related practices: smoking and cigarettes, drinking alcohol. Such items are conceptualised as 'luxuries' with the implication that the poor should restrict their purchases only to the 'essentials', such as food and household bills. Although it also appears that not all foods are 'essentials' with eggs being depicted as a luxury item in (10) in response to scenes of *Benefits Street II* participants throwing eggs at journalists.

The discourse of flawed consumerism is perhaps most prevalent in episode 4, which focuses on Christmas (11) and the purchase of high-end mobile phones was a particular target for tweeters (12-13). Furthermore, the purchase of iPhones, iPads and other Christmas presents is linked directly to criminality (14) and the prioritisation of 'luxuries' over 'essentials' is again criticised.

- 11) This lot are deluded they don't work, squander what they get on fags and booze then complain they can't afford Christmas lol! #benefitstreet
- 12) Look at all these poor bastards on benefits.. ? They can only afford an iPhone 3 or iPad 2. ? So sad. ? #benefitstreet
- 13) They'll all be out robbing each other's iPhones and mountain bikes on Boxing Day, or pawning them for fags and booze lol!!! #benefitstreet
- 14) "I'm not paying my water bill this month" perhaps you should've prioritised bills rather than pressies #priorities #BenefitsStreet

Tweeters imply that the participants on *Benefits Street II* and (by implication) benefits recipients more widely are not allowed to own particular goods or partake in activities such as smoking and drinking. Presumably, such purchases/activities are reserved for other people - perhaps the tweeters - but are not seen as viable allocation of resources for those in receipt of benefits. Whilst Baker and McEnergy (2015a) do not explicitly discuss flawed consumerism, they do note that their corpus included references to *fags*, *booze*, and *iPhones*. We consider the implications of tweeters' focus to these consumables in more detail in section 4.2.

Overlapping with the 'flawed consumer' discourse, we also identified a 'scrounger' discourse, similar to the previous identified 'idle poor' discourse Baker and McEnergy (2015a). They note the occurrence of negatively-loaded terms such as *lazy* and *fat*, which are used to portray a particular stereotype of the idle, or undeserving poor who are morally suspect (Katz, 2013). We find a similar pattern in our data, insofar as tweets concern the moral behaviour, and especially the laziness, of those in receipt of benefits.

- 15) Here we go another new series for the scroungers to give it large fucking scum cunts #BenefitsStreet
- 16) Are these people really that hard done by? #BenefitsStreet ... benefits were not this lucrative 50 yes ago!!! Lazy twats
- 17) It annoys me when people don't even try to look for a job #BenefitsStreet
- 18) #BenefitsStreet nothing but a bunch of druggy doley bell ends. Get off ur arse and get a fucking job!!!!!!!!!!
- 19) I can't watch #BenefitsStreet, makes me so angry with the mentality of these people. Get off your arse, get a job and pay your way.

Participants on *Benefits Street II* are described as 'scroungers', 'scum cunts' (15) and 'lazy twats' who are given 'lucrative' amounts of money (16) but are too lazy to find employment (17-19). In addition to indolence, many tweets also refer to the drug-taking habits of those depicted on *Benefits Street* (e.g. 'druggy doley bell ends') and this is used as evidence of general moral decline. Thus, links can be made here to wider moral panics about benefits and dependency on the welfare state (see Monbiot 2015). These tweets are typical of scrounger discourse, suggesting that the recipients of benefits do not really need the money to survive. That is to say, their flawed consumerism is further evidence of their general low worth as human beings. As we will also see in 4.2, taking illegal drugs is associated with benefits recipients and goes hand-in-hand with benefit claimants being undeserving and lazy (20-22).

- 20) Maxwell,depressed,anxious on dla.There is nothing depressed about him. On drugs and wanting a motorbike to get about. #fraud #BenefitsStreet
- 21) They moan they have no money on benefits and live in a dump but yet they can afford to buy drugs! Get a job! #BenefitsStreet
- 22) #BenefitsStreet hes getting money backpaid for sitting at home selling and smoking pot and my hard workin hubby cant afford a new cooker!!!

However, a detailed inspection of these negatively-loaded tweets suggests that it is not always the fact that people are drawing benefits that annoys the tweeters, but rather that the participants on *Benefits Street II* represent an 'underclass' whose behaviour generally is to be despised. Tweeters express general disgust with the participants shown in the programme, due to their supposed lack of morals and regardless of whether they receive benefits. This is not technically the same as scrounger discourse, as the tweets do not always overtly refer to people getting money for free. There seems to be more of a general condemnation of a certain way of life, regardless of where the money comes from. One tweeter makes this point explicitly (23). Others imply that condemnation is based on the notion that those on screen are somehow unclean and/or animal-like, which makes them bad people (24-26).

- 23) The liberals miss the point. Its not the fact they claim benefits but their useless, lazy, drug taking lifestyles we despise #BenefitsStreet
- 24) Got enough money for weed but not food. #BenefitsStreet"Being on benefits doesnt make us bad people" No love the baby stickin his dummy in shit then in his mouth does tho #BenefitsStreet
- 25) #BenefitsStreet Just because you have no money or education, there is no need to behave or live like a pig. #lazypeople

26) Wouldn't be a shit hole if you bothered to fucking clean it you dirty mong
#BenefitsStreet!

Thus, people being poor, or even lazy, is not the main complaint of these tweeters. Perhaps, then, this kind of discourse is more appropriately labelled 'underclass discourse' than scrounger/idle poor discourse. That is to say, the discourse refers to a cluster of human characteristics that are generally undesirable. These characteristics may include laziness, drug-taking, low intelligence and, sometimes, 'scrounging'.

Whilst references to flawed consumerism, scrounging and low morals indicate negative evaluations of the (presumed) practices and choices of benefits recipients, both those participating in *Benefits Street II* and more widely, at the same time there were also tweets which focus on the bad behaviour of individuals. In particular, one participant named Maxwell, was singled out for ridicule (27-31).

- 27) Maxwell looks like one of life's achievers. Let me guess, it's not his fault.
#BenefitsStreet
- 28) #BenefitsStreet guys got no money, no job, no electricity, what does he do? Buy a fucking puppy. You couldn't write the shite
- 29) Oh it'll put you in jail but it's ok I'll put it on TV tho #BenefitsStreet this lad is fucking funny!! "Bend me up like a fucking chicken"
- 30) Maxwell showing off his illegal drugs. On national TV. Again, this is the level of intelligence we're dealing with... #BenefitsStreet
- 31) Maxwell sells weed for a living, claims disability allowance for memory loss and learning allowance for being thick as sh*t #BenefitsStreet

Maxwell is the most-named participant in the corpus. His name is the third-highest keyword and occurs 319 times, with additional pronominal references (*he, him, his*) also referring to him. Tweeters suggest Maxwell is unintelligent due to his on-air drug dealing, which some find amusing ('this lad is fucking funny!!'). Indeed, examples (27-31) demonstrate that it is not actually the cannabis use or the drug dealing that is evaluated negatively, but rather Maxwell's apparent lack of awareness that undertaking (alleged) criminal activity on camera is not an intelligent decision to make. In (27) there is an implication through sarcasm that Maxwell has failed through his own personal faults, which is indicative of a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility (Block et al. 2012). His intelligence is also questioned when he buys a dog. Again, it is not dog ownership itself which is evaluated negatively, but rather it is Maxwell's perceived inability to care for the dog that is criticised. No other *Benefits Street II* participant is evaluated so systematically negatively; Maxwell is characterised as the epitome of 'underclass' behaviour.

By contrast, the corpus does include positive evaluations of *Benefits Street II* participants. Such positive evaluations were especially prevalent in the final episode, which included the illness and death of Reagan, a terminally ill child. Tweets responding to this episode were dominated by expressions of sympathy for Reagan and his mother, Julie. This shift away from negative evaluation seems to denote a more positive stance towards benefit claimants and the community shown in *Benefits Street II*, as in (32).

- 32) Aww hope regan gets to see the reindeers. Community spirit. So nice too see.
Rare too. People with the most, give the less #BenefitsStreet
- 33) Julie is an inspiration!! A mothers love is everything ?? #BenefitsStreet

- 34) I'm more than happy to pay my taxes if it helps people like Julie and Regan.
#BenefitsStreet
- 35) #BenefitsStreet Sympathy for Julie and Raegan. Not "dole dossers" but an example of those who truly need benefits

In (33-35) Julie is portrayed as deserving and in true need of government benefits and is explicitly contrasted with 'dole dossers'. Although the positively-evaluated portrayal of benefits claimants' family life and community spirit might thus seem empowering (cf. Baker and McEney, 2015a: 255; Biressi and Nunn, 2016: 479-480), the corpus analysis suggests that such situations were treated by tweeters as exceptions that proved a rule. Thus, Julie's representation and evaluation as a deserving individual actually serves to reinforce wider negative stereotypes about benefits claimants, which are treated as embodied by Maxwell.

Far from solely focusing on the programme and its participants, tweeters also used their responses to *Benefits Street II* as a form of political commentary. Whilst there is some support for government welfare policies (36), the overarching tendency in government-based discourses is to express displeasure, whether it is with the current government (37), opposition parties (38), or named individuals, such as Labour MP Alex Cunningham who appeared on *Benefits Street II*. There are also mentions of the 2015 UK general election (39-40), with the Conservative Party being labelled 'The biggest fraudsters' and *Benefits Street II* described as government-endorsed 'Pure Propaganda TV'.

- 36) Watching this scumbag on #BenefitsStreet collecting his benefits I'm glad the Tories got in. Hopefully no more benefits for him
- 37) New series of #BenefitsStreet on @Channel4 ... Bleak. Expect more poverty on your doorstep in #ToryBritain over the next 5 yrs. ? Thanx4That
- 38) Remember, if #Labour had been in charge for the last 5 years this would be a common sight in more places #BenefitsStreet
- 39) The biggest fraudsters in this country are the tory ones that got elected just a few days ago. #BenefitsStreet
- 40) To celebrate the #Tories win, Iain Duncan Smith proudly brings you a brand new series of #BenefitsStreet #IDS #DWP Pure Propaganda TV

Dissatisfaction with government policy (and how it benefits the rich) has been found in other work on *Benefits Street* (see Anonymous, xxxx in particular). However, what does not occur systematically in our Twitter data are the references to bankers found in Baker and McEney's (2015a) analysis, as part of what they termed a 'rich get richer' discourse. They report that politicians were referred to as *wankers*, *cunts*, and *slimeballs*, yet these terms are not used to evaluate this group of people in our corpus. One interpretation of this is that, as we move further away from the 2008 financial crisis, the behaviour of bankers may be less salient in discussions of benefits receipt. Similarly, there is no systematic use of 'government need(s)' or 'government should' as Baker and McEney found. As *Benefits Street II* aired in the weeks following the election of a Conservative government (who had made it clear that they intended a continued programme of austerity) there may have been less of an impetus to call for government action on benefits.

4.2 Indices of social class

The examples discussed so far suggest audiences of *Benefits Street II* not only evaluated the behaviours of those shown on screen, but used these behaviours and evaluations to

assume particular identities for the *Benefits Street II* participants, which could be generalised to all benefits recipients (with the notable exception of Julie⁴). Particular choices, actions, and conduct, such as selling and consuming cannabis, are repeatedly tweeted about, with these behaviours indexing seemingly essential elements of a homogenous underclass. In this section we interrogate these themes in greater detail, arguing that indexical links are forged between an underclass identity and behaviours that are deemed to be morally repugnant. We follow Silverstein in defining indexicality as the relationship between 'linguistic signs in use' and 'contexts of occurrence' (2003: 195), where the former points to (or indexes) certain aspects of the latter (c.f. Ochs 1992).

The concept of indexicality has been used in sociolinguistic research to investigate the links between regional identity and particular vowel sounds (e.g. Johnstone et al., 2006) and the relationship between specific address terms and young, male identity (Kiesling, 2004). Much of this research has focused on 'second-order' indexicality (Silverstein, 2003), in which the use of certain linguistic features are seen to point to culturally salient stereotypes associated with a particular group. Particularly pertinent for our study is the work of Bennett (2012) who argues that certain popular texts serve to enregister 'chavspeak', which is based on stereotypical behavior and serves to underscore the idea of a distinct underclass of society. Similarly, our analysis draws on second-order indexicality, as we detail recurring icons that tweeters invoke when discussing benefits recipients. It can be argued that the spatial limitations imposed on language by the 140 character limit of Twitter and the contextual expectation that users will share things as they occur 'live' encourages those tweeting about *Benefits Street II* to look for particular 'enregistered' (Agha, 2003) forms of speech, dress, and behaviour. Indeed, the tweeters in our corpus do seem to react in ways that draw heavily on cultural stereotypes.

We argue that specific social characteristics (such as dress, leisure habits, use of taboo lexis, etc.) are drawn upon by tweeters to construct a stereotype of benefits recipients. Those individuals shown in *Benefits Street II* appearing with such items (e.g. sports clothing) or performing particular behaviours (smoking, drinking) are seen as proof positive that the stereotype exists in lived experience. In previous work on *Benefits Street*, such indices of class identities have included teenage pregnancy and ownership of large dogs (Anonymous, xxxx), as well as alcohol consumption and drug use (Anonymous, xxxx). In order to determine whether particular repeated themes were acting as indices of a constructed class identity, we returned to keyword analysis. We generated a list of keywords for each episode (by comparing all the tweets for each episode to Baker and McEnery's reference corpus) in order to focus on direct responses to particular on-screen events which may have been lost in the keyword list for the whole corpus.

We used AntConc to calculate keywords (log-likelihood ≥ 15.00 , min frequency = 5) and manually categorised the top 200 keywords for each episode. In order to focus on the linguistic construction of a particular (class) identity, we eliminated proper nouns, references to government, finance, and function words and used concordance analysis to determine how potentially-ambiguous terms were used. When grouped thematically, the keywords showed that references to drug use, criminal behaviour/deviance, physical appearance/hygiene, and smoking repeated across

⁴ Whilst Julie potentially represents the 'deserving poor' there were no clear trends in the corpus which suggested that tweeters generalised from Julie's experience; she, and her circumstances, were seen as individual.

episodes (Table 3). Additional minor trends included references to food in responses to episodes 2 (*KFC*) and 3 (*fruit, foodbank(s)*), flawed consumerism was alluded to for episodes 2 (*bike, motorbike, helmet*) and 4 (*iphones*), and sex was a category for episode 3 (*pregnant, std, sterilisation, birth*).

Table 3
Overview of keywords per episode

Episode	Drugs	Appearance	Illegal/Deviant	Smoking
1	<i>bong, cannabis, dealer, dealing, Diazepam, drug, drugs selling, weed</i>	<i>orange, Orangedot, sun, sunbed, sunbeds, tan, vest, vests</i>	<i>court</i>	<i>fags, smoke, smoking</i>
2	<i>dealer, drug, drugs</i>	<i>Adidas, balaclava, bin, shirt, washer, washing</i>	<i>fraudulently, nicked, police, stolen</i>	<i>fags, smoking</i>
3	<i>bong, drug, drugs, joint, skunk</i>	<i>teeth</i>	<i>bail, gangster, jail, police, prison, robbery</i>	<i>smoking</i>
4		<i>Thegreatunwashed</i>	<i>fraudulent</i>	<i>smoking</i>
Total	17	16	12	7

When ranked by statistical significance, the sixteen appearance-related keywords were all ranked in the top twenty, demonstrating the apparent importance of this category within the corpus. The analysis of the APPEARANCE category below focuses on episodes 1-3, as ‘thegreatunwashed’, which occurred in response to episode 4, was used as a hashtag in tweets that largely criticised benefit claimants’ moral attitudes, behaviour and spending habits, but did not solely relate to appearance. The APPEARANCE category included references to particular items of clothing or clothing brands (*vest, adidas, balaclava, shirt*), as well as references to tanning, washing clothes, and dental hygiene. *Vest* and *vests* were keywords for episode 1 and were used when Maxwell was shown attending a court-case. Tweeters chastised Maxwell for dressing inappropriately at such a formal occasion (41-45), with some condemning Maxwell for lack of respect (42). In some tweets, the vest was–used metonymically to represent Maxwell (43) and as a way of making connections between receiving benefits and items of clothing (44-45).

- 41) That Maxwell situation is surely a wind up...the vest,shorts,moody gold chains, tipping up to court like that!! #BenefitsStreet
- 42) Furthermore where is your respect? Going to court wearing shorts and a vest?! I really just can't #BenefitsStreet
- 43) Can't understand a word green vest is saying #BenefitsStreet
- 44) Yep.. that will help mate, turn up for court in a tatty vest and T-shirt..43min's late! More brain dead's and spongers on #BenefitsStreet :-//
- 45) Is wearing tacky gold chains, vests and bad hair standard for people on benefits? #BenefitsStreet

These examples share an assumption that there are norms of dress and behaviour for court hearings and that Maxwell and others receiving benefits do not understand these norms, and thus have a lack of respect. Wearing a vest is imbued with cultural meaning and

is seen as representative of being 'brain dead' and a 'sponger'. Similarly, references to the sports brand 'Adidas' were used to criticise Maxwell and his girlfriend, when the latter was depicted as having stolen Maxwell's Adidas t-shirt following a disagreement over whether they should watch a particular TV programme (the *X-Factor*). Although this was an isolated event,—some tweeters seemed to regard the event, and the references to Adidas, as representative of typical behaviour of those on the programme (46-48).

- 46) These 2 creatures arguing over an Adidas t-shirt on Benefits Street pretty much sums the whole program up #BenefitsStreet
- 47) #BenefitsStreet where people fall out over what's on TV and an Adidas t-shirt!
- 48) Haha dirty chavs arguing over an Adidas t-shirt! #BenefitsStreet #chavproblems

The participants' seeming preoccupation with Adidas and TV shows is criticised and is seen as representative of poor and barbarous taste more generally, typical of such 'creatures' (46). In (49), this behaviour is also presented as being indexical of 'chav' behaviour,—with this tweeter—prefacing their comment with knowing laughter ('haha'), referring to people as 'dirty chavs', and closing the tweet with the hashtag '#chavproblems'.

Where some of these keywords were used to negatively typify benefit claimants as lacking respect and taste, others were used to comment on benefit claimants' spending behaviour and apparently misjudged priorities (as noted above). For example, *tan* and words relating to tanning practices (*sun*, *sunbed(s)*, *orange*) were keywords for episode 1. Having a fake tan was seen as an indexical characteristic of benefits recipients, and attending tanning salons was seen as a typical activity for this homogenised group of people. Tweets relating to tanning practices corresponded with scenes from *Benefits Street II* which included people with apparently fake tans (in particular when Maxwell and 'Orange Dot' were on screen). Some tweets displayed anger, condemning those with (fake) tans for poor lifestyle choices and misjudged priorities.

- 49) #BenefitsStreet there in poverty because they choose to do drugs get dodgy tans and smoke yet they moan about having no money?? #sodumb
- 50) At least y'all can afford fake tan though. Essentials eh. ??? #BenefitsStreet
- 51) Pets, tattoos, tanning salons, drugs and fags. All essentials for the munkees on #BenefitsStreet

Like wearing a vest, having a fake tan seemed to stand as a shorthand for typical benefits-recipient behaviour. In such tweets, the people on screen were negatively judged as flawed consumers, with some tweeters comparing their own (presumably more prudent and sensible) behaviour with the apparently more lavish behaviour on *Benefits Street II*. For example, one tweeter sarcastically remarked 'I'm glad my tax payments are paying for his tanning sessions #BenefitsStreet'.

Words relating to cleanliness were also part of the APPEARANCE category. In episodes 2 and 3, *washing*, *washer* (as in 'washing machine') and *teeth* were keywords used to comment on the hygiene habits of benefits claimants. Reacting to scenes of one family installing a washing machine in their house in episode 2, tweets explicitly questioned the ability of benefits recipients to operate washing machines (52) and the priorities of these flawed consumers (53).

- 52) A washing machine? Do the people of Kingston Road know how to use a washing machine? #BenefitsStreet
- 53) #BenefitsStreet 6 months without a washing machine, but not one day without fag and a drink. #priorities

Similarly, poor dental hygiene was invoked as being indexical of people on benefits. Sometimes this indexical association was confined to the individuals on screen (54-55), whilst in other tweets, bad teeth were associated with poverty more generally (56). These comments not only make an indexical link but also consistently display audience members' disgust and outrage at this unclean, 'manky' behaviour.

- 54) What amazes me is the amount of people on #BenefitsStreet with manky / no teeth.... Your on benefits, you get free dental treatment – WTF
- 55) Eeeewwwhh them teeth like tombstones ????? #BenefitsStreet
- 56) Baffles me how people on benefits have such bad teeth, they get free dental care I'd be booking appointments every week #BenefitsStreet
- 57) I know times are hard but you'd think one of these cunts on #BenefitsStreet would have the brains to get some toothbrushes when out thieving

Examples (56) and (57) also-report surprise at the perceived lack of common sense of benefits recipients. Tweeters are 'amazed' and 'baffled' that such people could have bad teeth despite receiving 'free' dental treatment. Thus, there is a perception that there is no excuse for having poor dental health because such treatment is funded by the state. The implication here, perhaps, is that benefits recipients are not deserving of such entitlement (i.e. 'free dental care') because they do not have the common sense to make use of the service. In a similar fashion, (57) comments on this perceived lack of common sense, but in a rather different manner. The assumption encoded in (57) is that benefits recipients habitually go 'out thieving', accepting this action (humorously, perhaps) as something natural to do when 'times are hard'. However, 'these cunts' are criticised for not getting their priorities right in their stealing: they should 'get some toothbrushes' instead of, presumably, stealing items that they do not need. Like the tweets discussed above, (57) makes indexical links between certain aspects of appearance and benefits receipt, while at the same time condemning such behaviour as being caused by bad choice, poor taste, and a warped set of priorities.

Comments on hygiene form part of a wider middle-class discourse that is fixated on the perceived uncleanliness (moral and physical) of the working-classes (Skeggs, 2004).⁵ Tweets about benefits claimants' teeth are thus unsurprising in this respect. By contrast, washing machines are most obviously associated with cleanliness and we would expect, therefore, that the aspiration to own/use one would be construed as positive. However, this is not the case. Instead, such aspiration is taken as a sign of the participants' previous lack of attention to their personal and moral hygiene, and (paradoxically) as indicative of their lack of aspiration. Indeed, an abandoned washing machine is invoked as an index for 'benefits Britain': 'There is always a washing machine in the front yard #benefitBritain #BenefitsStreet'.

⁵ This is not to say, however, that only those tweeting such things identify as members of the middle class.

Thus, the tweeting audience of *Benefits Street II* drew heavily on cultural stereotypes in forging indexical links between individuals' social characteristics and an underclass identity. Indices of negatively-evaluated class identities in this dataset included wearing particular clothing (in particular vests), having a fake tan, smoking and drug use (c.f. Anonymous, xxxx), and poor (dental) hygiene. Individuals' relationships to these items, characteristics or behaviours was seen as evidence of their underclass identity.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper we have contributed to research on audience reception by showing the value of using live tweets as audience response data. This approach has allowed us to investigate the ways in which audiences make sense of mediatised constructions of poverty and helped us gain an understanding of public perspectives on a popular television programme. Using live tweets as data in this way could shed light on audience responses to a particular news item, live statements from politicians and/or public figures, sporting events, and so on. Live tweets allow researchers to work with real-time, real-world data, and are an invaluable source for empirically exploring how viewers conceptualise televisual media and how this meaning-making process is a socially-situated act that may generate insight into social-cultural norms. Twitter is a rich data source for the exploration of the discursive construction of social groups and notions of class, and future researchers may find tweets fruitful for contrastive analysis of the public construction/evaluation of different social groups. However, it must be acknowledged that tweets are also a particular kind of data; not everyone tweets and, furthermore, tweeting may be associated with particular social groups and/or demographics. Although demographic data is not widely available in a usable format, there is some limited data available on the average age of tweeters (see Statista 2017) and there have been some moves in sociology to garner demographic details from tweets (Sloan et al. 2013).

Ultimately, however, research drawing on Twitter should acknowledge that tweets only represent the views of a snapshot of the population. In this case, not all people who watched *Benefits Street* would have tweeted about it, either by choice or because they do not use Twitter. Furthermore, there was no way to ascertain the socio-economic background of the tweeters in our corpus in order to potentially shed light on why they evaluated *Benefits Street II* participants in the way that they did and/or see correlations between demographic groups and wider attitudes. Nevertheless, our use of live tweets allowed us to capture the opinions of large numbers of audience members (there were over 4,000 unique twitter handles in the corpus). Not only is this number beyond the scale of alternative methods of data collection, it demonstrated that a relatively large number of people had something to say about *Benefits Street II* and wanted to make their opinion known on a public platform.

By drawing on a corpus of tweets responding to *Benefits Street II*, we have analysed an unprecedented number of live audience responses to an example of poverty porn. In doing so we have uncovered the three main discourses tweeters drew upon in their reactions to the programme: discourses of flawed consumerism were used alongside scrounger discourse and an underclass discourse which portrayed people as morally repugnant and unaware of, or deliberately not conforming to, wider social norms. There are similarities between our data and that of Baker and McEnery (2015a), but different patterns also emerged from our data. For example, our corpus did not include systematic references to bankers, nor was there an impetus that the government should take action. The latter absence is perhaps explained by the fact that the new UK government had won a majority of the vote partially on the back of pledging to 'find £12 billion from welfare savings'

(Conservative Party, 2015). Thus, those in favour of government initiatives were already expecting benefits cuts to happen.

Overall, we found extensive negative evaluation of benefit claimants in response to *Benefits Street II*. Similarly to Anonymous (xxxx) findings, our analysis showed a trend towards the homogenisation of benefits claimants, with tweeters conceptualising them as constituting a particular, identifiable social group subject to anger, disbelief, and disgust. Wearing particular clothing, having a fake tan, using drugs, and poor (dental) hygiene were seen as evidence of benefits recipients belonging to a wider social underclass, which tweeters conceptualised as comprising of morally repugnant people who are unaware of, or deliberately do not conform to, wider social norms. Benefits claimants were typified as not just scroungers, but as non-human 'creatures' (see example 46) and objectionable beings. Tweeters were more sympathetic to some individuals depicted in *Benefits Street II* (particularly Julie), yet this was not evidence of a 'poor as victims' discourse (c.f. Baker and McEnery 2015a) as Reagan's illness and death were the source of sympathy, not Julie and Reagan's relationship to the welfare system. Rather than evidencing a change of tone in public opinion, the apparent sympathy for Julie and Reagan was not representative of wider trends in the audience's response to benefits recipients. Rather more negatively, the individuals identified as deserving sympathy in episode 4 were used as an exception to the rule in the construction of overarchingly negative stereotype of those on benefits. Ultimately, tweeters did not generalise from examples, such as Julie, who appeared to provide counter evidence for negative stereotypes about benefits recipients, but rather they repeated negative evaluations that drew on indices of a social underclass, which have been found here as well as in other research on *Benefits Street* (c.f. Anonymous, xxxx; Anonymous, xxxx).

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