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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

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## 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 McEney (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.

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## 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 McEney (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. Paterson et al. (2016) 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

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an overarchingly negative stereotype of those on benefits. Similarly, Paterson et al. (2017) 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 Paterson et al., 2016).<sup>1</sup> 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 McEney (2015a) and Paterson et al. (2016, 2017).

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; Paterson et al., 2016).

## 2. Analysing tweets as audience response

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 pas-

sive 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, 2012; Peplow et al., 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 McEney (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 McEney 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

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

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