

A corpus based, class-sensitive contrastive analysis of attitudinal responses to the YouTube series *Britain's Forgotten Men*

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Abstract

In this paper, we investigate audience responses to a controversial sub-genre of reality television: poverty porn. In so doing, we explore a previously neglected perspective in audience response research (i.e., that of the working class). Using a sample of 1,966 comments posted to YouTube, we examine the kinds of attitudes evoked by the BBC Three online series *Britain's Forgotten Men* and the underlying ideation driving such attitudes. Specifically, we contrast comments posted by those who self-identify as working class with those who make no such identification. Making a virtue of a limitation that has long dogged corpus-assisted discourse studies (i.e., being confined to the sentence level), we cut the data into forty-eight mini corpora (consisting of the clauses and clause complexes expressing the respective attitudinal categories) which allowed for the identification of salient differences. For example, whilst self-identified working class commenters used significantly more +TENACITY, +CAPACITY and +PROPENSITY to express a self-focussed discourse of merit and individual achievement, this did not exclude the expression of sympathy towards those on screen, nor criticism of structural factors. Whilst non-identified commenters largely used attitudes to negatively evaluate those on screen, the expression of –SECURITY (with an ideational focus on material deprivation) drove more sympathetic responses. We conclude with a discussion of the implications arising out of this study for researchers and content producers.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, we investigate audience responses to the representations of social class in the BBC Three YouTube series ‘Britain’s Forgotten Men’ (henceforth BFM). The mediated representations of BFM take place within a context in which masculinity receives increasing amounts of popular and academic attention (e.g., Connell [2005], Baker and Levon [2016] and Iveson and Formato [2022]). Within the academic sphere, discussions often revolve around the notion of a ‘crisis of masculinity’ (Roberts, 2013: 761), the existence of multiple masculinities (Connell, 2000: 10), and the presence of inequalities amongst them (Connell, 2005; and Roberts, 2018). Moreover, these discussions shed light on how the denigration of traditional working class masculinity can be attributed to the shifting nature of its primary domain of construction (i.e., paid employment) (Bauman, 1998: 17). This shift has deprived many working class men of the ability to translate masculinity into (relative) social advantage (Connell, 2000: 16), thereby contributing to their classification as a ‘forgotten’ group.

Against this backdrop, BFM follows the plight of several white working class males (henceforth WWCM) living in the Greater Manchester area, and it predominantly focusses on issues such as criminality (including gang violence and drug use), long-term unemployment, homelessness and destitution. The thematic foci of the series firmly place it within the factual entertainment sub-genre of ‘poverty porn’ (Feltwell *et al.*, 2017: 345). Defined as the simplistic and unsympathetic depiction of those living in low-income communities (Feltwell *et al.*, 2017: 345), this label reflects ‘the prurient and voyeuristic nature of such programming as well as the objectification of its subjects’ (Feltwell *et al.*, 2017: 345) for the purpose of entertainment (Paterson *et al.*, 2016: 197). The kind of responses content like BFM arouses amongst audiences has attracted the attention of researchers. Using the Attitude component of the Appraisal framework (Martin and White, 2005), and tools associated with corpus linguistics, we will explore the evaluative responses as well as the underlying ideation of YouTube comments posted in relation to BFM.

The burgeoning body of studies exploring mediated representations of social class in popular entertainment can be broadly split into those that investigate the multi-modal semiotic construction of social class (e.g., Daly [2022]) and, as here, those that consider audience responses to such constructions (e.g., Baker and McEnery [(eds) 2015]). A striking feature of the latter is the absence of social class as a focus in audience responses. Indeed, despite persistent calls to bring social class to the forefront of linguistic discussion (e.g., Paterson *et al.* [2016: 196]), discourse analysts have not systematically explored the phenomenon (van Dijk, 2006: 114). In accordance with the affordances of the data used here, this study contributes to

existing research by conducting a more sensitive analysis in terms of audience demographics (i.e., by isolating the responses of self-identified working class commenters). In so doing, we will contrast the evaluative responses of self-identified working class commenters with non-identified commenters and ask the following question:

What (dis)similarities exist (if any) between self-identified working class commenters and non-identified commenters?

In the following two sections, we will briefly expand upon the core concepts of this paper: the genre of poverty porn and the Appraisal system. The data and approach will then be presented followed by the findings and discussion section. Finally, we will conclude with a discussion of the implications arising out of this study.

2. Literature review

2.1 The genre of 'poverty porn'

Against the backdrop of an 'increasingly unequal society' (Couldry, 2011: 18), the genre of poverty porn has proved to be controversial amongst academics, social commentators, and those represented on screen.³ Amongst other things, researchers have criticised the genre as a site for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes about working class people (Paterson *et al.*, 2016: 27; and Paterson *et al.*, 2017: 42); pre-determining the grounds on which evaluations of those represented on screen are to be judged (e.g., deserving *versus* undeserving poor) (Biressi, 2011: 145; and Harkins and Lugo-Ocando, 2016: 80); and, demonising and homogenising those in receipt of benefits (van der Bom *et al.*, 2018: 44). Couldry (2011: 37) further criticises the genre for attempting to resist scrutiny by presenting itself as 'only entertainment'.

In terms of audience responses to the genre, obvious concerns have been raised as to the potential responses the mediated representations of poverty may evoke towards those portrayed on screen. Baker and McEnery ([eds] 2015: 257), in a study of Twitter discourse, report a degree of sympathy amongst audiences which is essentially expressed as a projected victim discourse (i.e., the poor as unfairly treated by an exploitative system). However, van der Bom *et al.* (2018: 44) do not find widespread public sympathy for the people represented in poverty porn. Indeed, the researchers find that individuals deemed worthy of audience sympathy were constructed as exceptions to a general rule of condemnation. Hancock and Mooney (2013: 111) further report the genre as invoking anger and indignation amongst

³ Cain (2014), cited in van der Bom *et al.* (2018: 36), reports that local residents in Stockton-on-Tees revolted against the presence of the pre-production team for the second series of Channel 4's *Benefits Street*. This ultimately led to a decision to abandon production in that particular location.

viewers towards those represented on screen and functioning to justify simple causative explanations of poverty.

Crucially, none of the aforementioned studies distinguish responses according to the class of the respondents.⁴ Paterson *et al.* (2016), analysing focus group discussions of *Benefits Street*, note a pronounced process of group polarisation in which the achievement of agreement amongst participants took priority over the expression of individual opinions. The researchers found that group condemnation of working-class people, like those shown in *Benefits Street*, were over-ridden by more sympathetic opinions held by individual research participants. Given the social-interactive influences on the negotiation of stance (e.g., ‘group-solidarity and positive face needs’ [van der Bom *et al.*, 2018: 37]), in this paper, we pay attention to the top-level comments⁵ of individuals posting to YouTube which we take as representing the un-negotiated responses to the representations in BFM. It should also be noted that the studies cited thus far report a decidedly other-focussed perspective (i.e., how respondents evaluate those on screen): without pre-empting our results, we identify a pronounced self-focussed response amongst self-identified working class commenters (i.e., the mediated representations in poverty porn engendered a great degree of self-reflection amongst self-identified working class commenters).

2.2 Attitude in digital communication

As already mentioned, digital communication has been noted as highly evaluative (see, for example, Mauranen [2023: 93]). A focus on the use of evaluative language within digital communication has allowed researchers to ‘mine social media as a data source for exploring [the] public mood’ (Zappavigna, 2017: 436) in relation to a range of phenomena. This includes sociopolitical movements on Instagram (Lee and Chau, 2018), mediated global news events on Twitter (Rasmussen, 2015; and Johansson *et al.*, 2018), service provider and online customer communication (Palomino-Manjón, 2018), public responses to the COVID-19 pandemic on Facebook (Andersson, 2022), election campaign discourse on Twitter (Zappavigna, 2011; Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015; and Ross and Caldwell, 2020) and of course, as here, responses to popular entertainment. Since much of social media discourse involves ‘sharing and contesting opinion[s]’ (Zappavigna, 2017: 435), polarised discussions often occur (Johansson *et al.*, 2018: 99) as groups emerge and express diverse opinions (Andersson, 2022: 509). Studies have noted the use of evaluative language to construct ‘positive self-presentation and negative other presentation’ (van Dijk, 2006: 380)—see, for example, Lee and Chau (2018) and Li and Zhu (2020). Andersson (2022: 510) highlights the particular usefulness of Appraisal in examining the various

⁴ van der Bom *et al.* (2018: 44) report that they were unable to make such a distinction in their Twitter data. Perhaps the lack of information concerning social class was due to the limited number of characters afforded by the Twitter platform.

⁵ Top-level comments on YouTube are the initial comments left directly on a video. They are not replies to other comments but are the starting point for any comment thread.

stances of different online groups. The sub-category of Attitude has also been highlighted for its usefulness in analysing opinions and emotions in online comments (see Chiluya and Ifukor [2015: 269]). Such views informed our choice of Appraisal (and Attitude) in this study.

3. Data and approach

The first and second series of BFM aired on BBC Three in August 2017 and June 2018, respectively. Both series contain four episodes each with titles including *Growing Up White & Working Class*, *Crime & Poverty in Manchester*, and *Fighting to Survive*. To date, it has received over 9.5 million combined views on YouTube. We analysed all the comments posted under each of the episodes hosted on YouTube (5,291 comments in total). Excluding a handful of lengthy entries, the average length of a comment was twenty-six words. Perhaps, due to the limited affordances of the platform, excluding occasional emojis, the comments were largely monomodal text-based comments. The adoption of corpus linguistics methodology in this research provided two main benefits. First, it allowed for the precise identification of discourse markers, like the indexical phrase 'I am working class' which helped uncover voices that might have otherwise been overlooked in a 'noisy' corpus. Second, with the support of corpus technology, we were able to create and exploit a set of mini corpora (consisting of clauses and clause complexes). The use of the mini corpora based on clauses/clause complexes allowed us to focus on specific meanings expressed in the various sub-categories and thus generate unexpected nuance in relation to the research topic. For instance, as will be seen, even amongst those who held negative views towards the WWCMS shown on screen, an unexpected driver of sympathy was uncovered.

In line with our central enquiry, all of the comments were split into two corpora: Corpus 1 (which we call the self-identified corpus) contained 524 comments (31,384 tokens) in which the poster explicitly self-identified as working class. Typical constructions of self-identification included direct identity statements (e.g., *I am + working class*), as well as indirect statements pertaining to family background or origins (e.g., *I grew up working class*). The self-identified corpus included comments from those who identify as currently working class as well as those who would be classified as 'working class origin people' (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 40). Corpus 2 (which we call the non-identified corpus) contained 5,271 comments (92,600 tokens) in which no such identification took place. We further down-sampled using stratified random sampling (De Vaus, 2013) and Ransoft,⁶ a web-based sample size calculator. After sampling, the self-identified corpus contained 436 comments (31,254 tokens) and the non-identified corpus contained 1,530 comments (45,905 tokens). The sampled comments were read in full by the researchers.

⁶ See: <http://www.raosoft.com/samplesize.html>.

3.1 Appraisal framework and Attitude

Martin and White's (2005: 1) Appraisal theory provides researchers with a functional framework of evaluative meaning at the level of discourse semantics and is concerned with 'the subjective presence of writers/speakers in texts as they adopt stances'. The framework is further split into three components: Attitude, Engagement and Graduation. In this paper, we will investigate the Attitude component as digital communication is well documented as being used for the expression of evaluative attitudes (Chiluwa and Ifukor, 2015: 269).

As will be explained below, Martin and White (2005: 49) divide Attitude into three main categories: AFFECT which concerns evaluations as expressed by emotional dispositions; JUDGEMENT which concerns evaluations of human behaviours; and APPRECIATION which concerns evaluations of aesthetic criteria. These main categories are further divided into sub-categories with each sub-category divided according to a positive and negative polarity. AFFECT is divided into four main subcategories: (+/-)HAPPINESS, (+/-)SECURITY, (+/-)SATISFACTION and (+/-)INCLINATION. Briefly understood, HAPPINESS covers emotions related to 'affairs of the heart', SECURITY covers emotions related to eco-social well-being, SATISFACTION covers emotions related to the pursuit of goals, and INCLINATION covers emotions related to the desire or fear of the conditions of future events. JUDGEMENT is further divided into assessments of human behaviours concerned with social esteem and sanction. Judgments of social esteem contain the sub-categories of (+/-)NORMALITY, (+/-)CAPACITY and (+/-)TENACITY. NORMALITY covers judgments of usuality, CAPACITY covers judgments of capability, and TENACITY covers judgments of determination. Judgments of social sanction involve (+/-)VERACITY and (+/-)PROPRIETY. VERACITY covers judgments of honesty, and PROPRIETY covers judgments of ethical standards. APPRECIATION is concerned with reactions to stimuli and contains the following three sub-categories: (+/-)REACTION, (+/-)COMPOSITION and (+/-)VALUATION. REACTION concerns evaluations of attractiveness, COMPOSITION covers evaluations of balance and complexity, and VALUATION covers evaluations of worthiness. These categories are exemplified in Table 1.

3.2 Analytical process

The analytical process comprised a multi-level analysis involving three parts: identification of attitudes, significance testing of frequency results, and investigation of the underlying ideation.

3.2.1 Identification of attitudes

Using the taxonomy in Martin and White (2005), the comments in the self-identified and non-identified corpora were closely read and annotated for the expression of attitudes. Table 1 provides examples of attitudinal responses to the BFM Series and demonstrates the application of the analytical framework in this study.

Attitudinal Marker		Examples from corpus
AFFECT	(+/-)HAPPINESS	<i>Happy for Jimmy.</i>
	(+/-)SECURITY	<i>People have no future job prospects.</i>
	(+/-)SATISFACTION	<i>I'm proud of where I come from.</i>
	(+/-)INCLINATION	<i>People do want to work.</i>
JUDGMENT	(+/-)NORMALITY	<i>They are rarely given the opportunity to move upwards.</i>
	(+/-)CAPACITY	<i>They are incapable of holding a job.</i>
	(+/-)TENACITY	<i>We work day and night....</i>
	(+/-)VERACITY	<i>The government didn't fail them.</i>
	(+/-)PROPRIETY	<i>...[Poor] but got money for weed...</i>
APPRECIATION	(+/-)REACTION	<i>Very good series</i>
	(+/-)COMPOSITION	<i>It's a clear depiction of the disparity.</i>
	(+/-)VALUATION	<i>Education is one of the most valuable things.</i>

Table 1: Taxonomy of Attitude used in the present study (adapted from Martin and White [2005]).

The clause was treated as the basic analytical unit. Martin and White (2005) highlight that it is common for multiple attitude markers to appear in a clause. As a result, where necessary, we coded more than one attitude into a clause (see Example 1).

(1) They had a *horrible* childhood [-reac] with *poor* parents [-cap] ...

The clause in Example 1 demonstrates the use of two attitude markers. The commenter first expresses -REACTION to classify the overall perceived nature of the childhood endured by those on screen. The commenter also expresses -CAPACITY to classify the parents of those shown on screen as lacking.

Each sub-category in the taxonomy above, was split according to a positive and negative polarity meaning that we had twenty-four sub-categories. Both inscribed (explicit) and invoked (implicit) attitudes were identified in our corpus. Inscribed attitudes are embodied by 'explicitly evaluative items' (Martin and White, 2005: 76). For instance, in *Glad for Jimmy*, the word *Glad* is an explicit expression of the sub-category of +HAPPINESS. Invoked attitudes refer to attitudes, the interpretation of which 'depends on reading position' (Martin, 2020: 21). As suggested in Martin (2020: 21), linguistic strategies include lexical metaphors (e.g., *class war*), interjections (e.g., *PMSL*), curses (e.g., *what the fuck*), and intensifiers (e.g., *soooooo*). During the annotation processes, twenty per cent of the comments from each sample corpus were randomly selected for double-checking by

each annotator. Any differences identified were discussed as a group: the most frequent disagreement occurred in relation to the expression of invoked Attitude involving sarcasm. Take the following example:

- (2) The lads speak *excellent English* [–reac]. It's *streetspeak* [–reac].
Unfortunately [–hap], it won't get them a decent job! [–cap].

The disagreement in Example 2 revolved around whether the phrase *excellent English* should be annotated with a positive or negative REACTION. Although the adjective *excellent* typically conveys positive approval, in this context, it is juxtaposed with the rest of the comment that derogates the individuals' speech as *streetspeak*. Considering the overall negative context, we decided to annotate *excellent English* as negative (–REACTION) despite its typically positive meaning. All instances of language use suspected of involving sarcasm or irony were subsequently discussed as a group.

3.2.2 Significance testing of frequency distributions

Log-likelihood (LL) tests were used to identify significant differences in the frequency use of the attitudinal sub-categories in the self-identified corpus and the non-identified corpus. Calculated from the raw frequency of a linguistic phenomenon in a corpus and the corpus size, an LL-score denotes the relative over-use or under-use of the raw frequency in a corpus compared to the raw frequency in a comparative corpus (see Berger *et al.* [2017], Yadava *et al.* [2008] and Hardie and Ibrahim [2021]). The test was conducted using the UCREL log-likelihood wizard⁷ which is extensively used in corpus-assisted discourse studies (e.g., Marín-Arrese [2021]). To validate the accuracy of the LL tests, we employed an effect size metric. The minimal effect size, indicated by the percentage difference (%DIFF), precluded us from asserting a statistically significant outcome that would have negligible practical significance (Gabrielatos, 2018). We applied a critical value of 6.63 ($p < 0.01$) to determine statistical significance between the two corpora (as used in Archer and Lansley [2015]).

3.2.3 Investigation of underlying ideation of attitudes

Forty-eight⁸ mini corpora were compiled from the clauses that expressed each sub-category of Attitude considered here. This allowed for an examination of the underlying ideation driving the discrete evaluations without noise from the wider corpus. We ran a word list on each mini corpus in order to identify the frequent ideational considerations driving the evaluations. We excluded grammatical items from our analysis and focussed on the most frequent content words (consisting of nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs) as well as

⁷ See: <https://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>.

⁸ The self-identified and non-identified corpora combined contained twenty-four basic sub-categories which when split into positive/negative polarity categories equals a total of forty-eight mini corpora.

pronouns and personal determiners. The inclusion of pronouns and personal determiners allowed us to qualitatively explore the speaker orientation of the evaluative clauses (i.e., self-focussed or other-focussed). In self-focussed evaluative clauses, the commenter was explicitly visible and the focus of the evaluation. In other-focussed evaluative clauses, a party other than the current commenter was the focus.

4. Analysis and findings

In this section we will present the findings from the quantitative analysis of attitudinal markers. This will be followed by a more qualitatively led analysis of the highly significant results between the self-identified and non-identified corpora.

As can be seen in Table 2, the overall frequency distribution of the three main categories was similar in both corpora; JUDGEMENT markers were the most frequently used attitudinal category (the significant differences of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section). It should be noted that the evaluative judgments predominantly focussed on wwcms. Sometimes commenters expressed evaluative judgments about other things such as politicians, policymakers and social others (e.g., immigrants). APPRECIATION markers were the least frequently used attitudinal category. Even though the overall distribution of the attitudinal categories was similar, as will be discussed in the next section, more detailed analysis disclosed salient differences with regard to the underlying ideation driving such attitudinal evaluations, as well as the speaker orientation.

Due to limits on space, we cannot detail each sub-category here; however, we will briefly discuss the most frequently used sub-category with a non-significant difference between the two sub-corpora. Both commenters in the non-identified and self-identified corpora used +INCLINATION to express an other-focussed desire for the wwcms to change their outlook and approach to life (e.g., value education). When non-identified commenters used -INCLINATION, they expressed worry that British society will be negatively impacted in the future by the escalating problems of wwcms. When commenters in the self-identified corpus used -INCLINATION they expressed fear that inter-generational patterns would become entrenched amongst many wwcms. Commenters from both corpora used +NORMALITY to project a cultural acceptance of certain behaviours (e.g., crime) amongst wwcms. When employing -NORMALITY, both groups of commenters distanced themselves from the behaviours seen as normative amongst wwcms (e.g., consuming cannabis). When expressing +REACTION, self-identified commenters positively evaluated aspects of their educational experience that positively contributed to their life trajectory (e.g., encouraging teachers). As will be seen, the theme of education was pronounced in the self-identified corpus. Non-identified commenters used +REACTION to discuss potential

Attitudinal marker	Annotators	Self-identified corpus		Non-identified corpus		LL score	Significance	Percent DIFF
		Raw Freq.	Rel. Freq.	Raw Freq.	Rel. Freq.			
AFFECT	HAPPINESS	[+hap]	70	22.40	127	27.67	-2.05	-19.04
		[-hap]	192	61.43	404	88.01	-17.47	-30.20
	SECURITY	[+sec]	2	0.64	3	0.65	0.00	-2.08
		[-sec]	112	35.84	262	57.07	-17.96	-37.21
	SATISFACTION	[+sat]	8	2.56	3	0.65	4.68	291.67
		[-sat]	83	26.56	100	21.78	1.77	21.91
	INCANTATION	[+inc]	73	23.36	133	28.97	-2.23	-19.38
		[-inc]	19	6.08	35	7.62	-0.64	-20.27
	Total		559	178.86	1067	232.44	-25.82	-23.05
			32	10.24	32	6.97	2.35	46.88
JUDGEMENT	NORMALITY	[+norm]	37	11.84	36	7.84	3.08	50.96
		[-norm]	102	32.64	48	10.46	46.15	212.11
	CAPACITY	[+cap]	102	32.64	207	45.09	-7.38	-27.63
		[-cap]	129	41.27	129	28.10	9.47	46.88
	TENACITY	[+ten]	48	15.36	83	18.08	-0.82	-15.06
		[-ten]	10	3.20	20	4.36	-0.66	-26.56
	VERACITY	[+ver]	91	29.12	231	50.32	-20.95	-42.14
		[-ver]	148	47.35	141	30.72	13.47	54.17
	PROPRIETY	[+prop]	255	81.59	812	176.89	-130.72	-53.87
		[-prop]	954	305.24	1739	378.83	-29.29	-19.42
	Total							

Table 2 (continued on following page): The distribution of attitudinal markers. (Note: ‘Rel. freq.’ is the normalised frequency, calculated per 10,000 words.)

Attitudinal marker	Annotators	Self-identified corpus		Non-identified corpus		LL score	Significance	Percent DIFF
		Raw Freq.	Rel. Freq.	Raw Freq.	Rel. Freq.			
APPRECIATION	REACTION	50	16.00	66	14.38	0.32		11.27
	COMPOSITION	98	31.36	144	31.37	0.00		-0.04
	VALUATION	2	0.64	0	0.00	3.61		0.00
		4	1.28	2	0.44	1.67		193.75
		30	9.60	43	9.37	0.01		2.47
		22	7.04	44	9.59	-1.44		-26.56
	Total	58	18.56	89	19.39	0.02		-4.28
	Self-identified versus Non-identified	1,571	502.66	2,895	630.65	53.49	$p<0.01$	-20.3

Table 2: (continued from previous page): The distribution of attitudinal markers.

Sub-category	Content words
+TENACITY	<i>I</i> (147), <i>work</i> (104), <i>my</i> (54), <i>it</i> (25), <i>hard</i> (21), <i>job</i> (20), <i>up</i> (19), <i>get</i> (15), <i>you</i> (13), <i>got</i> (12)
+CAPACITY	<i>I</i> (128), <i>my</i> (47), <i>have</i> (36), <i>got</i> (19), <i>now</i> (19), <i>own</i> (15), <i>university</i> (15), <i>job</i> (14), <i>went</i> (13), <i>well</i> (11)
+PROPRIETY	<i>I</i> (103), <i>my</i> (49), <i>they</i> (26), <i>me</i> (25), <i>people</i> (24), <i>never</i> (19), <i>good</i> (17), <i>parents</i> (16), <i>help</i> (14), <i>go</i> (11)

Table 3: Top ten most frequent content words in the +TENACITY, +CAPACITY and +PROPRIETY mini corpora.

educational opportunities that could benefit WWCMS. In the use of –REACTION, both non-identified and self-identified commenters negatively evaluated the impact of low employment rates amongst WWC. In the following section, we will discuss the significant differences in more detail.

4.1 Use of JUDGEMENT by self-identified working class commenters

Self-identified working-class commenters used significantly more +TENACITY, +CAPACITY and +PROPRIETY. These commenters overwhelmingly used +TENACITY and +CAPACITY to express a discourse of personal success: (past) effort results in (present) achievement. In other words, self-identified working-class commenters expressed JUDGEMENT as self-focussed praise.

4.1.1 +TENACITY

As explained above, the sub-category of TENACITY concerns the evaluation of resolve – for example, how ‘determined, courageous, dependable’ (Swain, 2012: 83) a person is judged as being. As will become apparent, clauses containing +TENACITY predominantly expressed ideas concerned with personal agency and mindset. The first-person pronoun *I* was the most frequently used word in the +TENACITY mini corpus, reflecting the self-focussed nature of this category. It was used with the past tense version of activity verbs like *worked* and mental verbs like *chose* to index the poster in the past as having consciously exerted effort to improve their circumstances (e.g., ‘I chose to work hard...’). The possessive *my* and the noun *job* further detailed the effort put into gainful employment (e.g., ‘...worked my ass off...’). The activity verb *get* often appeared in phrasal verbs (e.g., *get up* and *get out*) that detailed the mindset that motivated their behaviour (i.e., striving for upward mobility). The past tense form of the activity verb *got* also referred to past employment endeavours of the commenters (e.g., ‘...got any job...’). The dummy pronoun *it*, the inclusive second-person pronoun *you*, and the adverb *hard* featured in general statements of belief (‘...it’s about working hard...’). Such beliefs stressed the role of determination and choice as key to self-empowerment and avoiding the circumstances portrayed on screen.

Clauses and clause complexes expressing +TENACITY typically preceded the expression of +CAPACITY.

4.1.2 +CAPACITY

The sub-category of CAPACITY concerns the evaluation of an individual's ability to do something, or not, as the case may be (Smith and Adendorff, 2014: 3). Clauses expressing +CAPACITY, in the self-identified corpus, typically referred to past and present achievements of the commenter. As with the +TENACITY mini corpus, the most frequently occurring word was the personal pronoun *I*—again showing a pronounced self-focussed orientation. The first-person pronoun *I* was used with the past tense form of activity verbs such as *earned*, *went* and *did* to index the poster as having achieved something in the past (e.g., 'I did well'). All instances of the verb *went* involved representations about the commenters' successful entry into higher education (e.g., 'I went to university'). The commenters linked their university education to furnishing them with access to more lucrative careers (e.g., '...I have a good job'). The first-person pronoun *I* and possessive *my* were used in conjunction with the existence verbs *have* and *got* to index the poster in the present as having achieved a social outcome, like independent wealth, career success or property ownership (e.g., 'I have my own home'). The temporal deictic *now* placed statements of achievement in the present; it also expressed an implicit calculus: 'I did X, now, I have Y'.

4.1.3 +PROPRIETY

The sub-category of PROPRIETY concerns the evaluation of an individual's ethics (Smith and Adendorff, 2014: 4). In their expression of +PROPRIETY, the self-identified commenters were highly aware of how behaviours and ethics acquired during early socialisation functioned as enabling factors in their life trajectories (i.e., there was no attempt to play down such privileges).⁹ The +PROPRIETY mini corpus contained a mix of self-focussed and other-focussed items. The first-person pronoun *I* was used in conjunction with forms like the adverb *never*, negated contraction *didn't*, and the past participle of the aspectual verb *kept* to describe an ethics of forbearance (e.g., 'abstaining from alcohol and drugs') and discipline (e.g., 'I kept out of trouble...'). The possessive determiner *my* and the collective pronoun *they* were used in relation to family members (i.e., *parents*, *mum* and *dad*) and social others (e.g., *teachers*) who provided a *good* example or guidance perceived by the commenters as useful (e.g., '...my parents instilled discipline...'); the pronoun *me* was used to refer to the commenter as receiver of such guidance (e.g., '...pushed good values onto me'). The collective noun *people*, the causation verb *help* and the activity verb *go* were used to detail a sense of social conscience held by the commenters towards others in need—that is, an expression of the desire to help (e.g., 'I try and help...'). A key point to note is

⁹ Friedman and Laurison (2019: 91) observe the opposite trend amongst those from advantaged backgrounds who the researchers report as downplaying privilege.

that experiences of sacrifice and discipline of the self-identified commenters did not exclude a sense of sympathy towards those shown on screen.

When expressing +TENACITY and +CAPACITY, non-identified commenters also made representations concerned with effort and achievement. However, these clauses involved the attribution of effort (e.g., ‘works his balls off’) and achievement (e.g., ‘has made something of himself’) to social others within the commenters’ personal spheres (e.g., ‘lads I know’), and set up a negative contrast with the on-screen wwcms. There was a noticeable gendered aspect of such representations (i.e., they focussed on men) although we must remember that the series focusses on male subjects. The underlying idea of such representations was essentially the same as that expressed by the self-identified working class commenters – that there is a formula for escaping the circumstances portrayed on screen. When expressing +PROPRIETY, non-identified commenters positively evaluated the behaviour of certain on-screen characters (e.g., *Jimmy* and *Mikey*). As reported in other studies, the characters that gained sympathy from the commenters were those who displayed certain characteristics of being aspirational (van der Bom *et al.*, 2018) and those perceived as deserving of state assistance (Paterson *et al.*, 2016; and van der Bom *et al.*, 2018).

4.2 Use of JUDGEMENT by non-identified commenters

Non-identified commenters used significantly more –CAPACITY, –VERACITY and –PROPRIETY.

Sub-category	Content words
–CAPACITY	<i>you</i> (35), <i>have</i> (21), <i>people</i> (21), <i>they</i> (18), <i>homeless</i> (12), <i>money</i> (12), <i>education</i> (11), <i>skills</i> (10), <i>job</i> (9), <i>family</i> (8)
–VERACITY	<i>not</i> (47), <i>they</i> (40), <i>are</i> (40), <i>working</i> (34), <i>class</i> (31), <i>i</i> (30), <i>you</i> (23), <i>it</i> (21), <i>job</i> (19), <i>men</i> (17)
–PROPRIETY	<i>they</i> (191), <i>you</i> (167), <i>people</i> (148), <i>are</i> (121), <i>it</i> (111), <i>have</i> (88), <i>their</i> (86), <i>your</i> (85), <i>not</i> (75), <i>get</i> (68)

Table 4: Top ten most frequent content words in the –CAPACITY, –VERACITY and –PROPRIETY mini corpora.

4.2.1 –CAPACITY

The use of –CAPACITY by non-identified commenters was largely other-focussed (i.e., evaluated the wwcms on screen). Reflecting the other-focussed nature of this mini corpus, the second-person pronoun *you* was the most frequently used word in the –CAPACITY corpus. The pronoun *you*, and the plural pronoun *they*, were used with the existence verb *have* to attribute negative characteristics to those on screen (e.g., *lack of intelligence*, *lack of education/skills* or *lack of money*). As found by I Campos (2014: 13) these projected characteristics were seen as justifying the circumstances endured

by those on screen. Whilst the collective noun *people* was used in a similar manner, it was also used to refer to working class people more generally which highlights the homogenisation (and often negative generalisation) of social groups that can occur amongst viewers of this kind of content (see van der Bom *et al.* [2018: 44]). The noun *job* was used to make representations about the lack of an ability to gain employment. The noun *family* was used to express a lack of family support enjoyed by those on screen and to some extent constituted a sympathetic stance (i.e., recognition of the limiting conditions faced by those on screen). The adjective *homeless* was used in relation to a specific character (i.e., Chris) rather than homeless people in general.

As with the results for +CAPACITY, when self-identified working class commenters expressed –CAPACITY it was predominantly in relation to self (i.e., self-focussed in orientation). Most of the clauses expressed representations of past adverse conditions faced by the commenters (e.g., ‘I grew up poor’). Some commenters expressed negativity in regard to the consumption practices of those shown on screen (e.g., ‘I can’t afford to [consume cannabis/buy designer clothes/drink alcohol]’). It is well attested that focussing on the spending habits of those depicted in poverty porn leads to negative evaluations (see, for example, Lockyer [2010]).

4.2.2 –VERACITY

When expressing this category of JUDGEMENT, the non-identified commenters evaluated the identity of the on-screen WWCMS. This amounted to a kind of process of identity delegitimisation (see Bucholtz and Hall [2005: 601]) in which aspects of the identities of the on-screen WWCMS were refuted by commenters. The adverb *not* was the most frequently used word in the –VERACITY mini corpus reflecting the delegitimising nature of the comments. The plural noun *they*, adverb *not* and *copula* verb *are* were used in constructions that struck at the identities of the WWCMS. This principally involved a denial of working class status (e.g., ‘... they are not working class, they are underclass’). As reported by Tranchese (2019: 3), the concept of ‘underclass’ carries associations of illegitimacy, violent crime, and a refusal to work. According to this perspective, the ‘underclass’ is not impoverished due to socioeconomic inequality but, rather, due to welfare provisions that inadvertently discourage full-time employment. The conditions for qualifying as working class were explicated with the use of the second-person pronoun *you* and verbs like *have* (e.g., ‘you need to have a job [to be working class]’). Likewise, the plural noun *men* was used to deny the gender identity of those on screen. Such representations ranged from outright denials (e.g., ‘they aren’t men’) to the use of scare quotes (e.g., ‘these “men”’) suggesting those on screen are a mere approximation of men. This seemingly reflected an outdated stereotype of men as economic providers. Although such comments clearly attacked the identity of those on screen, we may also view them as attacking the truthfulness of the metalanguage of the series. As already stated, the titular banner under which the series ran was *Britain’s Forgotten Men*, with various episodic subtitles including references to the *Working Class*. Although the

series did not explore, in any great detail, the structural factors behind the conditions shown on screen, the men themselves often gave explanations for their circumstances.¹⁰ The pronoun *it* was often used by commenters to encapsulate and refute such explanations (e.g., ‘it’s not lack of opportunity’) representing a kind of dialogism between the commenter and the wvcm featured on screen. The first-person pronoun *I* occurred with communication verbs (e.g., *say*) and mental verbs (e.g., *think*) and functioned to express personal opinions about those on screen.

When expressing –VERACITY, self-identified working class commenters reacted to the hyperbolic nature of the on-screen depictions of poverty (e.g., ‘I’ve never seen this behaviour’). Some claimed to live in the same location where the series was filmed, thus expressing a kind of resistance discourse to the stigmatisation of deprived areas that can contribute to the marginalisation of local inhabitants (see Wacquant [2008: 238]).

4.2.3 –PROPRIETY

The use of –PROPRIETY by non-identified commenters was predominantly other-focussed in orientation. When expressing –PROPRIETY, non-identified commenters used the plural pronouns *they*, *you* and *people* to refer to the on screen wvcms. Commenters projected a negative set of ethical qualities onto those on screen (e.g., ‘they don’t want responsibility’) often using the existence verbs *are* and *have*. The adverb *not* was often used to describe what those on screen were failing to do which was contributing to their condition (e.g., ‘...not even looking for work’). Such representations expressed a violation of an implied ethical norm (i.e., ‘people should be looking for work’). Commenters made representations about the consequences and ethics of procreation amongst the poor (e.g., ‘why...have 6 kids’). This reflects previous research that has shown that the genre of poverty porn can evoke a eugenics type response in viewers – that is, those in poverty should not be allowed to procreate (see Harkins and Lugo-Ocando [2016: 87] and Cope [2021: 25]). The determiner *their* was often used to express specific criticism of parenting practices shown on screen. The determiner *your* was used to express imperative directives in response to the behaviours depicted on screen (e.g., ‘clean your room’) with a particular focus on consumption (e.g., ‘do not spend your money on...’). As already mentioned above, the genre of poverty porn has often focussed on, and thus generated criticism of, the spending habits of those featured in such programming (see Paterson *et al.* [2017: 25]). Lockyer (2010: 124) discusses how spending habits are even used to reinforce other invidious prejudicial beliefs (e.g., such groups lack the intelligence to see through vacuous consumerism). The dummy pronoun *it* was used to express generalisations regarding the causes behind the conditions faced by those on screen (e.g., ‘...it’s the parenting...’). The activity verb *get* was most often used as an imperative (e.g., ‘get a job’) reflecting a wider social narrative in which gainful employment is treated as

¹⁰ See Duggan (2015: 34–5) for a discussion as to how such explanations themselves may reinforce the stigmas attached to unemployment and poverty.

an undisputed positive (see Tranchese [2019: 23]). Such comments were often expressed with co-text indicating that those on screen were lazy or immoral for living off benefits to 'avoid' work. They also represented the totalising view of gainful employment as the answer to all of the problems shown on screen. Friedman and Laurison (2019: 179) similarly observe how the concept of social mobility is touted as a panacea for the problems faced by the working classes.

When self-identified working class commenters expressed –PROPRIETY this was most often found as imperative directives in relation to specific parenting practices (e.g., 'don't feed your kids crap...') and the behaviour of some of the younger people featured in the series (e.g., 'don't hang around the streets').

4.3 Use of AFFECT by non-identified commenters

As already stated, AFFECT is essentially concerned with the expression of emotion (Martin and White, 2005: 35). Non-identified commenters expressed significantly more –HAPPINESS and –SECURITY.

Sub-category	Content words
–HAPPINESS	<i>I</i> (126), <i>it</i> (51), <i>is</i> (40), <i>me</i> (34), <i>lol</i> (29), <i>sorry</i> (26), <i>have</i> (21), <i>no</i> (21), <i>feel</i> (19), <i>sad</i> (19)
–SECURITY	<i>it</i> (50), <i>they</i> (46), <i>is</i> (43), <i>people</i> (43), <i>are</i> (37), <i>have</i> (30), <i>I</i> (29), <i>you</i> (22), <i>their</i> (19), <i>get</i> (18)

Table 5: Top ten most frequent content words in the –HAPPINESS and –SECURITY mini corpora.

4.3.1 –HAPPINESS

The sub-category of HAPPINESS is a semantic resource for the expression of emotions like joy and love in its positive polarity and in its negative polarity, sadness and rage (Gallardo and Ferrari, 2010: 3174). The –HAPPINESS mini corpus was polarised between clauses that expressed sympathy, and those that expressed criticism, towards the circumstances and people shown on screen. Sympathetic comments were not an exception to the rule (*contra* see, van der Bom *et al.* [2018]). The first-person pronoun *I* was used to index the commenter as an opinion giver. Those expressing sympathetic positions frequently used the first person pronoun *I* with the emotional state predicate *feel* plus complement clauses expressing sorrow (e.g., 'I feel sad...'). Those expressing unsympathetic positions frequently expressed a lack of sympathy with the use of the first-person pronoun *I* plus the verb *have* plus the negated form *no* plus adjectives expressing emotional states like understanding (e.g., 'I have no sympathy...'). In accordance with the polarised nature of the mini corpus, the pronoun *it* was often used to express sympathetic and unsympathetic sentiment in more objective/inter-subjective

terms (e.g., ‘it is sad...’). The object pronoun *me* was used to describe emotional and physical reactions to the circumstances depicted on screen (e.g., ‘it makes me angry...’). The exclamation *LOL* and other variants of inscribed laughter (e.g., *haha* and *LMAO*¹¹) occurred alongside unsympathetic mocking comments (e.g., ‘Cringed so bad LOL’).

When self-identified working class posters expressed –HAPPINESS, it was predominantly sympathetic to the plight of those depicted on screen. This included the expression of sadness for the perceived hopelessness of the situation and an acknowledgment that society has overlooked wwcms. Some reflexively expressed anger at the lack of sympathy expressed by others in the comments section. Once more, it is important to note that whilst the self-identified working class commenters expressed a pronounced individualist, meritocratic stance,¹² for the most part, this did not exclude the expression of sympathy.

4.3.2 –SECURITY

Again, the category of SECURITY is a semantic resource for the expression of emotions like comfort and trust in its positive polarity, as well as anxiety and fear in its negative polarity (Hidalgo-Tenorio and Benítez-Castro, 2021: 336). The –SECURITY mini corpus contained largely sympathetic comments. The dummy pronoun *it* and the predicative verb *is* were used to sympathetically summarise the conditions faced by those on screen with a particular focus on the cycles of intergenerational poverty (e.g., ‘it’s an uphill battle’) and the structural factors faced by the working class in general (e.g., ‘there is no industry left’). The plural pronoun *they* and the collective noun *people* used with the existence verbs *are* and *have* expressed sympathetic inter-personal sentiment (e.g., ‘...they feel like nobody cares...’) and the maligned economic status of those on screen (e.g., ‘[they] have no future job prospects’). The pronoun *you* was used to index the current poster expressing interpretive opinions of the conditions shown on screen (e.g., ‘you get a sense of hopelessness...’). Some commenters expressed concern with regards to the escalation of the issues shown on screen (e.g., ‘poverty is a growing problem...’) with frequent calls for the government to do more to address the situation (e.g., ‘it needs to be sorted...’).

When self-identified working class commenters expressed –SECURITY, they expressed similar themes in regards to the escalating nature of the problem (e.g., ‘getting worse by the second...’) and the structural factors causing poverty (e.g., ‘...the mines closed...’). Self-identified working class commenters frequently made representations about the threat to social stability caused by growing poverty which included representations of social ruination (e.g., ‘...this country is going down’): a lack of personal security endured by those on screen was equated with the eventual compromised security of all members of society (e.g., ‘...the uk is finished’).

¹¹ Laugh My Ass Off.

¹² Although we submit that care must be taken when using such labels (see Conclusion).

5. Conclusion

We will conclude with a discussion of the limitations and implications that arise from the approach and findings of this study, as well as directions for future research.

An alternative qualitative approach could have easily been employed in this study: however, utilising a corpus-based approach offered benefits and, perhaps more importantly, insight for researchers working with large corpora. The sheer size of mega-corpora may mean that marginalised voices are often lost. Our approach gives voice to the voiceless – in this case, revealing the perspective of (self-identified) working class people. A rudimentary search through a corpus for identity markers (e.g., 'I am a gay man...') would allow analysts to easily replicate the approach taken here and thus avoid unnecessarily overlooking marginalised perspectives. The creation and analysis of mini corpora further allowed us to magnify discourse categories and generate unexpected nuance. In a certain sense, the use of mini corpora made a virtue of a limitation that has long dogged discourse-assisted corpus studies (i.e., being confined to the sentence level). Whilst researchers will undoubtedly strive to find innovative ways to go beyond the confines of the concordance window, perhaps, we should not be too hasty to forget that rich insight lies at the micro-level.

A major limitation of this study relates to the opacity of the identity of the commenters. Whilst the data allows us to ascertain whether some commenters chose to disclose their working class status or not, the data do not allow us to discern much more in terms of social identity (e.g., middle class or gender). Future research could explore audience responses to poverty porn amongst members of different social classes and genders. In terms of the latter, it would be interesting to see whether poverty porn evokes the 'working class hero' type discourse, which Lawler (1999) sees as gendered male, amongst working class females. With regard to the non-identified commenters, we cannot ascertain whether this group did indeed contain working class people. At the very least, our data show that the explicit disclosure of working class status by commenters entailed substantive differences in attitudes, underlying ideological representations, and speaker orientation. In terms of the latter, the greater self-focus of the self-identified commenters may reflect their marginalised positions in wider society. From this perspective, the expression of self-focussed evaluative clauses allowed the commenters to discuss themselves and make their experiences known.¹³ Finally, from the comments it was clear that many of the self-identified working class commenters regarded themselves as having achieved a degree of social mobility; however, we do not know whether this was relative to the wwcms shown on screen or if they had actually moved social class. Nevertheless, the dearth of research reflecting working class perspectives

¹³ We thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this insightful suggestion.

acted as a disincentive for being too discerning between currently working class people and ‘working class origin people’ (Friedman and Laurison, 2019: 40). Future research could look to make finer distinctions within groups of working class people.

It is clear from our findings that the kind of mediated representations of social class found in poverty porn do indeed invite negative responses such as censure, anger and accusations of self-inflicted poverty. Such findings are well-established in the literature. However, the use of mini corpora allowed us to remove the noise from the wider data and generate unexpected nuance. Firstly, the typical responses reported in the literature were infrequent amongst self-identified working class commenters. Secondly, even amongst the non-identified commenters, the mini corpora method uncovered an unexpected driver of sympathy (i.e., the emotional category of SECURITY). The fundamental human need for security seemingly drove the expression of largely sympathetic comments by non-identified commenters. Future research could explore such representations amongst non-working class people (e.g., middle class) to further validate this finding. Producers and editors looking to redress problematic representations of the past might consider focussing more on the material deprivation and concomitant struggles faced by many people featured in poverty porn. Content producers may also desist from inflammatory representations like those perceived as conspicuous consumption (e.g., recreational drug use) which play into wider narratives regarding the welfare state as ‘too generous’, and perpetuate stereotypes of a ‘culture of welfare dependency’ (Tranchese, 2019: 4). Research amongst television development, production and commissioning professionals working in factual entertainment, like that conducted by Bednarek (2019) amongst screenwriters, may aid our understanding behind the creative choices often made within the genre of poverty porn.

Isolating the comments from self-identified working class individuals allowed us to uncover the fact that they predominantly reacted to the mediated representations of social class in BFM with a self-focussed discourse of merit and achievement. The formulae for escaping poverty by such commenters did not exclude sympathy for the wwcms shown on screen nor criticism of systemic factors (e.g., government policy). In other words, the self-identified working class commenters were seemingly able to hold a tension of opposites between the notions of individual agency and structurally disadvantaging conditions. It is crucial to note that we do not see the discourse put forward as simple rugged individualism. Given the chronic under-representation of working class people and their perspective in academia (see Friedman and Laurison [2019: 31–3]), researchers perhaps need to be more sensitive when labelling such discourse as neo-liberal and those who espouse it as ‘good citizens of neoliberalism’ (Cope, 2021: 29). The use of such labels could have the unintended consequence of suppressing working class thought and may not reflect underlying nuance. Whilst researchers have resoundingly debunked the notion of meritocracy and the ways in which it is unfairly used to explain differential outcomes (see, for example, Friedman and Laurison

[2019: 88]), further research should explore how discourses of merit function within marginalised communities.

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