ENDURING NOTIONS OF HETEROSEXUALITY: A STUDY IN CONTEMPORARY SEX AND RELATIONSHIPS

by

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Abstract

This thesis is a politicised sociological feminist critique of hegemonic heterosexuality. It questions how hegemonic heterosexuality shapes and informs everyday gendered interactions in the area of sex and relationships using the lens of sexual scripting theory. This thesis presents the findings from my innovative in-depth qualitative empirical study into the lives and thought processes of young adults. It unpacks audience interpretations of music video representations of sex and relationships shedding new light on the complex and dynamic process that is cultural meaning making. I draw on feminist theory, social theory, cultural studies, sexuality studies, communication theory, media theory and social science research theory to argue that the social and sexual scripts underpinning contemporary manifestations of hegemonic heterosexuality in postfeminist media culture enduringly discriminate based on gender, sexuality, race and class despite popular discourse to the contrary. This thesis presents examples of cultural domination in popular culture, theorises how they inform definitions of gender and sexuality, and draws out the implications of this for contemporary notions of sex and relationships. I empirically demonstrate my argument with examples of cultural dissonance, illuminating how contradictions between postfeminist discourses and lived experience were experienced and organised by my participants.

Dedication

For Pop and Logan.

Thank you for loving me and believing in me.

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Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction……………………………………….…1

1.1 Locating notions of sex and relationships…………..……………………………...2

1.2 Locating this work in the debate………………………..……………………….....8

1.3 Research aims and questions……………………….…………………….……12

1.4 Thesis outline……………………………………….……………..................13

1.5 Motivations……………………………………….……………………....15

Chapter 2: Conceptualising the problem: hegemonic heterosexuality and constructions of gender and sexuality..16

2.1 What is heterosexuality?..16

2.2 Constructions of gender and sexuality…………………………………………….28

2.3 Female sexuality and gender politics……………………………………………39

2.4 Sexual politics and questions of power…………………………………………49

2.5 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………..57

Chapter 3: Researching the phenomenon…………………..59

3.1 Understanding the problem……………………………………………………60

3.2 Textual analysis……………………………………………………………...67

3.3 Audience studies……………………………………………………………72

3.4 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………..77

Chapter 4: Methodology……………………………………...79

4.1 Analytic perspectives………………………………………………………...81

4.2 Research processes………………………………………………………….93

4.3 Ethics and reflexivity………………………………………………………...108

4.4 Concluding remarks…………………………………………………………113

Chapter 5: Generation as identity……………………………115

5.1 Unpacking the generational identity……………………………………………118

5.2 Navigating dominant and alternative discourses…………………………………..126

5.3 The role and significance of social media………………………………………133

5.4 Conclusion……………………………………….……………………….147

Chapter 6: Mediated Sexual Subjectivities: enduring heteronormativity…………………………………………150

6.1 What is 'alternative'?...153

6.2 Re-signifying discourses of sexualisation and objectification……………………...168

6.3 The significance of site of engagement……………………………………...178

6.4 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………186

Chapter 7: Scripts of Sexual Attraction and Interaction……189

7.1 Scripts of sexual attraction and interaction....……………………………………..194

7.2 The features and role of violence…………………………………………………210

7.3 The production and consumption of scripts...……………………………………222

7.4 Conclusion…………………………………………………………………231

Chapter 8: Conclusion…………………………………………234

8.1 Addressing the research questions……………………………………………..235

8.2 Contributions……………………………………………………………….241

8.3 Limitations and future research………………………………………………..246

8.4 Final thoughts and personal reflections………………………………………..249

Appendix 1: Participant information…………………….…252

Appendix 2: Analytic codes……………………………………256

Appendix 3: Interview materials……………………………260

Reference List………………………………………….…………265

Chapter 1:
Introduction

In summer 2018 I unexpectedly found myself on the road I had worked on as a sixteen-year-old Office Junior in the early 1990s. Reminiscing about my life at that time I recalled my then boyfriend and our relationship which could at best be called unsatisfactory. He was what would now be called emotionally abusive but I did not have that vocabulary then, I simply thought ours was typical of how relationships operated and if I wanted one, which all the world seemed to be telling me I ought to, I had to put up with it. While having these thoughts, I was reminded of a conversation I had had a few days previously with one of my research participants, a young woman of 20. In this conversation my participant was relating her life experience to that shown in a music video and resignedly telling me that love, or the illusion of love, makes us do silly, out of character things (in the case of the music video, stay with a physically abusive and philandering man). The parallels in our youthful resignation to 'unsatisfactory' romantic relationships, over 20 years apart, communicated and normalised in this music video, demonstrates what is the at the core of this sociological inquiry: the enduring gendered inequality of hegemonic heterosexuality.

This thesis addresses the institution of heterosexuality and questions how it shapes and informs everyday gendered interactions in the realm of sex and relationships using the lens of sexual scripting theory. It presents the findings from my innovative and in-depth qualitative empirical study into the lives and thought processes of young adults, uncovering and engaging with their interpretations of music video representations of sex and relationships to shed new light on the complex and dynamic process that is cultural meaning making. Importantly, I use Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) for my analytical framework bringing inventive and broad ranging insight to my data. MDA centres social action and explores the complex semiotic web of

discourses that surround it, meaning it encompasses the intentional and *un*intentional aspects of communication that make up human interaction. I argue that the social and sexual scripts underpinning contemporary manifestations of hegemonic heterosexuality in postfeminist media culture have not changed in any significant way despite popular discourse to the contrary, and empirically demonstrate the dissonance between these discourses and the lived experiences of my participants. Intrinsic to my argument is the assertion that hegemonic heterosexuality is enduringly coded in ways that discriminate based on gender, sexuality, race and class.

In the following sections I introduce the central themes of my argument and orient the reader to the concepts, frameworks and questions that have guided this inquiry. I end this introduction with an outline of the structure of this thesis, detailing the progression of my argument.

1.1 Locating notions of sex and relationships

Postfeminism is a diverse and divisive term used in reference to feminism in the contemporary moment. The term emerged in the 1990s and has been used variously to identify a time after second wave feminism (with all the implicit suggestions that feminism is no longer required), a new wave or brand of feminism (akin to a third wave), and a theoretical approach to feminism in line with other 'posts' e.g. poststructuralism and postcoloniality (Gill, 2007c; Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019; Gill and Toms, 2019). Academic debate on postfeminism is diffuse and various academic 'feminisms' have grown out of its early articulations offering different analytical focuses and approaches, but all are grounded in the same social manifestations of feminism, sexism, and misogyny (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019).

Applying postfeminism to media analysis, Ros Gill (2007c) links transformations in feminism to transformations in media culture and argues the two share a mutual relationship, introducing the concept of a *postfeminist sensibility,* present in media culture, through which we can "examine what is distinctive about contemporary articulations of gender in the media" (Gill, 2007c: 148). Central

to Gill's notion of a postfeminist sensibility are the themes, or features, which identify it: femininity as bodily property; the sexualisation of culture; the shift from sexual objectification to sexual subjectification; notions of individualism, choice and empowerment; self-surveillance and discipline; the makeover paradigm; the reassertion of sexual difference; the use of irony and knowingness; and, the entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist ideas. In this study, I use postfeminism as a critical term to capture a shift in the representation of women from the 1990s (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019) and empirically engage with Gill's (2007c) postfeminist sensibility as it emerged in my research; critically analysing my participants' readings of representations of sex and relationships in music videos and considering how they integrate these concepts into their everyday lives and interactions. In this way, I position myself as a critical analyst of postfeminist culture, not a postfeminist analyst (Gill, 2017).

Stuart Hall (1998) argued that popular culture is the ground on which social transformation takes place. Hall (1998: 447) outlines his theory of cultural power as the means of culture-making which sits with the cultural industries who have the power to "rework and reshape" representations; to "impose and implant" through representations "such definitions of ourselves as fit more easily the descriptions of the dominant or preferred culture". In this way, Hall argues, cultural domination takes place through a process of *cultural struggle* between those with cultural power (the dominant culture) and the masses. The notion of cultural struggle represents the process of recognition, of "resistance and acceptance, refusal and capitulation" (Hall, 1998: 447) that takes place as the dominant culture disorganises and reorganises its definitions in popular culture through dominant forms. Popular culture is the site of this ongoing battle, the complex dynamic of resistance and supersession that is culture making and the organisation of individual life.

Angela McRobbie (2004) and Gill (2007c) argue that media culture, which represents the dominant culture, has incorporated feminist discourses and (re)presented them back to us in such a way that their messages and mission have been undermined and 'undone'. They argue mainstream media has accommodated feminism in a common-sense way which simultaneously undermines it; as McRobbie (2004: 255) explains: "for feminism to be "taken into account" it has to be understood as having already passed away". In this process of acculturation, the notion of feminism becomes redundant as representations of 'gender equality' from the boardroom to the bedroom show women participating freely and through choice, gaining empowerment through their very participation. The territory of cultural struggle for defining gender and sexuality is here marked out; the space of recognition, resistance and acceptance for sexed gender relations takes place in popular culture with the media operating as "the key site for defining codes of sexual conduct" (McRobbie, 2004: 258) and ideology (Rubin, 1992: 23).

Feminist analysis of postfeminist media culture can be understood as an attempt to detangle or elucidate this process of cultural domination that is inherently patriarchal, white, European, heterosexual and neoliberal. In her argument for a postfeminist sensibility, Gill (2007c: 163) argues that what distinguishes postfeminist from other constructions of gender is that they are "clearly a response to feminism" and illustrates this by drawing attention to the contradictory entanglement of feminist and anti-feminist discourses, which simultaneously articulate and repudiate feminist ideas constructing contradictory gender relations. Gill's argument builds on McRobbie's (2004: 255) identification of a "double entanglement" in postfeminism comprising the contradictory co-existence of "neo-conservative values in relation to gender, sexuality and family life … with processes of liberalisation in regard to choice and diversity in domestic, sexual and kinship relations". For McRobbie (2004: 255), as for Gill and Hall, this double entanglement plays out in popular culture which, she argues, is the site where power is remade in our everyday lives and presented to us as common-sense. Gill and McRobbie's work highlights the process of

cultural domination taking place throughout popular culture, constructing definitions of gender, and has significant implications for how we understand sex and relationships. I return to Gill's concept of contradictory discourses and McRobbie's double entanglement throughout my analysis, drawing out the way contradictions are experienced and organised by my participants, considering the cultural dissonance required to facilitate this process and what it means.

Integral to critical analyses of postfeminist media culture is the notion of the 'sexualisation of culture' (Gill, 2007c) which operates in concert with it. The sexualisation of culture refers to the distinctive contemporary normalisation, dispersion and mainstreaming of representations of sex and eroticised imagery in the media, popular culture, and public spaces (Gill, 2012b: 483) and a persistent interest in sexual values, practices, identities and scandals; a shift to a more sexually permissive public mood; new sexual identities and experiences; and an increasingly lax approach to gatekeeping sexual deviancies (Attwood, 2006: 78 – 79). Academic debate on the sexualisation of culture repeatedly stalls in binary divisions of pro/anti sex/sexualisation of culture grounded in the feminist 'sex wars' of the second wave, but a unifying recognition is that under postfeminism, notions of femininity and sexuality have become linked in a way not seen before (Wolf, 1991; Gill, 2008b; Gill, 2009a; Gill, 2009b; Evans, Riley and Shankar, 2010; Walter, 2010a; Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Gill, 2016; McRobbie, 2016; Phipps, 2016). A key feature of this new female sexuality is its agency, packaged under headings of 'choice' and 'empowerment' in postfeminist media, as introduced briefly above. This postfeminist framing of the female as exercising agentic 'choice' incorporates neoliberal ideals of individualism, depoliticises feminism and conceptually likens postfeminist discourses to neoliberal gender relations (Budgeon, 2015: 304).

Debates on female sexual agency frequently get stuck in a binary for and against position, with opposing voices suggesting there is a kind of false consciousness operating in this new female

sexual agency (Gill, 2003; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012) while others see it as a form of sexual liberation (McNair, 2002; Bragg and Buckingham, 2009; Attwood, 2012). Gill and Shani Orgad (2018: 5) sought to move this debate forward by problematising *the way* bodies are sexualised, interrogating the sexism and other forms of discrimination present, rather than sexualisation *per se*. In this way, critical scholarly interrogation of sexualised culture can be based on "political rather than … moral sensibilit[ies] about sex… concerned with power, consent and justice rather than exposure of flesh" and adopt a "sex positive but anti-sexism" position. This approach allows for a politicised and intersectional interrogation of the production and consumption of a postfeminist sensibility in popular culture and the social practices it relates to. By adopting this approach, my research questions *how* bodies are represented and interrogates the meanings attached to those representations, for example raced and classed femininities, revealing patterns and inconsistencies that illuminate hegemony in action.

Applying Hall's (1998) theory of cultural power to representations of sexuality is a useful way to critically engage with the female sexual identity introduced here. As I argue in my findings chapters, postfeminist representations of sexuality and sexual identity reinforce a dominant hegemonic heterosexuality that is heteronormative and operates on axes of gender, sexuality, race and class to define notions of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, sexual identity and sexual behaviour. Understanding how these representations are not only read but *lived* in people's ordinary lives is an urgent academic task (Plummer, 2003; Jhally, 2007) addressed in this thesis which presents an unparalleled insight into the meaning making process and the relationship between representation and reality.

Addressing the material implications of postfeminist discourses of sexuality, some academics have linked them to incidences of sexual violence against women (Coy and Garner, 2012; Phipps and Young, 2013; Moran, 2017), which has been argued to be a manifestation of sexism (Bart,

1979). Sexual violence, assault and harassment remain a central challenge and focus for women's rights organisations (Women and Equalities Committee, 2018; Culhane, 2019; Women's March, 2019; Women's Equality Party, no date). Police recorded sexual offences for 2019 were at their highest volume since the introduction of the National Crime Recording Standard in 2002 (The Office for National Statistics, 2019: 52) and official figures estimate that 20% of women (3.4 million) and 4% of men (631,000) have experienced some type of sexual assault since age 16, with the year-on-year rate showing no significant change (The Office for National Statistics, 2018). There is a growing awareness and public discourse around issues of sexual violence and harassment due to the growth and impact of initiatives like the #MeToo movement and projects like The Everyday Sexism Project which frame the contemporary sexual landscape for young adults. Against this backdrop of contemporary sexuality are people's individual experiences of navigating sexual interactions and social expectations of their sexual behaviours, what I refer to as sexual politics.

As I have begun to illustrate, there is power in seeing oneself represented and having that representation legitimised (Plummer, 1995; Hall, 1998); representation shapes sexual subjectivities and discourses and frames how we understand sexuality and sexual practices by presenting a set of 'rules' that inform and guide social interaction (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Hall, 1998; Jhally, 2007). These rules, the ways we learn them and the ways we interpret them, form the foundation of the everyday business of existence and social interaction (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Plummer, 1995; Stanley and Wise, 2002: 116). This conceptualisation of the sexual as social originated in Gagnon and Simon's (1974) ground-breaking sexual scripting theory which asserts that sexuality is socially constituted, constructed and re-constructed throughout a lifetime of interaction, located among the "mundane actualities" of daily life (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 814). The idea of sexuality as being scripted implies it is not 'spontaneous' and does not originate from some 'biological mandate' but rather from the appropriate social organisation of defined script

elements: situation; actors; plots; and, behaviours (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 19). Scripts, Gagnon and Simon (1974: 19) argue, "are involved in learning the meaning of internal states, organizing the sequences of specifically sexual acts, decoding novel situations, setting the limits on sexual responses, and linking meanings from nonsexual aspects of life to specifically sexual experience". One of the most significant ways we learn these scripts is through seeing ourselves, and social life, represented in the media (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Plummer; 1995; Hall, 1998). Using audience readings of representations of sex and relationships in music video, I argue, is therefore an important and valid approach to gaining insight into contemporary sexual scripts and understanding the gendered dynamics underpinning hegemonic heterosexuality and sexual politics.

A major aim of this thesis is to empirically examine how young adults interpret representations of sex and relationships in contemporary music videos to shed light on the scripts that govern contemporary sexual politics. In recognition of the digital and visual media landscape young adults engage with I also question the role social media plays in this process and consider the dynamic relationship these two media forms share. I establish the determining factors in the interpretive process and how my participants integrated and managed scripts into their daily lives, bringing empirical insight to existing knowledge on the interrelationship of media and culture, of representation and reality, of the 'mediatisation' of sexuality (Plummer, 1995).

1.2 Locating this work in the debate

Through this thesis I problematise the institution of heterosexuality, as represented in postfeminist media culture and evidenced in my empirical research with young adults, to demonstrate how the scripts underpinning it endure to discriminate based on gender, sexuality, race and class. My contribution is unique in its in-depth empirical approach which engages with the lives of young adults in an unprecedented way to uncover the complexities and contradictions

involved in navigating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics. I contribute to and move forward academic debates on postfeminist female sexuality and the sexualisation of culture introduced above and developed in the following chapter. I extend knowledge on the relationship between sexual representation and practice (Attwood, 2006), between ideas and action (Scollon, 2001), and contemporary sexual scripts and gender relations.

I draw from a multidisciplinary body of work and owe a particular debt of gratitude to the ground-breaking and rule-breaking intellectual work of the women who came before me and challenged, and continue to challenge, academia and the long-held traditions of thought that govern it. It is true in many ways to say that without them this work would not have been possible. I locate this work in the western tradition of feminist thought and have developed an intersectional methodological and analytical approach to represent the diversity and breadth of experience of my participants and challenge discriminatory hegemonic definitions of gender and sexuality.

In addition to the canon of feminist thought and theory that influenced my work, I have drawn from social theory, cultural studies, sexuality studies, communication theory, media theory, and social science research theory. This range of perspectives shaped and informed my methodological, analytical and interpretive processes and allowed me to consider my data in a multifaceted way, strategically illuminating the research problem and generating insights that would not have been possible with a more limited conceptual toolkit (Mason, 2011). The overarching sociological theoretical perspective I adopted was symbolic interactionist. The central empirical imperative of symbolic interactionism and its grounding in the premises that 1) human beings act towards things on the basis of their meanings, 2) that those meanings arise from interactions with others, and 3) that meanings change (Blumer, 1969: 2; Fine, 1990; Fine, 1993; Plummer, 2000) reflects the person-centred focus of my research. Further, taking a symbolic

interactionist approach allowed me to address the dynamic interaction of institutional heterosexuality and individual sexual practices. I justify and address the advantages of this approach in chapters two, three and four.

Reflecting this theoretical perspective, I conceive of power as located in the interaction between individual and text which is informed by the ideas circulating in society and solidified in the interactive process of cultural struggle and domination (Hall, 1998). Conceptualising the way ideas circulate in society and the significance of this for practice is central to this inquiry and understandings of how cultural power works. Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, originally applied to class relations and the cultural dynamic by which one social group dominates another (Connell, 2005), provides a useful way to understand this process and has influentially been applied to analyses of race and racism, and gender (see Hall, 1986; Connell, 2005). In hegemony, power operates at a cultural level, shaping notions of common-sense, and originates in the dominant 'moral and philosophical worldviews' of a given time and place (Bocock, 1986). Resistance and alternative ideologies are necessary within hegemony and by empirically engaging with my participants' negotiations of dominant and alternative discourses of gender and sexuality I have empirically evidenced the process of ideological struggle and their everyday management of contradictory discursive identities. I expand on this concept and justify its usefulness in chapter two.

Before moving on to set out the research objectives and questions which guided this inquiry, I briefly address music videos as the critical objects of postfeminist media culture that facilitated the research process. I chose to work with music videos as a route to illuminating power and meaning making in hegemonic heterosexuality within contemporary culture for several reasons. Firstly, music and music videos are culturally constructed and as such can be used as a lens through which to analyse culture. Secondly, music videos are recognised as significant cultural

products in the identity formation of adolescents and young adults (Lull, 1987; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman, and Banning, 2007). Thirdly, as sexual storytellers (Plummer, 1995; Jhally, 2007) frequently (re)presenting heterosexual romantic relationships as their main theme (often adding a sexual dimension not present in the lyrics (Arnett, 2002: 257)), music videos communicate scripts on gender and sexuality. Fourth, as a cornerstone of celebrity culture musicians and musical artists hold a significant position in contemporary social life (this is further examined in chapter seven). Lastly, music and imagery generate particularly emotional responses in audiences (Lull, 1987; Middleton, 1990; Pink, 2001; Rose, 2014) and therefore generate especially rich data.

In recognition of the way music videos are appropriated in the contemporary media environment (i.e. through YouTube or other streaming / social media platforms) and the digital and visual culture young people now inhabit, I also focused on the relationship music videos share with social media. In my findings chapters I demonstrate the intertextual and interdiscursive dimensions of this relationship, drawing attention to the way boundaries of interaction between 'celebrities' and 'ordinary people' have been disrupted by social media and the implications of this, and the significance of the role of musicians and musical artists for sexual storytelling and cultural meaning making.

In closing this introduction to the themes and frameworks which contextualise this thesis, it is important to say that I do not claim any universalising truths through this work. I present a unique insight into the interpretive processes of the young adults I worked with, bringing a new and distinct insight to the debates and academic problems outlined above, developing and extending academic knowledge.

1.3 Research aims and questions

As introduced, the aim of this inquiry is to identify, interrogate and address the intersectional implications of contemporary sexual scripts in hegemonic heterosexuality. I have done this by using music videos and social media as critical objects to facilitate the uncovering of these scripts.

This aim can be broken down into the following objectives:

1) To identify sexual scripts in music videos.
2) To interrogate the significant discourses in the interpretive process.
3) To establish how young adults incorporate, or reconcile, what they see with what they already know.
4) To understand the relationship between mediatised representations of sexuality and sexual practice.

These objectives informed the research questions for the inquiry which are:

1) What happens when audiences interact with representations of sex and relationships in music videos?
2) How does social media interact with the interpretive process?
3) How do audiences rationalise/integrate their readings with existing social and sexual schema?
4) What might the implications of this be for real-life sexual encounters?

Questions one and two reveal what is happening in the interaction of audience with text with exclusive reference to sex and relationships; question one prioritises music videos as the primary critical object and question two identifies social media as a secondary critical object and defines its focus as limited to it interaction with the findings of question one. Question three asks what discursive and conceptual tools audiences use in the interpretive process and how they relate to

the existing conceptual and discursive tools that inform the audiences' daily lives. Question four is concerned with the relationship between representation and reality and the material implications of sexual scripts in music videos for real-life sexual politics.

1.4 Thesis outline

This introduction sets out the central research problem of this thesis and introduces the reader to the guiding academic debates and concepts which informed my approach. I have set out my research questions, the theoretical framework I employed to answer them, and introduced the central themes of my argument. **Chapter two** critically engages with the theoretical concepts underpinning this thesis and sets out in detail how I position myself within them. It grounds my argument that hegemonic heterosexuality endures as an oppressive social institution, discriminating on multiple axes and exerting cultural power through postfeminist media culture. It describes how notions of sex, sexuality and sexual identity are gendered and how common-sense notions of gender and sexuality are constructed. **Chapter three** sets out how these concepts have been studied and examined previously and positions this thesis in relation to that body of work, presenting it as a novel and innovative methodological contribution to understanding human meaning making, and demonstrates how my approach allows us to think about these problems in new and different ways. **Chapter four** discusses the processes involved in producing this research, detailing the development of my methodological approach and analytical lens and justifying why they are appropriate to answer my research questions. This chapter locates my work in the feminist research tradition and addresses what it means for my approach and conceptualisation of the research problem, details how I used Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) and reflects on my positionality and role in the research process.

Chapters five, six and seven present my research findings. Chapters five and six present findings and discussion on the most significant and influential discourses involved in my participants'

interpretations of representations of sex and relationships in music videos, and chapter seven deals explicitly with the sexual scripts which emerged in my data. **Chapter five** details the most significant discursive identity characteristic that informed my research participants' interpretations of sex and relationships: their generational distinctiveness. I empirically demonstrate how this generational identity materialised, how it was experienced through their relationship to social media, and how feeling singularly differentiated from previous generations was used as a lens through which sex and relationships were conceptualised. In this chapter I address the challenges involved in navigating contemporary social and sexual life for my research participants. **Chapter six** builds on chapter five to highlight how my participants gendered and sexual identities were enduringly based on heteronormative scripts which contrasted with their discursive identities, revealed in instances of cultural dissonance. I expose how the notions of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality informing their interpretations were gendered, classed and raced, underscoring the discriminatory nature of hegemonic heterosexuality and the nuanced way power operates through popular culture. **Chapter seven** directly addresses the scripts of sexual attraction and interaction my participants observed in music videos and draws attention to the concepts underpinning these (re)presentations. This chapter draws out the predominance and acceptance, the role and significance, of violence in heterosexual scrips and argues hegemonic heterosexuality endures in contemporary popular culture through a postfeminist sensibility that discriminates based on gender, sexuality, race and class and highlights what this means for contemporary gender relations and sexual politics. This chapter also details the significance of the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship between music video and social media for reading and integrating scripts and highlights what this means for the cultural power of sexual scripts in popular culture.

In **chapter eight** I clarify how I have answered my research questions through this thesis and consolidate my findings and the contributions this thesis makes to knowledge, setting out the

broader implications of my research and methodological approach for feminist theory, sexuality studies, cultural studies and audience studies. I reflect on the research process addressing limitations in the research process, findings I was not able to discuss and suggestions for future work.

1.5 Motivations

In closing this introduction, I would like to include a few words on my motivations for undertaking this research. Primarily, this research stems from a place of anger and frustration at what I now recognise as the double entanglement of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). Prior to undertaking this research my understanding was more visceral and I observed it in competing and contradictory demands on (particularly young) women through popular culture to meet a version of womanhood it simultaneously shamed and berated them for. The research I present in this thesis has come a long way since those original thoughts, but it is important to be clear that this academic endeavour is not purely 'academic', it stems from and addresses social life and social inequalities.

In this thesis I (re)present the lived experiences of my research participants with my words and I sincerely hope I have conveyed the complexities of their lives and identities respectfully throughout; they are each so much more than the sum of the words I have included here. I tuned into very limited and very specific aspects of their lives in the research process and I saw so much change over that relatively short time, I can only guess at how much more is to come as they move through life. I do not seek to define them with my words but to use their experiences to contribute to the movement for social change that has inspired this work.

Chapter 2:

Conceptualising the problem: hegemonic heterosexuality and constructions of gender and sexuality

This thesis identifies, interrogates and establishes the intersectional implications of contemporary sexual scripts in hegemonic heterosexuality. In this chapter I critically engage with the concepts that framed my analytical approach beginning with an examination of 'heterosexuality', setting out in detail the nature of the problem I tackle. I then engage with the specific aspects of heterosexuality addressed in this research: constructions of gender and sexuality; notions of female sexuality; power in heterosexuality. By engaging with the academic literature in this way, I clarify my position and locate my argument that hegemonic heterosexuality enduringly discriminates on multiple axes through a process of cultural domination of representation in postfeminist media culture within it. This critical engagement with the literature underpins my argument as set out in my findings chapters which evidence and build on these theories by demonstrating how common-sense notions of sex, sexuality and sexual identity were constructed by my research participants.

2.1 What is heterosexuality?

I follow Stevi Jackson (1999; 2006) who argues heterosexuality is a social construction interacting across four dimensions. Firstly, the structural, or institutional, which constructs sexuality through the law, the state and patterns of social convention. Secondly, the relational, emergent in social practices embedded with meaning through discursive conceptualisations which frame our understandings of (in)appropriate gendered notions of the sexual. Thirdly, the everyday, the lived

experience of being a gendered and sexual being in our socially contextualised worlds through which our sexuality is continually (re)constituted in social practice, in what we 'do'. Finally, the subjective, the embodied social and sexual gendered identity through which we "make sense of our everyday gendered interactions" (Jackson, 2006: 108). Underpinning Jackson's (1999) argument is the assertion that these dimensions intersect with gender to oppress women and maintain male dominance, an assertion I echo and demonstrate through this thesis.

Conceptualising heterosexuality this way means seeing it as having less to do with who a person chooses to have sex with than with the conventions and rules which govern gender relations and notions of (un)acceptable sexuality. As Jackson notes, reducing heterosexuality to the sexual occludes its intersections with gender, and conflating the complexity of the dimensions outlined, treating it as a "monolithic, unitary entity" (Jackson 1999: 176-177) creates problems when critiquing it. Adopting Jackson's analytical distinctions allows clarification in the focus of study and consideration of the inter-relationship between gender, sexuality and heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). It is the patriarchal foundation of heterosexuality, its implicit gender inequality or what Jackson (1999: 164) calls its "gender hierarchy", and the intersectional dimensions of that hierarchy, experienced in everyday social practice (that is in the thoughts, decisions and actions) of my research participants, that are the focus of this inquiry. I begin by highlighting the heteronormative foundations of institutional heterosexuality and critically examining that normative status. Through this analysis I draw out the patriarchal dimensions of heteronormativity, highlighting its gendered foundations that shape the heterosexual identity embodying meaning, social practice and subjectivity.

A social constructionist view of sexuality positions it as a particular, historically and culturally situated object of analysis (Jackson, 1999: 4). Articulated in this way, I locate the particular 'version' of heterosexuality I address as that represented in contemporary postfeminist media

culture. Postfeminism has close conceptual connections with popular culture as the site where it has frequently been recognised and named in- and outside of academia through popular female characters perhaps most notably in *Bridget Jones* (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007c; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Genz, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009), *Ally McBeal* (McRobbie, 2004; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Genz, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009), and the casts of *Desperate Housewives* (Genz and Brabon, 2009) and *Sex and the City* (Genz, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009). Stéphanie Genz and Benjamin Brabon (2009: 27) argue postfeminist media is characterised by contradictory and oppositional messages which seek to reshape social relations. Gill (2007c; 2017: 606) articulates a postfeminist sensibility in popular culture (which she identifies as the *object of analysis* not a historical or analytical approach) and similarly emphasises its contradictory nature and 'entanglement' of feminist and anti-feminist themes, arguing in a recent abstract that postfeminism has become hegemonic, manifesting as common-sense, "as a kind of gendered neoliberalism".

Postfeminism is closely associated with neoliberalism which began as a political and economic ideological paradigm centred on notions of individualism, choice and empowerment (Oksala, 2013). Conceptually neoliberalism has evolved into what has been termed a 'governmentality' in the Foucauldian sense of organising life across multiple social spheres, constructing people as self-regulating individuals and removing notions of state and social context and influence (Gill, 2008a; Oksala, 2013). My interest in neoliberalism is limited to its intersection with (post)feminism and the ordering of gender relations governed by notions of individuality (in place of the second wave feminist mantra 'the personal is political'), in the notion of freely chosen self-governance (in place of acknowledged external influence and forces), and the creation of 'self' through consumerism and dominance of consumer culture (in place of traditional forms of identification) (Gill, 2003; Connell, 2005; Gill, 2008a; Attwood, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Harvey and Gill, 2011; Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Oksala, 2013; Budgeon, 2015; Gill, 2017; Gill and

Orgad, 2018). These parallels suggest a reinforcing and reconstituting relationship between the two (Gill, 2008a) which can be observed in Gill's postfeminist sensibility and wider postfeminist culture and which this research identifies in the complex and contradictory gendered and sexual subjectivities of my research participants.

Integral to Gill's postfeminist sensibility is the sexualisation of culture which locates femininity within women's bodies and eroticises the female body in ways that typically meet assumed male sexual desires reinforcing a heteronormative heterosexuality (Gill, 2007c; 2009a). For Gill (2007c; 2009a: 148, italics in original), postfeminist representations of female sexuality are indicative of a shift from the sexual objectification to the sexual *subjectification* of women; from representations of women as "passive, mute *objects* of an assumed male gaze" to sexually active and desiring sexual *subjects*. Gill (2009a; 2009b) articulates this sexual subjectification in her characterisation of the ubiquitous 'always up for it sexual subject' representation of womanhood framed by discourses of 'choice' and 'empowerment' and 'pleasing oneself' and notes the paradoxical male admiration this confers.

It has been said that 'sex is the big story now' (Plummer, 1995), that sexuality now articulates "our bodies and our pleasures and in making our claims to individuality, to a self for itself, to our status in the world, to our embodiment for others and for sex itself" (Attwood, 2006: 89). The media is central to the telling of these sexual stories through the 'mediatisation' of society (Plummer, 1995) and a sexualised mode of address is recognised as standard in music videos which are highly efficient in their frequent (re)presentation of heterosexual male sexual dreamworlds or fantasies (Jhally, 2007; Railton and Watson, 2007). It is this hegemonic common-sense manifestation of heterosexuality, captured in Gill's postfeminist sensibility, that informs my identification of heterosexuality. This version of heterosexuality is hegemonic in its cultural dominance and legitimised representation in popular culture and the media (Hall, 1980; Connell,

1995), in line with Gill's (2017) assertion that postfeminism has 'intensified' to become hegemonic within contemporary life.

Hall's (1998) theory of cultural power sets out how the culture of the dominant is re-presented back to us through dominant forms, specifically through popular culture and the media which shape and (re)produce popular discourses and ideals and are recognised as significant in the (re)production of sexuality (Rubin, 1992; McRobbie, 2009). The culture of the dominant can be understood as hegemony and the process of representation in this sense is the communication of a hegemonic 'worldview'.

To understand this more clearly, it is helpful to consider that at any one time there are multiple 'heterosexualities' in public life, for example in the contemporary moment polyamory is receiving considerable attention in the media and in youth culture more broadly. Hegemony may only be achieved when there is some "correspondence between cultural ideal and institutional power, collective if not individual" (Connell, 1995: 77) and so we understand that polyamory is a subordinate heterosexuality because it is not represented in popular culture as normative and does not offer an institutionalised authority; few if any cultural or corporate elites offer displays of this version of heterosexuality to validate and legitimise it at the highest levels of society (Hall, 1980). The version of heterosexuality offering cultural and institutional legitimacy in the current moment is that which is represented in postfeminist media culture, introduced above. This version of heterosexuality is heteronormative in its normalisation of heterosexuality to the exclusion, and detriment, of other sexualities and its framing of 'normal' relationships as those between one man and one woman who conform to conventional gender roles and engage in penis/vagina penetrative sex (Barker and Scheele, 2016). This conceptual normalisation of heterosexuality is the key to its hegemonic success.

Heteronormativity works across all dimensions of social life, in social structures, practices and institutions (Sinclair, 2017; Javaid, 2018), to limit, police and shape gendered interactions through defining and reinforcing 'rules' and 'assumptions' which underpin common-sense understandings of heterosexuality. By presenting heterosexuality as 'normal', heteronormative discourses engage long-held notions of the biological 'naturalness' and superiority of heterosexuality founded on the dominant, hetero-male-centric assertion that sex *is* penis/vagina penetration (Richardson, 1997; Jackson, 1999). Since the second wave, feminist scholars of sexuality have critiqued and challenged these notions of (hetero)sexuality, highlighting the inherent patriarchy of the definition which prioritises male orgasm (pleasure) and dominance, situating the male as the active 'doer' and the female as the passive 'receiver' in the interaction (Jackson, 1999: 11). To better understand this point it is important to frame current understandings of sexuality in their historical framework. The contemporary study of sexuality stems from late 19th century positivistic medical and psychiatric sciences which sought to classify sex acts and introduced the notions of 'deviant' and consequently 'normal' sexual behaviours (Downing, 2015). This approach to sexuality, often known as *essentialist,* posits that biology structures desire, that sexuality is an innate impulse or drive which is 'naturally' directed at a person of the opposite sex (Richardson, 1997: 155).

As the empirical study of sex evolved, sexual 'categories' were developed and the terms 'heterosexual' and 'homosexual' emerged, based on a gender binary, changing conceptualisations of sexuality from being something you do (behaviour) to something you are (identity) (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Barker and Scheele, 2016). Sexual behaviour became an indication of the kind of person you were and notions of 'normal' or 'abnormal', 'good' or 'bad' sex extended to the individuals that practised them. These foundational beliefs have had a lasting effect on popular and academic understandings of sexuality and are still in evidence today, framing dominant heteronormative discourses on the biological imperative of the natural state of heterosexuality

through discourses of reproduction and penetrative sex (Downing, 2015). Psychoanalytic theory, influential in feminist theories of sexuality, challenged these essentialist notions and argued language, not biology, structures desire (Richardson, 1997). Psychoanalytic theory, however, still maintained that sexuality operated on a gendered binary and saw women as passive and responsive to an active male sexuality (Crowley and Himmelweit, 1992: 111 - 112). These biological definitions of sexuality were, and remain, largely dominant and carry significant cultural power through their ability to define normal, natural, and acceptable sexual acts and identities. These definitions socially locate people as 'normal' and conversely 'abnormal' based on their sexual actions and advance the notion of a 'natural' set of gender relations. These gender relations are based on assumptions that a heterosexual sexual orientation is 'normal'; that male to female penetrative sex is the only legitimate 'sex'; and that reproduction is the ultimate purpose of this socially sanctioned sexual activity. Those who fall outside of this definition face being labelled deviant or abnormal (Rubin, 1992; Barker and Scheele, 2016). Underpinning these biological definitions of acceptable sexuality is an unquestioned patriarchal foundation which defines and reinforces gendered relations crucial to heteronormative heterosexuality; male dominance and female subordination.

The specific ways these gendered relations materialise in social and sexual life have been conceived of as a set of 'scripts' which guide and inform human sexual interactions. John Gagnon and William Simon influentially argue for sexual scripting theory in their ground-breaking 1974 (UK edition) book *Sexual Conduct.* In this and later works, Gagnon and Simon challenge biological ways of thinking about sexuality and were the first to offer a sociological social constructionist view of sexual behaviour which claims we can know very little of human sexuality from studying biology, arguing instead that sexuality is contextually and socially constructed (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Gagnon, 1990; Rubin, 1992; Plummer, 2001; Jackson and Scott, 2010). Gagnon and Simon's theory of sexuality directly challenges psychoanalytic theory

which positions sexuality as 'innate', an 'overwhelming force' that develops over one's lifetime from childhood and is based on the dualism of heterosexuality (i.e. that to be one sex is to desire the other sex), drawing analytical distinctions between gender and sexuality (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 814). Gagnon and Simon (1974: 2-4) argue that essentialist notions of human nature and social life as fixed, as "transhistorical and transcultural", have framed the study of "man and society" *[sic]* and understandings of human sexual life through a central significance being attributed to biological reproduction of the species. Resultingly, they argue, definitions of natural and unnatural emerge from sexual acts and behaviours, from the specific arrangements of human bodies and body parts; that sexual meaning is attached to "the organs, the orifices, and the gender of the actors" (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 5).

In their sexual scripting theory Gagnon and Simon (1974: 5) argue for a shift in focus from 'the organs' to the source of meaning attached to those organs, to the ways sexual acts are learnt as 'scripts' and how these scripts are "integrated into larger social scripts and social arrangements where meaning and sexual behaviour come together to create sexual conduct". They argue that to understand sexuality, sexual acts and their meanings must be recognised as time and place dependent; that sexual activities are the outcome of complex psychosocial developmental processes embedded in social scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 9), that nothing is 'inherently' sexual but only becomes so through "the application of socially learned meanings" (Jackson, 1999: 31). Sexual scripting theory directly challenged Freudian psychoanalytic thought, dominant at that time, which saw sexuality as a biologically mandated innate and spontaneous drive repressed by social forces which only respond to and do not initiate sexual arousal (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 5; Jackson, 1999). Instead, Gagnon and Simon's (1974) theory asserts that sexuality is socially constructed, that sexuality is meaningfully organised around social elements which when correctly organised result in a sexual event. In short, sexual scripting theory uses the language of theatre as a metaphor for behaviour in sexual life by describing people as 'actors'

who use 'scripts' to identify sexual situations and behaviours and inform their sexual interactions, "suggest[ing] the appropriateness of engaging in particular behaviours, including the order in which those behaviours typically occur" (Simon and Gagnon, 1986; Beres, 2013: 77). The cultural specificity of sexual scripts means that while individuals do not have identical scripts, those sharing cultural space will be familiar with similar scripts as they come "pre-prepared" (Beres, 2013: 77).

Gagnon and Simon (1974; 1986) describe three distinct levels scripts operate on within a gendered framework of sexuality. Firstly, *cultural scenarios* operate at the social level providing instructional guides on individual sexual behavioural requirements, or expectations; that is, the 'what', 'who', 'when', 'why' and 'how' of sexual conduct (Brickell, 2006; Beres, 2013). Secondly, the *external and interpersonal* level organises sexual identity positions for actors to follow when activating cultural scenarios in mutual dependence; linking identities to expectations in sexual interactions (Brickell, 2006; Beres, 2013). Thirdly, the *internal intrapsychic* level motivates arousal, or at least engagement, in the activity, through internal rehearsal and dialogue of broader sexual meanings (Brickell, 2006; Beres, 2013). We see in these distinct dimensions the way that sexual meaning is created through a complex process of the interior state being successfully met by an appropriate external situation and stimuli which results in a sexual interaction.

Sexual scripting theory tells us scripts are learnt from family, friends, school, and the media (an area of critique for the approach due to its lack of specificity and one met through this and other empirical studies which seek to identify how scripts are learnt) (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Richardson, 1997) in a gendered framework that is learnt before a child learns or has access to sexual scripts (Jackson and Scott, 2010). In our gendered selves, Gagnon and Simon argue, we locate ourselves as sexual actors and learn sexual scripts in an interactive, ongoing and reflexive process (Jackson and Scott, 2010). In this way, sexual scripting theory "allows for agency and

change in the constitution of the sexual self" and "Sexual conduct entails actively 'doing sex', not only in terms of sexual acts, but as making and modifying sexual meaning" (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 816). This fundamental foregrounding of gender as of central importance to the scripting of (hetero)sexual relations (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Jackson, 1999; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Beres, 2013) makes sexual scripting theory particularly useful to critical examinations of the inequality inherent in heterosexuality and this thesis in particular (Jackson, 1999; Beres, 2013).

Sexual scripting theory offers a comprehensive social constructionist framework for analyses of sexuality but is not without drawbacks. Its attention to gender focuses on socially constructed differences rather than power imbalances between men and women (sexual scripting theory lacks a concept for power), and Gagnon and Simon have faced criticism on their unfavourable considerations of lesbianism and lack of attention to rape and sexual violence (Richardson, 1997; Jackson, 1999; Beres, 2013). Additionally, sexual scripting theory has been criticised for reinforcing the status quo by ignoring individual differences in scripts, a result Melanie Beres (2013) argues of its application rather than the theory itself, and addressed in this thesis which draws out the intersectional dimensions of sexual scripts in hegemonic heterosexuality revealing implications for contemporary sexual politics. Despite these criticisms, sexual scripting has been used successfully to shed light on sexuality and sexual practice (see Jackson 1999; 2006; Brickell, 2006; Jackson and Scott, 2010; Beres, 2013). These critiques are met in this thesis through my methodological and analytical approach which brings a multifaceted theoretical lens to analyse and understand how sexuality is learnt and experienced, resulting in a politicised sociological feminist critique of the institution of hegemonic heterosexuality and sexual politics in the late modern period.

Underpinning notions of heterosexuality and sexual scripting theory is an implicit binary ordering of men and women. The idea that masculinity depends on a subordinate femininity is familiar to

feminist writing (see for example Woolf, 1928; Connell, 1987; McClary, 1991; Faludi, 1992) and underpins much feminist criticism of heterosexuality (Millett, 1977; Jackson, 1999; Brickell, 2006). One of the most influential feminist criticisms of heterosexuality comes from Adrienne Rich[1] who argues heterosexuality is an invisible political institution which normalises inequalities between the sexes at institutional (state), cultural and interpersonal levels, privileging male dominance and compulsorily positioning women as heterosexual (their sexual orientations assumed and unquestioned), appropriating their labour and their productive and reproductive force (Rich, 1980; Moran, 2017). For Rich (1980), women are trained into a 'compulsory heterosexuality' where they are oppressed under male power which is manifested and maintained in processes ranging through physical brutality to control of women's consciousness. Jackson (2006: 105) argues Rich's 'compulsory heterosexuality' was an early predecessor of heteronormativity in its conceptualisation of an institutionalised and normalising heterosexuality which "regulates those kept within its boundaries as well as marginalizing and sanctioning those outside them", a "double-sided social regulation" Jackson argues is not always expressed in heteronormativity. Claire Moran (2017: 125 - 127) draws on Rich's concept of 'compulsory heterosexuality' and Deborah Tolman's (2006) "revis(ion)ing" of Rich's theory to highlight the way dominant (hegemonic) heterosexuality discursively normalises and legitimises existing gendered power relations in everyday life grounded in hegemonic masculinity by "defining what is normal". Moran argues the unequal power relations in patriarchal heteronormative heterosexuality impact negatively on women's sexual agency before and during sexual encounters, a concern echoed by other feminist scholars (Rich, 1980; Connell, 2005; Gavey, 2005; Conaghan and Russell, 2014; Cahill, 2016).

[1] Fundamental to Rich's (1980) critique of heterosexuality is the way it denigrated or rendered invisible lesbianism and female lesbian experiences. I do not draw on this aspect of Rich's critique here but am informed by it in my discussion of representations of sexuality in chapter five.

Academic literature draws attention to the gendered ordering of heteronormative heterosexuality as expressed in sexual scripts, for example the 'insatiable male sexual drive' script and the 'female sexual gatekeeper' script which underpin the traditional sexual script (Schneider and Guild, 1987; Byers, 1996; Jackson, 1999; Wiederman, 2005; Beres, 2013). Conventional sexual scripts are based on essentialising biological Freudian notions of sexuality, that is, they draw on ideas of sexuality as an innate and irrepressible force that is socially repressed and functions on an established gendered binary. Identification and interrogation of heterosexual scripts allows the power relations inherent to them to be revealed and contextualised within everyday social practice.

It is important here to distinguish between the hegemonic heteronormative heterosexuality outlined above, which determines sexual *and non*-sexual aspects of social life and is a key site of intersection between gender and sexuality (Jackson, 2006: 107), and other expressions of heterosexual sexuality. Not all heterosexuality is heteronormative, just as some non-hetero expressions of sexuality can be deeply heteronormative. My interactionist approach recognises that sex acts mean different things in different times and places and offers a way to theorise "ordinary, everyday conventional *and* unconventional sexualities" (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 813, italics in original). As detailed, I take hegemonic heterosexuality as my critical object, examining the scripts and identities underpinning it to reveal the meanings, power relations and normative ideologies it upholds. This task is recognised as of significant academic importance because of the lack of critical attention heterosexuality has historically received (Downing, 2012; Barker and Scheele, 2016) and the enduring legitimation of power relations and prioritisation of male dominance and female submission it confers (Rich, 1980; Moran, 2017).

Why is this important?

As the culture of the powerful, heterosexuality operates as a cultural institution that shapes gendered interactions. It is socially constructed at the institutional level through law, the state and

social convention (Jackson, 1999: 5) and at the level of practice through sexual scripts determining appropriate sexual acts (Gagnon and Simon, 1974). Through its cultural power in 'telling the story' of sexuality (Plummer, 1995) it sets the terms, the frames, and the limits of what we understand to be (un)acceptable sexual acts and gendered forms of sexuality (Jackson, 1999: 5); it defines the sexual values and practices that inform sexual politics. This thesis employs these theories to argue that heterosexuality contributes to the social and sexual subordination of women through its scripts which are fundamentally flawed and discriminate on multiple axes including gender, sexuality, race and class as noted by scholars including Patricia Hill-Colins, bell hooks, Kimberlé Crenshaw and Beverley Skeggs.

It is important to note here that I did not set out specifically to address intersections of sexuality, race and class in my research. My intersectional methodological and analytical approach, discussed in detail in chapter four, created space for the emergence of the complex individual intersectional experiences of my participants and these were the intersectional dimensions that manifested as significant in their lives. It is pertinent, then, to consider how these social dimensions are addressed in academic literature which I do in the following section on the construction of gender and sexuality.

2.2 Constructions of gender and sexuality

Ervin Goffman (1977) argues is it not so much the social consequences of sex differences that should draw our intellectual attention, but the way these differences continue to be (re)presented within social institutions as justification for 'social arrangements'; that situations which represent gendered interaction do not *express* natural differences so much as *produce* them. As discussed, gender and sexuality are conceptually linked and mutually reinforcing in heterosexuality, continually intersecting to provide meaning through gendered differences in normative heterosexuality (Jackson, 2006). We cannot conceive of heterosexuality without conceiving of

two distinct genders, heteronormativity demands it. Gender is the primary carrier of meaning in everyday interactions because sexuality is ascribed on the basis of gender; before we can recognise someone as heterosexual or homosexual, we must first see them as female or male (Jackson, 2006).

Beyond this gendered understanding of sexuality, the 'scripts' which inform appropriate social and sexual behaviours are also gendered, and so we see the mutually reinforcing relationship between gender and sexuality, how we 'do' gender through interacting in sexual situations and practices; gender identifies sexuality which constructs gender relations. Hegemonic heterosexuality is fundamentally patriarchal and operates on a gendered hierarchy which privileges male dominance, necessitating a subordination of women. This is consistent with feminist sociological arguments that see gendered imbalances of power as resulting from patriarchal social structures and argue gender functions as a class-like relationship situated in the social and economic realms (Connell, 1985; Connell, 1987; Scully, 1990; Jackson, 1999).

Theories of gender relations, which I draw on in this thesis, have been likened to a 'network' connecting fields of theoretical concerns, including but not limited to patriarchy and sexual politics, intersecting across the economic, institutional, social and personal connecting "the social subordination of women, and the cultural practices that sustain it; the politics of sexual object-choice, and particularly the oppression of homosexual people; the sexual division of labour; the formation of character and motive, so far as they are organised as femininity and masculinity; the role of the body in social relations, especially the politics of childbirth; and the nature of strategies of sexual liberation movements" (Connell, 1985: 261). Gender theory asserts that gender relations are maintained through the practices of power, sexuality (which "is a nexus of the relationships between genders"), and labour (Connell, 1985; Rubin, 1992: 28), and are

affected by intersections of race, ethnicity, sexuality and class. This understanding of the interrelationship between gender and sexuality frames my theoretical approach.

When we learn what 'real' sex is, we learn that men 'do' sex 'to' women. This is the real sex script, embedded in hetero-male domination and female subordination epitomised in the act of penis/vagina penetration. The critical interrogation of this script and its relationship to sexual politics has been a central concern for feminist scholars since the second wave. Linking these analyses to the wider body of gender theory has allowed a canon of literature to develop challenging essentialist notions of sexuality and gender as biologically determined, originating from 'nature'. Much feminist work on sexuality has taken a Foucauldian perspective which challenges essentialist thinking and engages with questions of power (Richardson, 1997). For Foucault, power is omnipresent in discourse and the 'truth of sex' is constructed in power; power is constitutive of sexuality (Foucault, 1978; Richardson, 1997; Beres, 2013). Foucauldian analyses of discourses ("a set of statements that belong to a particular discursive formation representing a set of assumptions about the social world" (Beres, 2013: 80)) and power have been very useful in identifying the ways that heterosexuality is *described* and the consequent subject positions available within that, identified through language. However, Foucault's approach has been criticised for its lack of a gendered perspective, lack of recognition of female sexual orientations (Richardson, 1997; Jackson, 1999), and focus on macro level discursive constructions of sex and sexuality to the detriment of the interpersonal materiality of how sex and sexuality are experienced in a gendered hierarchy (Jackson, 1999; Gavey, 2005; Beres, 2013).

Jackson and Scott (2010) address this critique and present a case for the 'rehabilitation' of an interactionist theoretical approach to the feminist sociological study of sexuality, arguing that Foucauldian, post-constructionist and queer theory approaches which have dominated feminist sexuality studies do not allow for analysis of the everyday gendered 'doing' of sexuality which

allow us to locate sexuality in forms of social life. This approach argues that sexual meaning is co-created through interaction in recognition of the reality that sex is (often) performed between two (or more) people which necessitates an interactive element in the construction of sexual meaning (Beres, 2013). Beres (2013) advocates a dualistic theoretical approach which identifies sexual discourses as scripts, concentrating focus on the behavioural aspects of those scripts, rather than their linguistic (subject position) constructions. Similarly, Jackson (1999) argues discourses of sexuality materialise in a gendered heterosexual hierarchy which define gender relations as 'natural' and 'inevitable' and are fundamentally connected to "the structural inequalities characterizing the societies in which they are produced" (Jackson, 1999: 21). Jackson (1999: 21) argues that where Foucault considers "the concept of discourse as antithetical to ideology… we should view discourses as ideological in their effects".

Adopting this interactionist approach shows 1) how people construct sexuality by identifying their underlying assumptions and beliefs about heterosexuality, the subject positions they take up, and the actions and practices they engage in, 2) the processes through which sexuality is "constituted culturally, interpersonally and intrapsychically" among the 'mundane actualities' of daily lives (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 821), 3) the everyday social reality in which sexuality is negotiated and experienced, locating desire as social, exploring "the interconnections between gender, sexuality and other sources of social differentiation and identity without positing deterministic links, but always locating all that we are and all that we do firmly in the social" (Jackson and Scott, 2010: 823). It allows insight into the ways people understand themselves as gendered and sexual beings without "conflating gender and sexuality" or reducing "the complexity of desire to the gender of its object" (Jackson, 1999: 26) and analytical interrogation of people's engagement with the specific cultural discourses of gender and sexuality surrounding them, shedding light on how this relates their individual social situations (Jackson, 1999).

As indicated in the literature, heterosexuality proscribes a set of behaviours that determine gender relations in the form of sexual scripts. As a key site for the (re)production of sexual discourse, popular culture is a prime location of cultural scripts, and music videos in particular offer an instructive and illuminating way to identify these scripts. Situated at the heart of music, entertainment and media culture, music videos serve as instructional guides on gender and sexuality, offering "a way to understand ourselves" (Jhally, 2007, no page number) and (re)present a postfeminist version of sexuality through their heteronormative framework that priorities and normalises heterosexuality, in a style that has been described as heavy with instructional and aspirational representations and tropes lifted from pornographic heterosex (Paasonen, Nikunen, and Saarenmaa, 2007; Railton and Watson, 2007; Gill, 2009a). In chapter three I discuss existing academic approaches to the study of media texts, what they offer and how this thesis builds on their foundations, but here underline the relevance of empirical examination of music videos as a cultural framework from which to interrogate contemporary sexual scripts, gender relations and constructions of female and male sexuality.

It is also important to acknowledge the wider cultural and political context for sexuality and gender relations because of its significance for contemporary sexual politics. In response to President Donald Trump's election in 2016, which was characterised by some as evidence of a growing backlash against feminism (McRobbie, 2016; Alptraum, 2017), between 800,000-1.2 million people marched on Washington DC in March 2017 at the first Women's March, with millions more on all seven continents marching in support (Women's March, 2017). Around the same time, the online #MeToo movement was gaining traction amid a spate of allegations of sexual harassment in the American TV and film industry (Frechette, 2018). Founded by African-American civil rights activist Tarana Burke to support her work with African-American survivors of sexual violence a decade earlier, the #MeToo movement became widespread on a global level following a tweet from white American actress, Alyssa Milano, aimed at publicising the scale and

prevalence of sexual harassment and assault against women (Frechette, 2018; Gill and Orgad, 2018; Phipps, 2019).

The lasting impact of the Me Too movement is yet to be seen but many are questioning how it is re-shaping the sexual landscape and noting a shift in discourse from fears and moral panic over sexualisation to political discussion about the intersection of sex and power (Gill and Orgad, 2018; Valenti, 2018a; Cosslett, 2019; Wildfire, 2019; Willis Aronowitz, 2019). The attention to sex and power raised by the Me Too movement has contributed to a perception of 'white man victimhood' in some sections of society and a reassertion of whiteness and class privilege (Banet-Weiser, 2015; Blow, 2018; Phipps, 2019). This is perhaps best exemplified in the case of Brett Kavanagh who was confirmed to the Supreme Court of the United States of America amid claims of sexual assault and misconduct (BBC News, 2018; Valenti, 2018b; Phipps, 2019) and the much less publicised blocked suspension of our own Lord Lester in the House of Lords amid an upheld complaint of sexual harassment (Walker, 2018). Economically and politically, the contemporary moment is characterised by a rising far-right global politics under harsh economic conditions (Phipps, 2019). Hate crimes fuelled by racism, homophobia and misogyny are on the rise and groups of 'incels' (involuntarily celibate men) and others in the 'manosphere' are spreading hate against women (Phipps, 2019). This cultural and political climate provides the background to contemporary sexual politics for young adults and frames the sexual discourse that informs sexual interactions.

Locating postfeminist notions of gender and sexuality in this moment involves tracing intersectional dimensions of race, class and sexuality in sexualised culture and articulating how they shape different 'sexualities' through the specific ways sexual meaning is coded. I address this in two parts. Firstly, through an overview of intersectionality as a theoretical concept applied to my research (to clarify, taking an intersectional approach to my research means I was interested

to look at how different notions of femininity and masculinity emerged in my participants' diverse social locations). Secondly, by critically interrogating the intersectional dimensions of postfeminist articulations of gender and sexuality that materialised in my research, that is, race, class, and sexuality.

That sexism operates on multiple axes of social division (including but not limited to race, class, sexuality, (dis)ability, age, citizenship and ethnicity) and as a form of oppression intersects with social and personal characteristics to produce diverse forms of discrimination is an ontological truth that underpins the theory of intersectionality and justifies my use of it in this interrogation into the ways hegemonic heterosexuality informs gender relations. Intersectional theory recognises the plurality of genders that emerge from the complex of social locations that make up social life. Feminist scholars from diverse social positions advance an intersectional feminism by challenging white, middle-class, Euro-American centric feminist thought that foregrounds the experiences of white, middle-class, heterosexual, Euro-American women (see hooks, 1981; Hill-Collins, 1991; Skeggs, 2002; Yuval-Davis, 2006; Durham, 2012; Bilge, 2013; Hill-Collins and Bilge, 2016; Ahmed, 2017).

Black American feminist Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality makes visible the complex experiences of black women to illustrate the limitations of single-axis analysis to the multidimensionality of experience demonstrating how conceptualising discrimination as formed from a single categorical base disadvantages and erases (makes invisible) black women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1989; Hancock, 2016).

To understand intersectionality, it is useful to first look at the idea of 'triple oppression' that was circulating among British Black Feminists in the early 1980s (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Nira Yuval-Davis (2006) explains 'triple oppression' as the idea that a person can experience three distinct forms of oppression simultaneously; for example, oppression from being black, being a woman,

and being working class. Yuval-Davis challenges this idea of 'triple oppression' on that basis it essentialises forms of oppression and applies them in an *additive* way. Intersectionality, by contrast, looks at how forms of oppression and discrimination *intersect* – that is, how they meet to form distinct experiences of discrimination. Intersectionality offers a means to understand the complex ways power operates in society and how people experience it which is rarely shaped by one factor but rather by multiple axes that work to influence each other (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016). Crenshaw (1993) identifies three categories of intersectionality: structural intersectionality (the way systems and institutions operate to exclude or marginalise); political intersectionality (conflicting agendas of political activism), and; representational intersectionality (cultural constructions and imagery of difference). In differentiating between these categories, Crenshaw highlights the varied and complex ways intersectional discrimination operates in society.

Fundamentally, intersectionality seeks to identify and address "interlocking power structures" in social life from which "an ethics of non-oppressive coalition-building and claims-making" can emerge (Bilge, 2013: 408). However, Sirma Bilge (2013) draws parallels between what she calls the "ornamental intersectionality" in some academic feminism and Angela McRobbie's (2009) postfeminist 'undoing of feminism', arguing that far from being neutral, 'ornamental intersectionality' disarticulates intersectionality's political potential by undermining its credibility and presenting it as a tool to 'manage' diversity (Bilge: 2013: 408). To claim intersectionality without foregrounding race would be to fall into Bilge's 'ornamental intersectionality'. To adopt intersectionality as a theoretical and methodological framework through which to identify the ways hegemonic heterosexuality discriminates on axes of race, gender, sexuality and class, building knowledge of the way race intersects with sexuality in sexualised popular culture, and the material implications of this for young adults is an important and appropriate application, even in acknowledging my foregrounding of 'gender' as an analytical category.

Along with race, class emerged as a significant social category through which notions of gender and sexuality were interpreted by my participants and so it is important that I clarify how I understand class. In line with Pierre Bourdieu (1984), Mike Savage (2015) and Beverly Skeggs (2002) I understand social class as formed from distinctive forms of capital: social, cultural, economic and symbolic. These 'capitals' have the potential to confer power and status to the holder, are transmitted in families and generations, and inform our ways of understanding and meaning-making through the complex interrelationship of our social position which limits or grants access to them (Skeggs, 2002). Social class in this conceptualisation is an "arbitrarily imposed definition with real social effects" which are felt and experienced in social relations and interactions (Skeggs, 2002: 8) resulting in diverse gendered and sexed subject positions that limit and inform agentic potential. I reflect on my positionality and the power relations inherent in my research in chapters four and eight but here underline that by adopting an intersectional theoretical and analytical framework, my approach recognises the multiplicity of categories of gender within a male-female binary.

Addressing the intersectional dimensions of postfeminist articulations of gender and sexuality that materialised in my research (race, class, and sexuality) I return to the work of Gill (2003; 2007c; 2009a; 2012b; 2017) who draws attention to the ways a heteronormative postfeminist sensibility is raced, classed and sexed in its representations of femininity. Gill highlights the patterns of contradictions in these representations which mark it out as distinctively postfeminist and link it to neoliberal ideologies of individualism, choice and personal responsibility. Integral to this debate is the way that femininity and sexuality are linked in sexualised culture and the way the female body is represented within this. Under postfeminism, the body takes priority in defining femininity (Gill, 2007c; McRobbie, 2009) and the specific idealised postfeminist female body as white, slim, middle-class, young, conventionally attractive, and able-bodied is well documented (Tasker and Negra, 2007; McRobbie, 2009; Gill, 2009a; Widdows, 2018).

When, and indeed if, different bodies are (re)presented, they carry different meanings and it is the unpacking of these meanings that is of central importance to my analysis. Gill's (2003: 103) postfeminist sexual subject is sexually active and desiring, autonomous and knowing in her sexual power, representing a shift from the past sexual objectification of passive women to be 'looked at', to the active construction of "knowing, active, and desiring sexual subjects". As Gill (2003; 2009a) notes, however, not every woman can be a sexual subject as evidenced in the exclusions of these representations; postfeminist sexual subjectivity operates on multiple axes of discrimination which carry complexifying connotations for intersections of race, ethnicity, bodily appearance, sexuality and class. For example, sexualised representations of black female bodies carry different meanings (sexual promise, untamed sexuality, sexual deviancy) than do white bodies (normativity, sexual subjectification), as do middle-class representations (respectability) from working-class representations (sluttishness) (Skeggs, 2002; Hill-Collins, 2004; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Gill, 2009a; McRobbie, 2009; Durham, 2012).

In interrogating the discriminatory bases of postfeminist representations of gender and sexuality the connections between postfeminist culture and neoliberal ideology become central. In postfeminism, inequalities and (dis)advantages emerging from social, political and structural locations, for example gender, race, ethnicity, class and sexuality, become invisible, are not recognised as having any relation to experience, and there is no vocabulary available for discussing them (Gill, 2017). This representational lens reflects neoliberal notions of the importance of individualism, choice and personal responsibility in which one's life circumstances and outcomes are positioned as resulting from personal achievements or failures, depoliticised and detached from wider social and cultural influences and contexts (Gill, 2007a; Budgeon, 2015; Moran, 2017). In this way, postfeminist discourse individualises women and disarticulates feminism, "dispersing women across divisions of time and space, age and class, ethnicity and sexuality so that those who might otherwise have found some common cause together are

increasingly unlikely to do so" (McRobbie, 2009: 52). This notion of 'individualisation' is important in consideration of the ways representation interacts with reality by positioning us as autonomous subjects and constituting our subjectivities (Gill and Scharff, 2011: 8), a theme I explore in more detail throughout this thesis.

Subjectivity, that is knowing oneself and one's feelings, including ones gender and sexuality, can be understood as transitory in the sense that the reflexive 'I' from which subjectivity is recognised is not fixed but always in a process of being socially (re)constituted and (re)constructed through interaction (Jackson, 1999: 24). This symbolic interactionist approach recognises the time and space contextuality of notions of gender and sexuality, emphasises the social self and the continual negotiation of meaning and social practice in the production of subjectivity, and makes space for individual agency in the perpetuation and resistance to hegemonic forms of gender and heterosexuality (Jackson, 1999: 24). Analyses of "narratives of self" have illuminated subjectivities through understanding how individuals construct their socially located biographies (Jackson, 1999: 24). I adopted this approach in my research, listening to young adults tell stories of gender and sexuality from their lives through which I intuited how they learnt to be gendered and sexual beings (Jackson, 1999). In this way I saw how they conceptualised themselves as gendered and sexual beings through interaction with music videos and other media texts, and through interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction. By examining how subjectivities are constituted in interaction with representations of sex and relationships in music videos I have shed light on the processes by which power works with and through subjectivity, examining the historically specific manifestations of gender and sexuality rooted in the social and economic order, embodied and enacted in interaction with others (Jackson, 1999; Gill, 2007a).

Sexual subjectivity is an everyday lived practice; we are routinely required to engage in and make sense of sexual situations through which we learn the rules and work out who we are as gendered

and sexual beings *within our specific social and cultural context*. I address how the contemporary social and cultural context is navigated, sexual politics understood, and sexual subjectivities embodied in my findings chapters. In the following section, I consider how notions of female sexuality are framed by neoliberal discourses of agency and empowerment and how this interacts with contemporary sexual subjectivities.

2.3 Female sexuality and gender politics

In the preceding sections I highlighted how academic literature identifies gender and sexuality as socially and interactionally constructed in hegemonic heterosexuality. I turn now to how female sexuality is conceptualised in postfeminist media culture. As introduced, postfeminism is fundamentally sexualised and frames the feminine as sexual, linking femininity, gender, and sexuality. A brief history of the trajectory of feminist academic debate on sex is useful in understanding the current field of debate.

Second wave feminism began roughly around the late 1960s and early 1970s in Western society and is characterised by radical feminism and the women's liberation movement (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2006). Second wave feminists sought to frame the social, sexual and personal as inextricably linked in a feminist agenda and identified private and public forms of sexism embedded in "socialisation", setting out the entrenchment of sexism in "thought and practice" (Krolokke and Sorensen, 2006: 11). A characterising moment of second wave feminism which continues to cast a shadow over contemporary debate on sexualisation is the 'sex wars' or 'porn wars' of the 1980s which challenged heterosexual practices and pornography, which some linked to rape and sexual violence against women and institutionalised sexism (Gill, 2012b).

Fought on fiercely divided territory, some feminists conflated heterosexual sex with pornography, (sexual) violence and female oppression while others took a 'sex positive' stance, with polemic

sides entrenched in binaries of pro/anti sex/pornography where "every feminist was made to take a position or was forcibly allocated one" (Genz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2012b: 494). This divisive feminist debate can be seen as a precursor to the contemporary "sexualisation wars" (Gill, 2012b) which is concerned with the contemporary moment of intensified sexual imagery and interest in all things sexual commonly referred to as the sexualisation of culture. Common to both these academic debates is the centrality of questions on the nature and purpose of sex and morality. Gill (2012b: 485 – 486) identifies three positions which characterise the contemporary debate. Firstly, the 'public morals' position which argues from a position of public decency and sexual standards and is often grounded in religious discourse and fears for the sexualisation of children. Secondly, and oppositional to the public morals position, is the 'democratising sex' position. Advocates of this approach argue the liberalisation of sexual attitudes and availability of sexual imagery, facilitated by technological advances, has had a positive effect, pluralising sexual culture and unproblematically liberating women and men. Thirdly are feminist approaches, in which I situate my work. Feminist approaches to the sexualisation of culture are diverse and frequently divided along similar lines to the 'sex wars' of the second wave, stalling in a pro/anti sex/sexualisation binary. Arguments opposed to sexualised culture have linked the mainstreaming of sexualised imagery to sexualised violence and have been conceptually linked to an anti-sex position, while those taking a more optimistic view argue for the sexual liberation available to women through the new potential for an agentic sexuality (Attwood, 2011; Attwood, 2012; Coy and Garner, 2012; Gill, 2012b; Moran, 2017).

Another way these divisions can be conceptualised is through the lens of 'feminisms', variously as waves (second wave 'v' third wave), generations (young 'v' old), or identification (power 'v' victim) (Paglia, 1992; Wolf, 1993; Denfeld, 1995; Whelehan, 2000; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Walter, 2010b; Budgeon, 2011; Gill, 2016). Whichever way we address the debate, a central component of one side is always conceptually connected to postfeminism: third wave (sometimes

used as a synonym for postfeminism); young (typically younger women are represented in postfeminism); power (a central guiding goal of postfeminism). I address postfeminism in more detail in a moment, but first want to clarify that in this thesis I move away from moralising concerns about sexualisation and take a 'sex-positive but anti-sexism' position, problematising the way sex and relationships are represented within cultural practice by interrogating interpretations of those representations and questioning how gender, race, class and sexuality intersect with them, shaping meanings and, ultimately, sexual identity and politics (Attwood, 2006; Gill and Orgad, 2018).

Returning to questions of postfeminism in the sexualisation of culture debate, I must first address in more detail what postfeminism 'means'. Postfeminism has been conceptualised in multiple ways but is usually characterised by its foregrounding of notions of individualism, personal choice and autonomy, consumerism, and an absence of a vocabulary to address political and social change. Postfeminism has been analytically addressed in multiple social, cultural and political contexts but most significantly for this research it has been extensively articulated as inherent to and disseminated in popular culture (McRobbie, 2004; Banet-Wesier, 2007; Gill, 2007c; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Genz, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009; McRobbie, 2009; Nurka, 2016; Gill, 2017).

Critics of postfeminism link its prominence to a rise of 'anti-feminism' (Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2015; McRobbie, 2016), or what McRobbie (2004: 255 - 256; 2009) has termed the 'undoing of feminism': postfeminism's appropriation of feminist discourses, presenting feminism as being 'taken into account' and therefore neutralised, made to appear "redundant" (see also Tasker and Negra, 2007). An example of this in action is the prevalence of media representations championing (primarily young, white, slim, rich, Anglo-American) women which appear on one level to reflect feminist goals, yet which on closer examination reflect a

limited and limiting version of womanhood, seeped in white, patriarchal, heteronormative ideals devoid of social context. These presentations which are seen to have no political agenda are classed and raced and reproduce privileged positions across multiple social divisions and are concerned primarily with the consumption of goods to facilitate gendered subjectivity (Tasker and Negra, 2007). Feminist scholars have argued that by using individualistic, depoliticised discourses centred on economic capabilities and consumerism, postfeminism offers women a kind of empowered consumerism in place of political change that masks an underlying misogyny (McRobbie, 2004; Banet-Weiser, 2007; Gill, 2009a; Gill, 2009b; McRobbie, 2009; Social Science Bites, 2013; Banet-Weiser, 2015; Nurka, 2016).

Postfeminism's relationship to neoliberalism intersects with sexualised culture and female sexuality in the (re)commodification of sex and the female body, the packaging of sexual desire and, crucially, *desirability*, to make it marketable (Levy, 2005; Attwood, 2006; Attwood, 2009; Gill and Orgad, 2018). Moran (2017: 126) cites Rich (1980) in arguing that positioning women as sexual commodities for male consumption is a dimension of heterosexuality and Ariel Levy (2005: 178) gives an account of this in her analysis of the classic postfeminist text *Sex and the City*. In her analysis Levy argues *Sex and the City* presents sex as a consumptive act that has as much to do with having the right outfit as the right sexual partner, a theme she expands to the contemporary "porn star fantasy":

> Making sexiness into something simple, quantifiable makes it easier to explain and market. If you remove the human factor from sex and make it about stuff – big fake boobs, bleached blonde hair, long nails, poles, thongs – then you can sell it. Suddenly, sex requires shopping; you need plastic surgery, peroxide, a manicure, a mall.

In the above quote, Levy (2005: 184) articulates the process Esch and Mayer (2007: 107 - 108) call the 'genrification of sex' in which sex becomes a set of objects, a genre, with easily

recognisable and formulaic visual features, easy to identify and sell, and where differences are marginalised. The commodification of sex outlined here, embodied in the female form, is essential to understanding the centrality of the neoliberal ideal of consumerism in female sexuality.

Reflecting McRobbie's (2004; 2009) argument outlined above, under postfeminism female sexuality has become a commodity to be sold (through representation) and bought in any number of ways including cosmetic surgery, beauty treatments, clothing, social activities (e.g. pole dancing classes), and media products (e.g. magazines). The consumption of these often painful and often expensive products and procedures, then, is in service to the successful achievement of sexual desirability, the active seeking of which has been noted as essential to its achievement (Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007c; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Gill, 2009b). Notions of postfeminist sexuality frequently centre on discourses of choice, empowerment and agency, asserting participation in sexualised activities is freely, agentically, and unproblematically chosen on the part of an empowered woman, yet do not acknowledge that male participation is not so encouraged or celebrated, missing the gendered and politicised process of sexualisation taking place (Levy, 2005; Gill, 2012b).

The postfeminist female sexual subject is white, slim, middle-class, conventionally attractive and heterosexual. She embodies a sexual confidence that sets her apart from her less sexually assertive predecessors and identifies her as unmistakably contemporary. This co-optation of hard fought second wave feminist goals of female empowerment and sexual agency, re-coded to signify a conventional sexual desirability, demonstrates how patriarchal hegemonic heterosexuality neutralises and undermines authentic claims to power by locating them in a male fantasy dreamworld (Levy, 2005; Jhally, 2007; Railton and Watson, 2007). In postfeminist representations of female sexuality we see how dominant definitions of the erotic, understood through raced and

classed categorisations of women's bodies and sexualities, rework patriarchal gendered patterns of domination and submission (gender politics) through the process of cultural domination written into cultural representation (Hall, 1998; Jackson, 1999: 16; Skeggs, 2005; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008); we see how strong, assertive womanhood is re-coded to signify sexually attractive and desirable postfeminist sexual subject, and functions as a newer, more insidious form of sexual objectification (Gill, 2003: 105). I empirically evidence this in chapters six and seven.

Before moving on to outline feminist arguments on the role of agency and notions of empowerment, I draw attention to neoliberal discourses of individualisation and personal responsibility as they relate to postfeminist notions of sexuality. Shifting discourses in contemporary manifestations of feminism advancing a move away from considerations of social justice and women's rights towards work/life balance, happiness and a requirement on women to 'lean in' in the workplace have been attributed to the creation of a new feminist subject "who accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care" (Rottenberg, 2014; Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019: 5). This changing of vocabulary is central to postfeminism with its lack of language concerned with political and social change, structural and collective conceptualisations of problems and solutions. Instead, a postfeminist vocabulary encourages women to look internally to fix their problems, to be resilient and work on the self; to change themselves and not the world (Gill and Orgad, 2018).

The notion of individualism is central to Gill's postfeminist sensibility, observed throughout popular culture (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007c) and directly links to contemporary notions of sex and sexuality which are often (re)presented as acts of individualised hedonism, individual fulfilment and individual desires (Attwood, 2006). In this contradictory entanglement of feminist discourses of sexual agency with antifeminist discourses of depoliticization and individualisation,

characteristic of Gill's (2007c) postfeminist sensibility, we once again see McRobbie's (2004) double entanglement and the process of cultural domination which neutralises resistance, reinforcing the hegemonic. Relating this to my earlier point on how dominant definitions of the erotic are coded in representations of the female body, we can see that by individualising sex and sexuality, making them matters of individual choice devoid of structural iniquities, immune from the effects of racism, sexism, classism or any other form of discrimination, any "negative outcomes…are positioned as personal failings, and the individual positioned as fully responsible for her own actions" (Gill, 2007c; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008; Moran, 2017: 124).

This point leads to questions of agency and empowerment as sexualisation is re-positioned as "something in which active, playful sexual subjects apparently freely choose to take part in" rather than as "something 'done to' women" (Gill, 2012b: 492). It is not the focus of this research to examine whether, how or to what extent women exercise or achieve agency in postfeminist sexualised culture or in heterosexuality, rather, this thesis uncovers the complexities and contradictions involved in navigating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics. However, an understanding of this debate is useful in clarifying how female sexuality is approached academically and how its enactment in popular culture has been framed as 'empowering'. As discussed, the postfeminist female sexual subject is sexually agentic, arguably compulsorily so (Gill, 2008a: 440). Her sexual agency, or subjectification, has been lauded and critiqued as has her achievement of empowerment through her sexuality.

These debates are closely related to debates on postfeminism, the sexualisation of culture, and consumption as outlined above. A useful overview is contained in the academic debate between Gill and Duits and van Zoonen, abbreviated and summarised here for the purposes of illuminating a central theme of debate, which centres on public discourses of girl's clothing. Duits and van Zoonen (2007) argue discourses in relation to girls' clothing operate to control

girls' bodies and rarely if ever give space to their voices (which they equate with agency). Duits and van Zoonen (2007: 162) argue girls within this discourse are positioned as operating in a "false consciousness" rather than as agentically choosing. For Gill (2007a: 72), cultural context is the crucial factor in the ability to choose one's clothing in the sexualised West, an analytic approach which was interpreted by Duits and van Zoonen (2007: 164), as a means of silencing girls' voices, a sentiment echoed by Attwood (2011: 205).

Contained in this exchange is the essence of the agency debate; are those who participate in sexualised culture subject to a false consciousness where they are unable to see the cultural and structural forces at work in society, or, are they critical and reflexive savvy consumers, in other words, free choosing, autonomous social agents (Gill and Donaghue, 2013). This literature usually focusses on specific practices which are, arguably by their very selection, regarded as contentious, for example pole dancing and engaging with pornography (see Holland and Attwood, 2009; Attwood, 2011; Attwood, 2012). Conceptually, agency is linked to empowerment in postfeminism suggesting that through participating (engaging in a certain activity, practice, or behaviour, frequently linked to consumerism) a sense of personal empowerment is achieved, echoing and reinforcing notions of individualism discussed earlier (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007a; Riley et al., 2017). In sexuality, this sense of empowerment is expressed through the achievement of heterosexual desirability which is the pinnacle of female achievement conferring a modern form of 'agentic' power because it is now done to please oneself and not men (Gill, 2007c; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Concerns around the exclusions of postfeminist sexual agency and empowerment linked to race, class, body size, sexuality and homogenised Western definitions of attractiveness have been addressed in relation to cultural texts and dominant and subordinate popular discourses highlighting its patriarchal hegemonic heteronormative imperative (Gill, 2009a; Evans, Riley and

Shankar, 2010). I empirically demonstrate how this emerged in my data through a discussion of participant interpretations of representations of black women in chapter five. This notion of agency *as* empowerment has been criticised, particularly in relation to sexual subjectivity (Coy and Garner, 2012; Gavey, 2012; Gill and Donaghue, 2013; Riley et al., 2017) and I follow this critical stance that paradoxically identifies agency and empowerment as the capacity to negotiate situations which are themselves considered inevitable (Coy and Garner, 2012: 294 – 295; see also Jhally, 2007 for real-life examples of women attempting to exercise agency in the face of male sexual 'attention') and echo Gavey's (2012: 719) "fatigue" with the very notion of sexual empowerment in its current depoliticised "flabby" neoliberal postfeminist form. Instead, I address sexual identities and sexual politics as material implications of engagement with postfeminist sexual subjectivities, identifying with research that addresses sexual practice (see Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Coy and Garner, 2012; Moran, 2017).

I make one final point on agency so far as it relates to the symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective I adopt in this thesis. Following Jackson (1999: 24) I recognise agency as fundamental to the creation and maintenance of alternative, resistant subject positions which challenge the dominant order of hegemonic heterosexuality and gender relations. Implicit in my position is the assertion that agency operates *within* social structures, including patriarchy, social class and heterosexuality, which are outside individual control and which work to frame lived experiences and agentic potential (Fine, 1993; Skeggs, 2002; Brickell, 2006). This thesis addresses how heterosexuality shapes and informs everyday gendered sex and relationship interactions and questions of human agency are central to this inquiry. I discuss my findings in relation to sexual agency in chapters seven and eight.

Before closing this section on female sexuality and gender politics I address the field of academic feminist research on sexual practice. I orient this research in a feminist framework of power and

sexuality and address the interaction of institutional heterosexuality and contemporary sexual politics. Much feminist media criticism in this area has recently centred on the after effects, criticisms and (intended or otherwise) consequences of the #MeToo movement and other global feminist movements, drawing attention to the repositioning of discussions around sex from a moral panic to an engagement with questions of power (Gill and Orgad, 2018). Other work has empirically explored the ways hegemonic heterosexuality and postfeminist discourses of individuality, choice, agency and empowerment sustain unequal power in gender relations and the implications of this for female sexual health and sexual violence against women, highlighting the negative impact for girls and women (Ringrose, 2011; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Moran, 2017). Progress has also been made in bridging academic and practice and policy work, drawing out the how the postfeminist double entanglement contributes to negative outcomes for female sexual subjectivities in postfeminist sexualised culture by framing sexualisation as a 'conducive context' for violence against women and girls through its normalisation of practices which serve as templates (scripts) for gendered sexual behaviour (Coy and Garner, 2012). Moran (2017: 127) links sexualisation to dominant constructions of heterosexuality and sets out the terms postfeminist female sexuality must meet within masculine heteronormative discourses, arguing women need to act as sexual gatekeepers until "socially defined criteria" (e.g. romantic commitment, expressions of love) have been met. This thesis develops this body of work by adding empirical and analytical insight to the complex relationship between popular contemporary discourses on sexuality and the lived sexual experiences, and subjectivities, of young adults.

Feminists working in the field of sexual violence have faced criticism from self-proclaimed postfeminists for positioning women as 'victims' arguing it has spawned a 'victim feminism' underpinned by understandings of power and sex similar to those of Victorian chastity (Paglia, 1992; Wolf, 1993; Denfeld, 1995; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Whelehan, 2000; Walter, 2010b). In

response to the postfeminist argument that sexual violence is overstated, that it is not a concern for women today, I point to the unremitting levels of physical sexual violence women continue to face detailed in chapter one, and to the level and *type* of online abuse women routinely face. Here we see sexism and misogyny manifest in the daily vitriol directed at women in every sphere of life through the standardised use of death and rape threats as a way to silence and 'discipline' them, frequently spilling over into physical sexual abuse (Tsatsou, 2014; Powell and Henry, 2017; Gill and Toms, 2019). If sexualised violence were not a contemporary problem, surely we would be hearing alternative terms of abuse being thrown at women in public life?

The literature above demonstrates how meaning is "deployed within and emergent from social interaction" in daily life and social practice "through which each of us negotiates and makes sense of our own sexual lives" (Jackson 1999: 5) in the juxtaposition of postfeminist discourses of female empowerment set against an all too real background of routine abuse for many women. The negotiation and interpretation of these two distinct yet intertwined social dimensions is addressed in this research by illuminating how my research participants constructed and managed their sexual identities and negotiated complex and contradictory sexual politics (Jackson, 1999; Jackson, 2006).

2.4 Sexual politics and questions of power

The literature identifies sexuality and gender as not natural or biological but socially and interactionally constructed with integral power structures (heteronormativity, patriarchy, neoliberalism) that prioritise male desire and subordinate female sexuality. The rules of hegemonic heterosexuality, drawn from essentialist sexual ideologies are the framework on which our sexual lives and interactions are judged, and which inform contemporary sexual politics. Understood this way, the central importance of querying heterosexuality becomes fundamental to an understanding of sexual politics (Jackson, 1999: 10). These rules are part of a patriarchal

system of domination and subordination which prioritises men and inevitably leads to a sexual landscape where women are subordinated. This is the basis of sexual politics, the study of which must develop understandings of power by giving full weight to its politics (Connell, 1985: 266; Rubin, 1992).

In *Sexual Politics,* Kate Millett (1977: 23) defines politics as "power-structured relationships, arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another". Connell (1987) extends this definition by introducing considerations of group interests in the gender order and the effects of this on transformational trajectories. Connell (1987) grounds this argument in notions of hegemonic struggle which identifies dominant and subordinate groups and I adopt this reworking of Millett's definition which articulates the complex gendered inequality of patriarchal social and sexual relations outlined above and embedded in sexual scripts. In questioning how it comes to be that society consents to and accepts a sexual politics, similarly to Connell (1985; 1987) I use the Gramscian concept of hegemony to conceptualise how power operates culturally to (re)assert itself through winning the 'hearts and minds' of the people. By using this theoretical approach, I identify manifestations of postfeminist heteronormativity in popular culture (power) and trace its path into the lived subjectivities of my research participants (politics).

To reiterate my earlier point, I focus on heteronormativity as the dominant model of heterosexuality not to prioritise heterosexual sexual-object choice, but to draw attention to the way heterosexuality constructs social and sexual gender relations, the way we understand how relationships work. I further clarify that in centring heterosexuality, I do not imply or suggest that sexuality is the sole cause or effect of female oppression, nor do I equate heterosexual sex with sexual violence. The preceding theorisation influenced my identification of hegemonic heteronormativity as an institution based on sexism and sexist oppression that has real and damaging consequences and I empirically engage with its manifestation in popular culture

through my unique and innovative methodological approach. The damaging consequences of institutional heterosexuality, the inequalities and harm it causes (Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1992; Downing, 2012; Moran, 2017), are justification enough for its critical analysis. Additionally, this thesis extends knowledge of how sexuality and gender are (re)produced in everyday social interactions and empirically evidences how social practices, specifically watching music videos and engaging with social media, are part of the process of cultural domination in which notions of acceptable and unacceptable gendered sexuality circulate to (re)establish hegemonic power.

I use the Gramscian concept of hegemony to interrogate how dominant heterosexual power is transmitted through representation and negotiated and experienced in everyday interaction. Using hegemony as a lens to conceptualise power, inspired by its use in cultural criticism (Hall, 1986; Hall, 2017) and gender theory (Connell, 1985; Connell, 1987; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005), allowed me to address the power relations in heterosexuality and postfeminism, meeting the gap in sexual scripting theory highlighted previously, and empirically progress Gill's argument that postfeminism is now hegemonic in contemporary life (Gill, 2017: 606). The concept of hegemony, developed to interrogate class-relations under Fascism, refers to a complex of ideas that work together to form a coherent world-view philosophy and, through the social organisation of private life and cultural processes, means a "social ascendancy" (Connell, 1987: 184).

Hegemony supports my social constructionist and interactionist framework by offering a way to demonstrate how dominant practices become so and maintain their dominance, serving the interests of dominant groups in a given society with the freely given consent of the people while discouraging resistance and opposition by presenting itself as 'common-sense' (Bocock, 1986; Brookfield, 2017). In hegemony, the distinction between state (a coercive power operating through the police and armed forces) and civil society (site of production of social and political

power) foregrounds the importance of those civil state institutions which produce, sustain, and reproduce social structures (Bocock, 1986; Hall, 1986; Joseph, 2005). I adopt hegemony to critically interrogate the institution of heterosexuality and its role in shaping and informing everyday gendered sex and relationship interactions.

In developing the notion of hegemonic masculinity, Connell (1987) argues multiple masculinities circulate at any one time and hegemonic masculinity operates in opposition to subordinate masculinities, in a hierarchical system, and through this social order its dominance is established. Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 832) point to empirical ethnographic studies which have identified a plurality of complex gender constructions, evidencing the "active struggle for dominance" implicit in Gramscian hegemony. It is through this cultural expression of dominant and subordinate and the ensuing struggle for cultural dominance that we see how notions of self, of subjectivity, are necessarily contradictory as people negotiate oppositional positions; "how the so-called 'self' which underpins these ideological formations is not a unified but a contradictory subject and a social construction" (Hall, 1986: 27). By using a hegemonic framework I identify and examine dominant and subordinate ideologies circulating in my research participants' social worlds to illustrate how hegemonic heterosexuality neutralises oppositional and subordinate sexualities and subject positions through neoliberal discourses of individualisation and consumption, revealed in the contradictory identity constructions necessary to embodied gendered and sexual subjectivities (Hall, 1986; Connell, 1987).

The foundation of hegemony is philosophy which Gramsci believes is contained in language and discourse, notions of 'common sense' and popular thought (Bocock, 1986: 59). A central means of establishing a philosophical worldview is media representation (Bocock, 1986; Connell, 1987; Hall, 1998), already established as a central producer of sexual ideology (Rich, 1980; Rubin, 1992; McRobbie, 2004) central to the construction of sexual identities (Jackson, 1999). Scholars of

sexualised culture have argued that media professionals and the culture industries today operate as sexual experts (Attwood, 2009; Harvey and Gill, 2011), a position I extend to include musicians who are located at the heart of music, entertainment and media culture (Jhally, 2007). The significance of this for understanding how hegemonic heterosexuality creates and maintains power becomes apparent when we consider that for hegemony to be effective, a contemporary 'elite' in touch with the masses communicates its philosophy meeting the emotional needs of the people through an empathetic understanding, developing and maintaining a consensual relationship (Bocock, 1986; Connell, 1987). Celebrities can be argued to operate as a hegemonic 'elite' in contemporary Western society, embodying neoliberal ideals of material wealth, sexual success and desirability (Mercer, 2013; Mendick et al., 2019). In this conceptualisation, the importance of musicians to the maintenance of hegemonic heterosexuality becomes clear; musicians hold positions of power in the articulation of normative sexuality, or in Hall's (1998: 447) terms, they have cultural power in their ability to shape definitions which they "impose and implant" through representations in their music videos, defining the culture of the dominant.

Hegemony's non-reductive approach to constructions of 'class' and non-homogenous subject make it particularly useful for this interrogation of heterosexuality by allowing for an intersectional analysis, reflecting my methodological and analytical approach (Hall, 1986). Its foregrounding of culture and common-sense as central to social development (Hall, 1986) are further justification of its suitability for this work which examines the relationship between representation and reality, understanding the process of cultural meaning-making. Gill (2017) argues a postfeminist sensibility in media culture is now hegemonic, and McRobbie (2004: 256; 2009) observes that postfeminist discourse presents feminism as being 'taken into account' as 'common sense' in the Gramscian sense, while also repudiating it, thereby neutralising its political imperative as an oppositional force, underlining the 'undoing' of feminism. Gill (2017: 606) equates a postfeminist sensibility with a kind of "gendered neoliberalism", through which its

power as a hegemonic philosophy becomes all the more effective in its grounding in economic and political (absorption of feminism) discourse.

The consumerist dimension of postfeminist culture, grounded in neoliberal ideological and economic ethics, has been highlighted by feminist scholars (Genz and Brabon, 2009; Budgeon, 2015) and is epitomised in the commodified sexuality outlined earlier. This has contributed to a change in sexual attitudes and is linked to an emphasis on individualism regarded as a "refusal of genuine sexual politics" (Attwood, 2009: xxiii). By exculpating patriarchy and its institutions, women are held responsible for their disadvantaged positions and negative experiences in all areas of life, including in sexual interactions (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Gill, 2017; Moran, 2017). This is how postfeminist neoliberal 'philosophies' shape gendered sexual interaction in a process of hegemonic leadership; they make the structures appear normal, 'common-sense', and in so doing, frame interactions and behaviours between women and men, between women and women and men and men, in subordination and domination so that we become what we practice being (Frye, 1983: 34).

I empirically examine how this process happens in my findings chapters using the framework of sexual scripts and cultural domination as discussed. My innovative empirical approach, justified in chapter three and discussed in detail in chapter four, uncovers the ways representations of sex and relationships in music videos work with contemporary discourses to shape and position gendered and sexual subjectivities, reinforcing hegemonic heteronormativity and the discriminatory axes of social difference underpinning it, maintaining hegemonic power. This argument is based on an implicit assumption that representations matter. Sexual stories are told through representation as sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Plummer, 1995; Railton and Watson, 2007) and if those stories function to oppress and subordinate social groups, the literature suggests this is a problem. Using hegemony to conceptualise power and trace this

process offers a significant and exciting opportunity to develop and strengthen existing work in the fields of cultural studies and feminist media studies with empirical evidence of how representation communicates cultural power.

Symbolic interactionism offers a useful insight into these dynamics. Symbolic interactionism[2] stems from a social constructionist perspective and is concerned with the empirical study of social life. Based on the principles that people act towards things on the basis of their meanings for them, that those meanings arise from interactions with others, and that meanings change (Blumer, 1969: 2; Fine, 1990; Fine, 1993; Plummer, 2000), symbolic interactionism advances a view of power as symbol creation and interaction (Fine, 1993: 81), meaning as an interactive process, and the self as built from encounters and 'endowed with shifting meaning' (Plummer, 2000: no page number). Symbolic interactionism is sociological in nature, problematises questions of meaning creation (Fine, 1993), is founded on empirical inquiry, and focuses on action and interaction, all central to the aims of this research through which I justify its appropriation.

It is important to acknowledge that symbolic interactionism is not, however, without criticism. Its first main criticism is that it only believes in 'agentic choices' (Fine, 1993). To be sure, symbolic interactionism assumes agency for the individual, but within a framework of social institutions and structures (for example patriarchy, class, heterosexuality), over which the individual has no control; in symbolic interactionism the individual mediates and is mediated through this process (Fine, 1993). This recognition means that structures "can only be understood in the context of the circumstances in which these social realities are expressed" (Fine, 1993: 69). The second main criticism is that symbolic interactionism, frequently associated with micro-sociology and

[2] The origins of symbolic interactionism are variously debated but there is general agreement that George Herbert Mead is considered its 'founder' and Herbert Blumer later coined the term 'Symbolic Interactionism' in his 1969 book of the same name. For a full consideration of the origins of symbolic interactionism see Denzin, N. K. (1992) Symbolic Interactionism and Cultural Studies: The Politics of Interpretation; Fine, G. A. (1993) The Sad Demise, Mysterious Disappearance, and Glorious Triumph of Symbolic Interactionism; Plummer, K. (2000) A World in the Making: Symbolic Interactionism in the Twentieth Century

qualitative, particularly ethnographic, methods, does not address macro structures, is 'individualising and subjective' (Fine, 1990; Plummer, 2000). Symbolic interactionism disputes the micro-macro distinction as false and asserts there is no distinction between 'macro' structural and philosophical forces and 'micro' interactions that shape daily decision making. Instead, symbolic interactionism argues for the meso-structural level where 'structure is mediated through individual actions' (Fine, 1993: 69). Mesoscopic analysis brings attention to social dynamics through which state, institutions, and economic forces compel the individual to compliance (Fine, 1993); the interactionist problematic is made up of the 'massive social networks' which constitute these interpenetrations (Plummer, 2000). This thesis is a mesostructural symbolic interactionist examination of institutional hegemonic heterosexuality mediated through popular culture, specifically music video, and its relationship to the lives, actions and practices of my participants.

Stemming from an interactionist perspective, Gagnon and Simon's sexual scripting theory focuses on the differences between men and women and not the power relations (sexual politics) between them, yet, as Jackson (1999: 9) argues, there is no way to conceive of questions of power and inequality within this framework without recourse to "meaning and interpersonal conduct"; scrips are based in interaction. I have shown that the literature indicates heteronormative heterosexuality shapes gender through interaction, that it places individuals into a position of being either normal or deviant based on sexual behaviours, and that to be considered normal we must conform to gendered norms set out for us in sexual scripts, e.g. the male sexual drive script and the female sexual gatekeeper script. We make sense of these scripts through a constant reworking of our gendered and sexual subjectivities in social and interactional experiences through which notions of self come to be seen as 'common sense' in their routinisation, appearing natural and inevitable; we 'do' heterosexuality in talk and action, in demeanour and

dress, in the mundane activities which order our daily existence (Jackson, 1999: 179 – 180; Jackson, 2006).

2.5 Conclusion

To conclude this chapter, I reiterate the key points I have made within in. Firstly, I have set out my understanding of heterosexuality within the literature as socially constructed, heteronormative, patriarchal and discriminatory, rooted in iniquities of gender and sexuality, and based on essentialist arguments of a 'natural biological order'. I have grounded the 'version' of heterosexuality I address in literature that frames it as hegemonic and represented in sexualised postfeminist media culture, which is similarly discriminatory and closely related to neoliberalism, demonstrating how notions of (un)acceptable sexuality and gender relations within heterosexuality are learnt as scripts. I have identified sexuality and gender as continually socially and interactionally (re)constituted and (re)constructed and drawn attention to the specific ways these gendered notions of sexuality are significant for sexual practice and politics through interrogating their social and interactional constructions, critically examining intersectional notions of postfeminist female sexuality, drawing out central academic themes of debate and relating them to my argument. I have drawn on the notion of hegemony, informed by cultural studies applications, to identify how and where I understand power to be in sexual politics and set out my theoretical approach for its identification throughout this thesis.

This chapter situates and expands on the academic problem I address (the enduring gendered inequality of hegemonic heterosexuality) and outlines the conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks underpinning my analytical approach to studying it. Before moving on to outline and justify the specific methodological approach I took in my research, chapter three presents a critical overview of the field of academic study that has previously attempted to address this problem including media and cultural studies approaches to audience readings and

interpretations, feminist analyses of media and cultural texts, and other approaches to studying cultural meaning making. In this way I frame this thesis in the existing empirical field and illustrate how my work advances a new and innovative method.

Chapter 3:
Researching the phenomenon

This thesis is an ontological inquiry into the interpretive processes at play when people watch music videos. It identifies what people think is real or unreal in music videos and examines how they make those decisions. To meet this empirical challenge, I developed a methodological approach that prioritises experience and locates answers in the experiences of young adults. Chapter two critically engaged with the academic theories that influenced my analytical approach and underlie the central themes of this research. This chapter critically engages with the field of academic empirical study in media and subjectivity to understand how inquiries of this kind have been studied previously. Through this process, this chapter contextualises my empirical contribution by giving an appreciation of the significance of my methodological approach, highlighting the richness and depth of understanding that my innovative method offers.

The chapter is divided into four sections. In the first, I review and unpack the nature of my research problem in methodological terms, highlighting the dominant theories and methods that informed my approach. Sections two and three examine the dominant modes of empirical inquiry in media studies, cultural studies and feminist media studies in turn: textual analysis and audience studies. These sections evaluate existing empirical studies and locate my research in relation to them. Section four introduces my approach and explains how it moves forward and develops existing research. Chapter four details my methodological approach in detail, outlining and justifying my process and methods, and describes how I use my data in the findings chapters.

3.1 Understanding the problem

This thesis is a sociological study into how sexual politics is experienced in young adults' lives and how it is shaped by popular culture representations of hegemonic heterosexuality. Music is well-established as playing a central role in identity formation and articulation, providing a sense of place, belonging and being (Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Bennett, 2015). The arrival of the music video in the 1980s and its popularisation via MTV and other music television channels changed the way music was received, introducing a visual element characterised by a sexualisation that was often more intense than the lyrics suggested (Lull, 1987; Arnett, 2002) and changed the basis of commercial success into what has been called a "Darwinian…survival of the sexiest" (Andsager and Roe, 2003: 79). Sut Jhally (2007: no page number) argues music videos communicate 'how to guides' for masculinity and femininity, offering audiences a way to understand themselves, and likens their sexualised content to a 'pornographic imagination' that contributes to popular notions of female sexuality and blurs the line between fantasy and reality, asserting the imagery of music videos is "firmly implicated in the gender and power relations in our society".

Unpicking this blurring of 'fantasy and reality' is fundamental to understanding the significance of music video representations of sex and relationships for contemporary notions of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics; music videos (re)produce notions of appropriate sexual practice informing real life interactions. Digital media further complexifies the role of music videos as an instructional medium functioning simultaneously as the primary platform for accessing content and as a space where information, ideas and opinions about the music, videos and artists are given and received. The intertextual and interdiscursive references music videos and social media share, empirically evidenced in my findings chapters, work semiotically to confer

a high truth value (modality) meaning music videos may be read as authentic, realistic, achievable and often desirable ‘templates’, or scripts.

I use music videos as central objects of popular culture and interrogate their role in (re)producing heterosexuality as the culture of the dominant (Hall, 1998; Jackson, 1999). I achieve this by locating, examining and analysing audience interpretations of sexual scripts in their representations of sex and relationships and considering the relationship social media has to this process. By using media representations of sex and relationships as my critical object to elicit broader understandings of gender and sexuality I have located the meaning making process as integral to and implicit in the act of interpretation. Foundational to this epistemological approach is an assertion that meaning is produced through interaction and that this process is observable and knowable. I unpack these assumptions throughout this chapter.

By focussing on how meaning is made, this research is concerned with everyday human practice and human life locating it within the social science research tradition (Kincaid, 1996). In sociology and anthropology ‘meaning’ is typically defined in terms of signification, that is, a ‘sign’ (“words, images, sounds, odours, flavours, acts or objects”) ‘means’ based on its features, the situation it is used in, and the activities it produces (Osgood, Suci and Tannenbaum, 1957: 2; Chandler, 2002: 2). I orient my research in this disciplinary tradition, drawing on semiotic understandings of meaning through signification. Before going into more detail on semiotics and signification, it is important to first argue for the importance of representation as a critical object of interrogation, highlighting its significance to my endeavour and cultural meaning production more broadly. I then address academic work on meaning making and the role of signification, locating my work in the debate and consider questions of audience agency and subjectivity.

In *Notes on Deconstructing the Popular* (1998: 446 - 447) Hall outlines his theory of cultural power as operating through popular culture in the work of representation. For Hall, representation is the

process of *re*-presenting images of ourselves back to us in ways that reflect the preferred descriptions of the dominant (hegemonic) culture. Those who select the images, who rework and reshape them (i.e. the cultural industries, of which the music and entertainment industries are part), have cultural power through this process. Through representation, through the process of selection and repetition, dominant definitions are 'imposed and implanted' and culture[3] is made (Hall, 1998: 447). In this way, popular culture is a site where we can observe hegemony - the relations of domination and subordination in a 'war of position' - in action (Connell, 1987; Hall, 1998: 453).

In the relations of domination and subordination intrinsic to cultural power, the sign itself is an area of struggle as cultural forms and practices are "driven out of the centre of popular life, actively marginalised" in a process of transformation; traditions and practices are re-worked to 'mean' something different while appearing to "persist" (Hall, 1998: 443- 450), a process I demonstrate in chapter seven through a discussion of my participants' conceptualisation of sexual scripts as 'tradition'. Popular culture, then, is the site where these 'transformations' take place, it is the battle ground for "the culture of the working people, the labouring masses and the poor" constituted by a dialectic of "containment and resistance" (Hall, 1998: 442 – 443), and representation is the armoury of that battle. A further important epistemological distinction must also be made with reference to representations in recognition that they are not the thing they depict, but are *messages about* that thing; music video representations of sex and relationships are not sex and relationships, but messages about the nature of sex and relationships (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Hall, 1980: 131).

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[3] For Hall, culture is 'translation'; it is constantly reworked and evolving, drawn from the past and (re)produced in identity (Paul, 2005)

This thesis examines representations of sex and relationships, which in this theorisation are dominant definitions of sex and relationships, uncovering sexual scripts and shedding light on the meaning(s) young adults attach to sex and gender relations in the current moment (Jackson and Scott, 2010). By foregrounding media representations, I assert their central importance in culture making and follow a feminist media studies "desire to understand how images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression" (Gill, 2007b: 7). I identify media representation as central to the ideological production of hegemonic sexual ideology (Hall, 1980; Rubin, 1992; Gill, 2008a) and of central significance in the communication and learning of sexual scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Jhally, 2007).

Before moving on to address academic approaches to the study of meaning production, I draw attention to a broader point Hall (1998) makes regarding what he calls 'periodisation' in the study of popular culture. The current cultural and political moment, detailed in chapter two, indicates a reassertion of dominant discourses of (dis)order. This broader understanding of what is happening in the world is important for contextualising and justifying the need for this and other inquiries into discrimination. Hall traces the oscillating focus historical studies of popular culture have given to the containment/resistance binary and their relation to the moral and economic priorities of the time. Hall highlights the way studies of popular culture have changed understandings by focussing on different sides of the binary, foregrounding the voices of the oppressed or the dominant.

Hall himself was writing about popular culture during Thatcherism, a time of a growing dominance of neoliberalism and a crisis of the left, arguably reflective of the contemporary political and economic moment where the UK government is actively foregrounding discourses centred on crime and punishment (BBC News, 2019; Sleator and Kraemer, 2019). By linking what is happening in popular culture to what is happening in the broader political and economic

environment, I situate this thesis in Hall's theory of popular culture and draw attention to the dominant culture's contemporary emphasis on foregrounding a need to transform 'the unruly masses' to restore 'order', and argue for the importance of foregrounding oppositional and resistant voices within that. This thesis centres the voices of the masses, their understandings and interpretations of popular culture and their experiences of negotiating the descriptions imposed on them in the process of cultural struggle.

Academic debate on where meaning is made, where it rests, is long-standing and has generated passionate contributions (Cobley, 1996). Originating with a view of passive viewers, media reception theory has evolved to develop an interactionist position that identifies viewers as actively involved in the construction of meaning (Hall, 1980; Fiske, 1989b; Watkins and Emerson, 2000; Holsanova, 2014). Central to the development of this position has been the work of Hall and his highly influential 1980 paper 'Encoding/decoding' which marked a theoretical shift in its positioning of viewers as actively involved in the construction of meaning (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). In this paper, Hall (1980: 128 – 129 italics in original) argues mass-communications is a "complex structure in dominance", articulated in distinctive yet linked practices each with their own configuration, style and place in the production of discourse, which is translated (transformed) into social practice (if effective) through a series of "*determinate moments*". Each of these practices may be studied beginning with production and the economics of production, passing through textual practices, distribution, consumption and reproduction as a route to uncover the meanings and messages they communicate through the language of signs (Hall, 1980; Gill, 2007b).

Empirical studies of media and meaning have been vast and within the field of feminist media studies and media criticism, have tended to fall into one of two methodological approaches: studying the text (textual analysis), or studying the audience (audience studies), reflecting the

traditional linear transmission conceptualisation of communication: sender / message / receiver (Hall, 1980). Textual analysis studies rest on an assumption that meaning sits in the text (broadly speaking a constructionist view), and audience studies conversely, that meaning rests with the receiver, the audience (broadly speaking a post-structuralist view). An interactionist approach asserts meaning arises from interaction, is constantly changing, and determines people's notions of 'self' which informs their actions in the world (Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1990; Fine, 1993; Plummer, 2000). This is consistent with Hall's theory of cultural power and the Gramscian concept of hegemony which attest to the process of cultural meaning making, of culture as the 'complex of ideologies' through which hegemony interacts with one's identity in a never-ending struggle for definition, for *meaning*, in a process of resistance and acceptance (Hall, 1986; Hall, 1998).

Hall (1998: 447 italics in original) argues this is a process of cultural domination that has "real effects", where representations, while not imprinting themselves on guileless audiences, "*do* find or clear a space of recognition in those who respond", who see themselves in the text and connect with that representation in a process of integrating, or reconciling, the representation with their own inner contradictions of "feeling and perception". Making this process of recognition possible are 'conceptual maps' which allow us to classify, organise and arrange concepts as they are (re)presented to us based on their relationships to things in the world, meaning for others and meaning for us (Hall, 1997). This agentic view of the audience is consistent with varied structuralist and post-structuralist theoretical positions and postmodern and psychoanalytic approaches to understanding interpretation including feminist theory, psychoanalytic theory, Marxist theory, semiotics, sociological and cultural theory. I do not discuss these theoretical and epistemological approaches in detail but locate this thesis in the feminist media studies disciplinary tradition with the implicit knowledge values that confers, as I discuss in chapter four. In my findings chapters I evidence this dialectic of cultural struggle and space for

agency as it emerged in my research participants' negotiations of the social and cultural spaces and structures in which they lived.

Before moving on to address the field of empirical work, I turn to a central concern of this thesis, the relationship between media representation and subjectivity, which is closely linked to questions of agency and frames understandings of how "socially constructed ideals…are internalised and made our own…felt not as external impositions but as authentically ours" (Gill, 2008a: 436). Feelings of subjectivity, of individual identity, can arise through the appropriation of cultural texts and the meaning making processes involved in that act. It is therefore of central importance to understand the significance of those texts and how and why people attach the meanings to them they do (Scollon, 1998; Norris and Jones, 2005). I am informed by Hall's application of Gramscian hegemony in my conceptualisation of how notions of subjectivity (of subject positions) are re-worked and re-articulated through notions of common-sense in hegemonic discourse in culture (Hall, 1986; Hall, 1998; Gill, 2008a; Hall, 2017).

Underlying Gramscian notions of hegemony, of ideological formation and popular consciousness, is what Hall (1986: 27) calls the 'necessary and inevitable' contradictory nature of subordinated ideologies in and through which ideological struggle takes place; that is, the struggle for definition that transforms those ideologies into 'common-sense'. In this way, Hall argues, Gramsci shows us how the 'self' is also an inherently contradictory and socially constructed subject, made up of and co-existing within those very same contradictory ideologies (in much the same way postfeminism has incorporated contradictory ideological discourses to reframe notions of female sexuality). To deepen this conceptual understanding of how subjectivity is made and remade, Gill argues that within this analytical framework there is space for the consideration of the "*affective dimensions of ideology*" (2008a: 439 italics in original) which she links to a postfeminist sensibility by identifying how postfeminism attempts to "shape what and how women are

enabled to *feel*' in a "structure of feeling" (2017: 618 - 619 italics in original). Gill (2017) argues this can be seen most readily in the dominance of the neoliberal friendly 'positive mental attitude' discourse. Through this analytical framework we begin to see how media representations work to create and maintain subject positions, and by examining audience interpretations, this thesis identifies them as the necessary, and necessarily dynamic, work that takes place every time a person watches a music video or interacts with social media, using this social practice as a way to locate their sexual subjectivity.

Drawing on the research tradition outlined above, the following sections engage with existing textual analysis and audience studies as dominant modes of analysis, critically examining previous studies, considering their strengths and limitations, before detailing in chapter four my unique empirical approach that illuminates the complexities and contradictions involved in cultural meaning making.

3.2 Textual analysis

As introduced above, in analyses of media texts there is an underlying assumption that meaning is encoded into a text and that there is a direct relationship between those meaning messages and their decoding (reading) by audiences. Before considering studies of this kind, I will first expand on the process of signification to allow for a fuller appreciation of the process and its limitations.

Theories of communication are based on the traditional model of 'sender – message – receiver'. Semiotic approaches to studying this process include those based on Sausserean semiology which are closely linked to linguistics (Chandler, 2002; Cobley, 2005), and those originating from the Piercean model of semiotics which focuses on meaning-making in the mind of the audience (Eco, 1981; Chandler, 2002). Signification, i.e. the process of meaning making, is the central concern of semiotic analysis although there is debate where this happens (Chandler, 2002; Cobley, 2005). In textual analyses, the signs within a text (e.g. the imagery, language) are the

analytical object and are decoded, that is interpreted or analysed, to identify their 'meaning'. Typically, this type of analysis takes one of two forms, either a content analysis or textual reading. Content analyses of music videos have identified patterns of signification in representation e.g. colour, clothing, action, and have been used to highlight the ways sexist messages are encoded into imagery.

For example, by identifying the routinised use of sexual objectification of women's bodies, gendered character function(s), gendered clothing norms, 'gaze', and other sexualised or discriminatory identifying characteristics, content analyses have developed insight into how music videos contribute to a visual vocabulary that reproduces sexist norms (see for example Vincent, Davis and Boruszkowski, 1987; Andsager, 1999; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009; Aubrey and Frisby, 2011). While analyses of this kind have been very useful in highlighting sexist practices in media production and have undoubtedly contributed to a public discourse which challenges those practices, they are limited by their analytical focus on the text, methodologically grouping instances of the thing being quantified together (e.g. 'sexual imagery') and conferring an indiscriminate interpretation, with little or no reference to those distinctions and nuances that are important for balanced and meaningful analysis.

Analyst-informed textual analyses meet this gap and provide a richer, more detailed analysis of texts. Feminist analyses of (postfeminist) media texts offer theoretically informed interpretations of the meanings encoded into the texts, locating them in wider culture and arguing for the importance of representation through an illumination of the various ways "images and cultural constructions are connected to patterns of inequality, domination and oppression" (Gill, 2007b: 7). For example, the postfeminist female sexual subject has been explored and debated including questioning the implications of her intersectional boundaries, her sexual agency and relationship to feminist politics (hooks, 1994; Gill, 2003; McRobbie, 2009; Attwood, 2009; Gill, 2009a; Gill,

2009b; Gill and Scharff, 2011; Durham, 2012). The notion of female sexual objectification has moved into the mainstream following feminist accounts of it, articulated perhaps most famously in Laura Mulvey's (1975) essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which problematised the 'male gaze' as essentialising the viewing experience as male and contributed to the growing debate around objectification which continues today (see also Berger, 1972; 'Episode 2', 1972).

In these and other interrogations of manifestations of postfeminism in popular culture, scholars aim to connect popular culture to feminist politics to demonstrate the ways gender inequality is entrenched in our society (see for example Tasker and Negra, 2007; Genz and Brabon, 2009). An example of this is Gill's (2008b: 54; 2009b: 105-106) analysis of an advert featuring a woman hailing a taxi at midnight in a bra which Gill argues exemplifies the illusory relationship between postfeminist depictions of gender relations and the realities of social life as the threat of violence is erased, sexual relations are represented as 'playful', and women have as much if not more power than men. What is central to these analyses, illustrated in the above example, is the foregrounding of the analyst's theoretical orientation and epistemological position. The author analyses a text using their theoretical knowledge and is informed in the process by their political beliefs, values and prior experiences. The resulting analysis is a theoretical construction which engages with a media text that meets the object of critical scholarly and political concern; texts are appropriated to make a theoretical point. The analyses mentioned above, for example, illuminate in detail manifestations of a postfeminist sensibility in popular culture and raise questions about the implications of this which in turn are debated theoretically (as in the agency debate example in chapter two), or, occasionally, through empirical inquiry (see for example Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Phipps and Young, 2013).

Discourse analysis, which rejects realist understandings of language as neutral and asserts the central significance of language and representation in social life, forms a significant

methodological approach to textual media analysis (Gill, 2018). Beres (2013) applies this approach to researching sexuality, identifying discourses of sexuality as sexual scripts, but advocates focussing on the behavioural, rather than linguistic, aspects which she argues construct subject positions. This fundamental analytic limitation of discourse analysis to the linguistic construction of subject positions at the expense of social practice, or behaviour, is the reason I have not used it for this research; discourse analysis, I argue, does not allow for an interrogation of the necessary semiotic depth this inquiry requires.

A central question for textual analyses seeking to identify the 'meaning' of a text is the chain of signification and the potential of a text to signify (mean) different things, what is known as polysemy. As illustrated in chapter two, images of sexualisation have been argued to signify different things and this conflict in meaning underpins much post-structuralist analysis which argues meaning is infinite and as such, claims to the sexism or otherwise of representations can be challenged (Gill, 2007b). Hall (1980: 134 - 135), in opposition to the post-structuralist argument outlined above, argues meaning is bounded and I share his position arguing that meaning is not infinite but is limited by the cultural and social world of the social actor. Hall (1980: 134 - 135) further argues that while visual texts are open to multiple interpretations, not all interpretations are equal and identifies *dominant readings* as those legitimately decoded (interpreted) reflecting hegemonic discourses of social life representing the dominant cultural order, and *oppositional readings* as those constructed out of misunderstandings, when audiences operate outside the 'dominant' or 'preferred' code. In this framework we see the value that may be attached to texts (as dominant or oppositional) and begin to understand how an individual's subjectivity influences their reading, thereby limiting its polysemic potential.

Another important consideration in relation to the breadth of cultural studies and media studies analyses of postfeminist media culture is the question of modal value. Modality refers to the

'reliability' of a sign to communicate 'truth' (Chandler, 2002; van Leeuwen, 2005); high modality communicates a reliable truth, low modality does not. Modality in representation refers to the reality/fantasy, fact/fiction, authentic/fake binary and in social interaction it refers to the 'truth value' of social contexts i.e. what is true in one social situation is not necessarily so in another (van Leeuwen, 2005: 160). When applied to the analyses discussed above, what is apparent is that the texts typically analysed are of a low modal value. That is, analyses of postfeminist media are predominantly of television shows (with a particular emphasis on American sitcoms), films (typically mainstream American), and traditional advertising e.g. print, TV and outdoor advertising. These media are widely recognised as fictional mediated constructions of reality; people know what they are looking at is not 'real', they know it has been created to entertain and/or sell something. The relationship between the modal value of the text and its social context is not addressed in textual analyses which focus instead on unpicking the meanings encoded into a text, or range of texts. I argue this limitation has significant implications for the application of these analyses to understandings of the relationship between media and culture, representation and reality. My methodological approach answers this limitation.

A final limitation of the methodological approaches outlined above for extending understandings of the relationship between representation and reality is that the texts are researcher identified and researcher analysed. Texts have been selected to meet some pre-defined criteria by the researcher, presumably reflecting the research focus, and the interpretations (including coding decisions in content analysis) are informed by the researcher's theoretical knowledge and subject position. Textual analyses interrogate denotation illuminating processes of production that limit their ability to further knowledge on how meaning is created in the audience. On this basis, these approaches are not appropriate to answer questions of audience interpretation or meaning for the audience because they do not engage with the lives and views of those audiences. Additionally, researcher-analyses cannot consider patterns of audience appropriation which reveal important

information about the depth of reading taking place e.g. is it a detailed reading that takes in nuance and suggestion, or is it a surface level reading taking only the most dominant messages? This has implications for how analyses can be applied theoretically. This thesis addresses this limitation and extends academic understanding of the interpretive and (re)signification processes by providing valid and credible insight into young adults' understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics through an innovative in-depth empirical methodological approach.

The methodological approaches outlined above affirm the transmission model of communication that implies media representations are unproblematically accessed as models of reality (Gill, 2007b). This notion has been challenged as outlined above and by media critics and analysts from multiple methodological and epistemological positions (Gill, 2007b). In the next section I address approaches to studying audiences that sought to challenge this assumption.

3.3 Audience studies

In textual analysis the analytic focus is the text as the site of meaning. In audience studies the receiver of the message, the audience, is the analytic focus, and the emphasis is on what the audience brings to understand how meaning-making happens in the audience-text complex (Cobley, 1996), or, in Hall's (1980) terms, to interrogate the act of consumption. Audience studies question what media texts 'do' to audiences, how readings are influenced by social and cultural contexts and forces, and identify power in that process (Fiske, 1989b; Cobley, 1996). Empirical approaches to the audience-text complex vary and depend on the researcher's epistemology and their belief of where meaning lies (in the text, the audience, or somewhere in between), which informs the methodology and structure of the inquiry. Gill (2008a) argues much contemporary academic analysis of the relationship between culture and subjectivity focuses on considerations of the 'agency' 'choice' and 'autonomy' of the audience(s) which implicitly reinforces neoliberal discourses consistent with individualisation and depoliticization.

Returning to semiotics, the Piercean model introduced above allows for a more thorough understanding in audience studies through what Pierce calls the 'interpretant': the sense the interpreter (audience) makes of the sign in the mind (Eco, 1981; Chandler, 2002). In this model of semiotics the process of meaning-making, known as 'semiosis', is potentially unlimited as the interpretant (meaning of the sign in the mind of the interpreter) itself becomes a new sign in a process which has the potential to carry on endlessly (Eco, 1981; Chandler, 2002). Through these notions of the interpretant and unlimited semiosis the significance of the intertextual relationships between media can be uncovered by exposing the 'infinite regression' (signs creating new signs) of interpretants which is central to any study concerned with 'understanding understandings' (Eco, 1981). It is important not to confuse unlimited semiosis, which happens within an individual, with polysemy, which refers to the potential of a sign to mean different things to different people.

Ethnography is a widely used and well-established methodology in audience reception studies (Fiske, 1989a; Cobley, 1996; Watkins and Emerson, 2000; Carter, 2014) and research into music cultures (Grazian, 2015). Pioneered by The Chicago School of Sociology, urban ethnography was a significant force in the development of symbolic interactionism (Fine, 1993; Plummer, 2000; Grazian, 2015) and heavily focused on music production up until the mid-1970s, in part resulting from critiques of mass culture, popular culture and its audiences emanating from the Frankfurt School and Theodor Adorno (Grazian, 2015). Early research in the consumption of music tended toward content analysis and surveys until the ethnographies of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (BCCC) in the 1970s and 1980s (Grazian, 2015). The BCCC produced wide-ranging accounts of the ways young people used and incorporated music into lifestyles and subcultures and spawned empirical participant-observer ethnographic research into music consumption, generating a wealth of insight into the varied ways people use and interact with music and its polysemic potential (Grazian, 2015). In the 1980s ethnographic 'reader

response' studies aimed to understand how audiences responded to media texts using an ethnographic approach coupled with semiotic textual analysis, for example Charlotte Brundson and David Morley's (1980) *The Nationwide Audience*, Ien Ang's (1984) *Watching* Dallas, and Janice Radway's (1984) *Reading the Romance* (Cobley, 1996; Gill, 2007b).

In feminist media studies media reception is recognised as gendered social practice. Audience studies have sought to challenge the idea of the passive female viewer unquestioningly internalising images of subordination by centring the lived experiences of active female viewers using media to reinforce and simultaneously contest gender inequality in their lived experience (Watkins and Emerson, 2000). There have been several significant studies informing understandings of how women use, appropriate and 'experience' different media and shaping audience research. Perhaps most famous are Janice Radway's research into the pleasures women find in reading romance fiction and Ien Ang's research into fans of the television show Dallas (see Cobley, 1996 and Gill, 2007b for a detailed review of these studies and their significance to the field of audience studies). While taking differing approaches to their studies in terms of what they sought to uncover and what they prioritised, what these studies offer is an uncovering of the social and cultural forces that inform audience readings. They share an ethnographically informed methodological approach to working with audiences and semiotic textual analysis conducted by the researcher-analyst, an approach replicated in audience studies since that time.

There are several problems with this research design that I argue limit its potential to offer insight into the interpretive process of the audience. Firstly, the texts are researcher-identified and as such have been selected to meet a specific theoretical objective. Secondly, the researcher-led semiotic analysis presupposes meaning rests in the text and subordinates audience readings begging the question, what would it mean if a researcher-identified interpretation was not present in the audience reading? Whose reading would be more 'valid'? Could it legitimately be claimed

something was really there if the intended audience did not see it? Thirdly, what these studies offer is an account of the texts, rather than the audiences. This brings us back to the question of audience agency and notions of 'truth'.

Feminist media studies has typically foregrounded a post-structuralist and social constructionist approach consistent with feminist conceptions of the social construction of gender (Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). My symbolic interactionist perspective argues human agency operates in active engagement with the culture and social structures around it. While there are some similarities between symbolic interactionism and post-structuralism, a significant difference is the latter's relativist approach to 'truth' (Weedon, 1987; Barker and Scheele, 2016) and the former's continually shifting and interactionally and contextually dependent understanding of truth (Brickell, 2006).

Another dominant theoretical approach in feminist media studies is psychoanalytic theory which has been argued to allow for the complexity of reader experiences in its emphasis on understanding the mechanisms of identification and desire in consumption (McRobbie, 2009). Based on an understanding of subjectivity as founded in language which it regards as the site of struggle for meaning and power where unequal gender and social relations are constructed (Weedon, 1987), psychoanalytic theory offers a useful lens to explore subjectivity in readership. However, I argue psychoanalytic theory's emphasis on language as the root of subjectivity and power limits its ability to address the complexities of interpretation and meaning making and does not address the essentially dynamic and interactional relationship between audience and text with which this research is concerned.

Outside of audience studies, empirical research has sought to engage with individuals to understand their participation in postfeminist culture and meaning making more broadly (see for example Attwood, 2009; Bragg and Buckingham, 2009; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Phipps and

Young, 2013). While these studies offer another lens to consider audience engagement, they are limited in their engagement with audiences, drawing primarily from single interviews and/or focus groups, and do not offer the depth of insight of the ethnographic studies discussed above. I address the significance of this for understanding meaning production in chapter four.

The final approach to studying the audience I address stems from what Hall (1980: 130) calls positivistic "effects, uses, 'gratification'" research, that makes connections between viewing habits and real-life (sexual) behaviours. Cultivation theory, the dominant model for studying media influence on sexual attitudes and assumptions, posits that the more a person is exposed to media the more they believe it is normal or real (Ward, 2003; Wright and Craske, 2015). Studies using this theoretical lens differ from those discussed above in objective and methodology, and in their analytical attention to audience relationship to musician, which they argue is significant in a text's potential to effect (sexual and other) behaviours and blur the line between fantasy and reality (see Ward, 2003; Zhang, Miller and Harrison, 2008; Coyne and Padilla-Walker, 2015; Wright and Craske, 2015; Wright and Qureshia, 2015). The significance of the 'musician – audience' relationship is important for understanding music videos ability to communicate a 'reliable' truth, to present an authentic reality. I discuss this point in my findings chapters, empirically evidencing its singular significance in the interpretative processes.

Media effects research has faced criticism for its simplistic understandings of media influence (Gill, 2007b; Gill, 2008a: 433 - 434) and should be interpreted with caution not least because of the moralistic approach some researchers take to questions of sexuality. However, these studies demonstrate a strong consistency of results indicating a relationship between representation and beliefs in sexual conduct supporting the argument that sexual scripts are communicated through media representations (see for example Burt, 1980; Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1982; Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1984; Malamuth and Briere, 1986; Lees, 2002; Littleton, Axsom, and Yoder,

2006; Martino et al. 2006; Zhang, Miller and Harrison, 2008; Aubrey, Hopper and Mbure, 2011; Edwards et al. 2011; Ryan, 2011; van Oosten, Peter and Valkenburg, 2015). This thesis follows Hall's (1980; 1997; 1998: 447 italics in original) view of ideological effect in cultural struggle which argues representations "*do* find or clear a space of recognition in those who respond" in a series of determinate moments facilitated by conceptual maps.

3.4 Conclusion

This chapter depicts the field of empirical academic inquiry into media texts and their audiences. In it I have set out the scope of existing knowledge and its limitations and determined the theoretical scope of my methodological approach as media and communication studies, cultural studies, feminist theory and sexuality studies. I have identified paradigmatic gaps in these approaches which my novel methodological approach meets. By clarifying what counts as knowledge in existing empirical approaches to the study of meaning making, I have laid the ground to demonstrate how this thesis extends it.

I have located my symbolic interactionist and semiotic perspective in relation to existing work and drawn out the central principles informing my approach: modality, the interpretant, the central prioritisation of power as symbol creation, and interactive meaning creation in the relationship between audience and text informed by external political and social forces (Fine, 1993: 81; Plummer, 2000). I have addressed academic understandings of audience agency, identifying it as limited by structure in the process of cultural domination and struggle and located meaning making in the audience-text dynamic. I have used Hall's (1998) theory of cultural power to demonstrate the central importance of media representation in cultural meaning making, in creating subjectivity and informing notions of 'self' and connected this to questions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics justifying my methodological approach and

identifying the gaps it meets. I have located this thesis in the contemporary cultural and political moment and clarified the need for inquiries into discriminatory practices of representation.

In chapter four I set out how this thesis addresses the methodological limitations identified in this chapter, including analyses that do not consider nuances of representation and appropriation, researcher-identified texts and researcher-analysis, analytic focus on discourse as action, lack of attention to modal value of texts and relationships between audience and musician, analytic focus on text *or* audience. I explain in the next chapter how I developed an approach that prioritises audience identified texts and audience analyses to shed new light on cultural meaning making and the relationship between hegemonic heterosexuality and the everyday lived experiences of my young adult research participants.

Chapter 4: Methodology

I developed my methodological approach from understanding and appreciating the research processes outlined in the previous chapter. By understanding how studies of this kind have been addressed previously and considering the limitations and restrictions of those studies, I developed a novel methodological toolkit which allowed me to apply that theoretical knowledge to new empirical study. This chapter explains and justifies my methodological choices in a detailed overview of the research process, a process that engaged with the everyday practices and lives of my research participants to understand how they produced meaning. By unpacking the process I clarify how this approach differs from those outlined in chapter three and outline the uniqueness of my contribution as empirically engaging with young adults in an unprecedented way to extend knowledge on the interrelationship of media and culture, of representation and reality, of 'mediatised' sexuality (Plummer, 1995).

This chapter is organised into three main sections. The first details the analytical frameworks that shaped my methodological approach; the second describes the processes I undertook in sampling, recruitment, methods and analysis; and the third sets out the ethical issues that emerged throughout the research process and gives a reflective statement of my positionality and its significance for the research.

The introduction chapter discusses in detail the aims and research questions that informed this research, to summarise these are as follows:

Aim: To examine young adult interpretations of music video representations of sex and relationships, paying attention to the role of social media in that process, to shed light on the sexual scripts informing contemporary sexual politics and their intersectional implications.

Research questions:

What happens when audiences interact with representations of sex and relationships in music videos and how does social media interact with this process?

How do audiences rationalise/integrate their readings with existing social and sexual schema?

What might the implications of this be for real-life sexual encounters?

It is important at this point to clarify what I am *not* talking about. When I have discussed my research with friends, family and academics alike, the conversation has tended to follow a similar pattern; they think it is about female sexual objectification in music video and consequently assume I must be focusing on rap and hip-hop music videos. I was repeatedly surprised at how readily appropriated discourses of female sexual objectification were in everyday discourse as everyone, it seemed, claimed familiarity with the concept which they identified as the stereotypical 'girl in a bikini' whose sole purpose is to look 'hot', an image conceptually linked to rap and hip-hop. I unpack the significance of this for informing notions of (un)acceptable sexuality in chapter six but here address the implications of this conflation of sexism with rap and hip-hop because it emerged as foundational in the diverse range of individuals I spoke to.

There is no question that some rap and hip-hop is deeply misogynistic, in particular to black women (hooks, 1994; Hill Collins, 2004; Ward, Hansbrough and Walker, 2005; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Redfern and Aune, 2010; van Oosten, Jochen and Valkenburg, 2015; Wright and Craske, 2015). However, a disproportionate focus on this genre gives the misleading impression that sexism and misogyny are not present in other genres, which is simply not true (see Brownmiller, 1975; Andsager and Roe, 1999; Andsager and Roe, 2003; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Aubrey and Frisby, 2011; Coyne and Padilla-Walker, 2015) and is imbued with racist overtones in its 'othering' of the problem and consequent sexual problematisation of black men (hooks, 1994; Jhally, 2007). Identifying rap and hip-hop as *the* site of sexism and misogyny in music videos is problematic because it ignores significant levels of sexual objectification and misogyny in other music genres, in particular rock and pop music (Brownmiller, 1975; Wolf, 1991; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Aubrey and Frisby, 2011), does not engage with the dominant white patriarchal corporate management ideologies behind mainstream rap and hip-hop (hooks, 1994; Weitzer and Kubrin, 2009; Redfern and Aune, 2010), or the way that some black female rappers positively express and explore their sexual subjectivities within it (Andsager and Roe, 1999; Hill Collins, 2004; Railton and Watson, 2007; Durham, 2012).

4.1 Analytic perspectives

To meet the aims and objectives of this research inquiry I developed an analytical framework that brought fresh insight to cultural meaning making processes. As detailed in chapter three, much audience research is grounded in ethnography (Fiske, 1989a; Cobley, 1996; Watkins and Emerson, 2000; Carter, 2014; Grazian, 2015) and semiotics (Cobley, 1996; Gill, 2007b). I adopted this framework because of the depth it offers but rejected the researcher-orientated approach

because of the limitations discussed i.e., that by prioritising the researcher's analysis it foregrounds the text and cannot shed light on the audience's interpretative process. To understand the complex ways young adults interpret and manage sexual scripts in their daily lives, to uncover the significant discourses and practices involved in the interpretive processes, the audience and their readings must take precedence. Reflective of this imperative, I developed an approach to observe the complex and contradictory processes involved in the construction and maintenance of 'self' and sexual identity to gain a richer and deeper insight into cultural meaning production.

As discussed in chapter three, my interactionist perspective is grounded in empiricism and understands truth to be interactionally and contextually dependent and continually changing (Brickell, 2006). This informs my understanding of meaning as emanating from a dynamic process of audience interaction *with* text, rather than audience *plus* text. This is differentiated from the studies discussed in chapter three because it conceives of meaning as created in dynamic interaction, not in text or audience. This understanding meant any readings I undertook as researcher would have taken me away from the aim of the research which was to understand audience understandings. Directly emergent from this position, I adopted a mediated discourse analysis informed ethnographic method because, as I go on to discuss, it centres social action as the object of analysis offering a nuanced and complex approach to the study of meaning creation.

Mediated discourse analysis

Mediated discourse analysis (MDA) is a relatively new analytical approach[4] that links discourse analysis to social semiotics (Dooly, 2017), representing an innovative methodological approach to

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[4] MDA was developed by Ron Scollon in the late 1990s (Norris and Jones, 2005).

audience studies. Closely related to but differentiated from critical discourse analysis, MDA treats discourse as produced through social interaction and focuses on discourse *in* action, not discourse *as* action, analytically centring the action which *appropriates* texts or discourses, rather than the text itself (Scollon, R. 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Norris and Jones, 2005; Lane, 2014; Wohlwend, 2014). In this way, the mediated act of interpretation is the object of my inquiry, not the music video, and I trace the significant actions and discourses present in it.

It is important to clarify how 'discourse' is used in MDA and in this study: discourse refers to "all forms of meaningful semiotic human activity seen in connection with social, cultural and historical patterns and developments of use" (Blommaert in Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004: 5). In this definition, discourse and semiotics are interchangeable illustrating the extralinguistic production of discourse. By focussing on the interaction of discourse and action MDA allows for a broad semiotic scope of inquiry covering objects, gestures, non-verbal sounds and the built environment bringing an analytic depth not available in other methods of discourse analysis (Norris and Jones, 2005; Rodner and Kerrigan, 2017). MDA thereby accommodates the intentional and *un*intentional aspects of communication present in all behaviour to become part of the analysis and allows for disjunction between intention and interpretation, which the analyst must distinguish, and which adds to the depth of understanding the researcher has of the research subject (Scollon, 2001: 109 – 110). For example, the locations people choose to spend time in, the locations people live in, the food and drink people consume, the things a person raises their eyebrows at – all these non-verbal actions communicate about the person, whether intentionally or not, and all form part of a richer understanding of that person.

This analytic lens uncovers the differences between what people say and what people do, revealing the necessary work of creating and maintaining a 'self' and transcends the limitations of linguistic or textual analysis. This point is of particular importance in this study on sex and relationships which are generally regarded as personal, and potentially as sensitive, topics, fraught with social expectations and costs. What people say about sex when questioned, especially to a stranger holding a notebook, is not necessarily what they think, and does not necessarily provide an insight into how they live. This point is further considered in justification of my longitudinal ethnographic approach.

MDA argues large-scale social issues are present in "micro-actions of social interaction and, conversely, the most mundane of micro-actions are nexus through which the largest cycles of social organization and activity circulate" (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004: 8). This assertion avoids the macro-level analytical focus of critical discourse analysis and the social science micro-macro divide (Lane, 2014), and echoes my symbolic interactionist meso-structural approach outlined in chapter two (Fine, 1993; Plummer, 2000). In its action orientated approach, MDA equalises the roles of material activity and discourse as they work together mutually reinforcing each other as the researcher first identifies a mediated action (when the material enters social action) then traces the full range of discourse emanating from it (Scollon, 1998; Plummer, 2000; Scollon, R., 2001; Scollon, 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Norris and Jones, 2005; Wohlwend, 2014). Adopting this analytical framework meant the ideas and concepts informing interpretations were revealed in the semiotic complex of discourses of participant readings and further, that the differentiating characteristics that meant interpretations resonated (or not) with pre-existing conceptual maps were illuminated.

Mediated actions are the unit of analysis in MDA and, significantly, occur as **sites of engagement**, that is, the historical time and material space of the action in question. Crucially, actions occur *as* sites of engagement rather than *in* a site of engagement "to avoid the notion of action within context" (Scollon, R., 2001:159; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Jones, 2005). In this conceptualisation, sites of engagement show cultural ideologies entrenched in the historical body of the mediated action by exposing culture specific notions of time and uses of space that open up as "patterns of orientation towards different spaces and different timescales" (Jones, 2005: 151). I draw on this notion in chapter six to demonstrate how my participants' appropriation of different media platforms interacted with their interpretive processes.

In MDA, the 'nexus of practice' is where the trajectories of *historical body*, *interaction order* and *discourses in place* meet; it is the object of critical attention where analysis begins (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012; Lane, 2014; Wohlwend, 2014). The **historical body** refers to the social and historical 'body' of experience and can be applied to the social actor, the interaction order, or discourse(s). It relates to the relationship of our habitus, our present or anticipated actions, with history but is differentiated from the Bourdieusian concept of 'habitus' in its location in the individual body (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). Drawing on Erving Goffman's term, **interaction order** refers to the social arrangement and history of interactions and is interested in the way people behave differently dependent on who they are (interacting) with (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). **Discourses in place** are all the semiotic and overt discourses circulating around the action from which the significant discourses must be discerned from the background ones (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). By analysing the nexus of practice, significant interpretive discourses are identified as texts (music videos and social media) meet culture (habitus) reflecting my interactionist perspective and allowing space for

multiple interrelated social differences and divisions that shape aspects of the self and identity to emerge (Jackson and Scott, 2010).

Individual interpretations reveal dominant or alternative readings indicating the text's polysemic potential and highlight the overlapping and discrete cultural habitus' of my research participants by exposing what in MDA are called **internalised discourses of practice**. Internalised discourses of practice are discourses that have become so embedded they have merged into practice, become 'invisible', their origins no longer recalled (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). An example of an internalised discourse of practice could be a sexual script, for example the female as sexual gatekeeper script, which becomes so embedded into a historical body it is accepted as 'normal' and 'natural', not questioned and how it was learnt cannot be recalled. Or the association between a place and a person that is so strong going there becomes deeply meaningful. Or perhaps the ritualistic use of a social media platform we can't remember using for the first time. By identifying discourses internalised as practice, hegemony becomes visible as common-sense notions are displayed.

Because of the time required to understand the nexus of practice ethnography is recommended in MDA (Scollon, 1998; Scollon, R. 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2007; Lane, 2014; Dooly, 2017). In contrast to anthropological ethnography's cross-cultural comparative focus on 'differences that make a difference' within a categorised social group (Wolcott, 1999; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001), MDA advocates an intercultural perspective that questions how culture is made in interaction, shifting the focus from an individual's communication to the mediated action, thereby orienting social change as the central concern (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001: 544). This prioritisation of the complexities of social life is reflected in my anticategorical approach to sampling (detailed later in this chapter) that

prioritises how cultural meaning emerges for individuals, rejecting analytical categories (e.g. class, age, social class) and creating space for individual intersectional identities to emerge (McCall, 2005). By adopting this methodological approach, I have centred my participants' experience and voice and avoided creating researcher-identified categories of analytical importance. Methodologically and analytically foregrounding my participants' social actions, behaviours and interactions directly answers the limitations of previous studies outlined in chapter three and is consistent with my symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective, MDA analytical lens and disciplinary theoretical frameworks (Cobley, 1996; Fine, 2000; Plummer, 2000; Watkins and Emerson, 2000; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Carter, 2014; Grazian, 2015).

Ontology and epistemology

It is important to address my ontological and epistemological positions in recognition of the role they played in framing this research. Ontology is "the study of the nature of being, a concern with the basic structure of reality" (Lawson, 2003: 120). This thesis empirically engages with the interpretative processes of young adults watching representations of sex and relationships in music videos and considers the significance of the intertextual and interdiscursive relationship music videos share with social media. It identifies music videos and social media as mediated means of reproducing social norms and expectations for social identities and social groups (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Norris and Jones, 2005). By studying this phenomenon, I implicitly state there is a reality to the domain of interpretation which I can observe, at least to some degree, locating my work in a realist research philosophy. My realist philosophy underpins the aims and goals of this thesis and is influenced by the ontological assumptions of critical realism which I expand on here.

Critical realism is a philosophically informed metatheory situating itself as an alternative paradigm to scientistic law-seeking positivism and hermeneutically orientated strong interpretivism and postmodernism (Archer et al., 2016). As a realist philosophy, it differentiates the real (what exists, its structures and powers) from the empirical (what we can experience) and the actual (the facts and events resulting from reality) (Sayer, 2000; Archer et al., 2016) allowing me to clarify the level or type of reality I am investigating; that is, the emergent causal powers (hegemonic heteronormative heterosexuality) in the actual (interpretation) as far as they can be experienced in the empirical (observation). Implicit in my investigative frame is an assertion that social structures, for example heterosexuality and social class, operate in a dynamic way and have powers of their own, independent of the people that participate in them (Lawson, 2003).

Critical realism does not prescribe a rigid methodological framework but combines interpretation and inquiry into "artifacts, culture, social structures, persons, and what affects human action and interaction" (Archer et al, 2016: no page number). Crucially, it offers *explanations* (not descriptions or statistical models) of the complex of social mechanisms at play in social interaction and how social structures influence interpretations, reflecting the central aim of this thesis (Lawson, 2003; Sayer, 2000; Rees and Gatenby, 2014; Archer et al, 2016: no page number). Causality in critical realism does not reflect a positivist 'successionist' view of a regular sequence of events resulting in 'social laws' (Sayer, 2000; Archer et al., 2016). It is concerned with interrogating the structures (internally related elements) present in a social action which when combined are emergent (apparent) on its constituents (social actors), offering its finding as an explanation of the possibility that these causal mechanisms (structures), when activated (combined) under these specific conditions result in this social event (Sayer, 2000: 14). Accordingly, this thesis is a theoretical explanation of the social mechanisms (postfeminist hegemonic heteronormativity)

present in my research participants' interpretations of representations of sex and relationships in music videos.

It is important to note that critical realism centralises the intrinsic meaningfulness of social life and asserts that while knowledge can only ever be partial, some knowledge is better than others and that from knowledge stems 'values', propositions of what is a 'good' life or society (Archer et al., 2016; Critical Realism Network, 2016). Therefore, while this thesis makes no universalising truth claims, I argue its original in-depth empirical approach and claims to knowledge about meaning making are justified and challenge harmful social practices (Archer et al., 2016). This critical realist position on judgemental rationality (the belief that some claims, which while not 'absolute truth', are 'good enough' to act upon and that some claims to truth are 'better' than others) is consistent with my symbolic interactionist perspective. This compatibility that extends to support of epistemic relativism (the assertion there is a reality independent of our interpretations of it) and conceptual limitations placed on the social construction of reality (while maintaining that interpretations of social reality matter significantly) in recognition of the obduracy of reality (Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1990; Fine, 1993; Critical Realism Network, 2016).

As discussed, I locate this thesis in the Western tradition of feminist thought and as such must address the question of feminist ontology. This thesis is grounded in the belief that the gendered imbalance of power in our patriarchal society is an ontological truth worthy of critical academic attention (Scully, 1990; DeVault, 1996). This principle underpins my feminist ontological position. I follow bell hooks' definition of feminism as a political movement "to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression" (hooks, 2000: viii) and Flavia Dzodan, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sirma Bilge, Ros Gill, Shani Orgad, Angela McRobbie and all feminists who strive to ensure their feminism is intersectional, recognising the diversity of women and the oppressions they face

(Crenshaw, 1989; Stanley and Wise, 2002; McRobbie, 2009; Bilge, 2013; Valenti, 2014; Barker and Scheele, 2016; Gill and Orgad, 2018).

Feminist thought and feminist research are characterised by an ontological prioritisation of 'experience' (DeVault, 1996; Shipman, 1997; Skeggs, 2002). Feminist theory emerged through the sharing of experiences as women talked to each other and developed theories and interpretive frameworks conceptualising their shared experiences (Skeggs, 2002). This prioritisation of female experience challenges the dominant positivistic Durkheimian ontology which considers the human subject passive and operating within roles set out by institutions (Shipman, 1997; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). Positivist ontology argues there is an objective reality that can be observed, measured, and reported on objectively and rests on a Cartesian dualism of opposing principles working symbiotically in a gendered super- and subordination relationship that prioritises masculine, white, heterosexual, European experience (DeVault, 1996; Shipman, 1997; Stanely and Wise, 2002). Feminist ontology argues against this 'masculinist' dualism, transforming social science ontology and epistemology in its theorisation of 'being' as diverse and differentiated, not oppositional or dualistic, making space for the plurality of experience upon which feminist theory is built (Lawson,1999; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010). This feminist ontology argues social reality is at best *partially* constructed by the individuals participating in it and independent of our interpretations of it (Stanley and Wise, 2002: 9).

Above is set out my (critical) realist feminist ontological position which centres the diversity of personal experience and has shaped the methodological, analytical and theoretical approach of this thesis. I now address the epistemological (theories of knowledge) assumptions underpinning my understanding of acceptable empirical knowledge, or 'evidence', from which I make

knowledge claims about social reality (Mason, 1996). In this action I identify knowledge as 'created' and locate the terms of its production and representation in this thesis (Skeggs, 2002: 17).

Epistemology is a *theory of knowledge* adopted in the conceptualisation of a research project. Methodology is a *theory of research practice,* for example qualitative or quantitative. Methods are the *tools* the researcher uses to carry out the research (DeVault, 1996). The methods I used to gather empirical evidence sit in a qualitative research paradigm reflecting my social constructionist epistemology which asserts the validity of experiences, thoughts and actions as the basis for making knowledge claims.

Different degrees of social constructionism hold different assumptions and ask different questions, resulting in the potential for variety in methods and answers (Vance, 1992). This research draws from a plurality of theoretical perspectives whose understandings of appropriate 'evidence' are addressed in chapter three. It takes a weak social constructionist and contextual symbolic interactionist approach to interrogate the political and power-based dimensions of sexual politics by understanding how audiences create meaning in interaction with texts (Schneider and Gould, 1987). My symbolic interactionist theoretical perspective frames this inquiry into understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics as rooted in the meso-structural level where "structure is mediated through individual actions" (Fine, 1993: 69), emphasises empirical study into how people 'assemble' meaning (Fine, 2000; Plummer, 2000), and advocates a plurality of methods including ethnographic, interpretive, qualitative, and semiotic (Denzin, 1992). Resultingly, this research uses empirical evidence gathered from observation of the social actions and speech of people's interpretations of sex and relationships in music videos (set out in detail in the following section) to explain cultural meaning making,

thereby constituting social action and speech-based interactions with the world, its artefacts and inhabitants, as acceptable evidence.

Before moving on to my research processes, I address the contested notion of a feminist epistemology and its role in shaping my research. Feminist theory has been criticised for not having a clear epistemology which has been argued to result from a general 'muddling' of methods, methodology, and epistemology, as the wealth of qualitative research centring women's voices and experiences, stemming from second wave feminism's social constructionist and symbolic interactionist foundations, led to an erroneous conflation of qualitative feminist research with a feminist epistemology (DeVault, 1996; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Finch, 2004). Experience is usually at the core of any discussion of feminist epistemology and methodology reflecting the prioritisation of women's experience and voices and challenging accepted theories of knowledge in presenting an alternative female experience (DeVault, 1996; Skeggs, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

The way experience is theoretically conceptualised is a question of epistemology. As detailed in chapters two and three, psychoanalytic theory has been influential for feminist theorists studying subjectivity through experience (Richardson, 1997; McRobbie, 2009). Founded on assumptions of language as the root of subjectivity and power, psychoanalytic theory has been critiqued for offering women no way out of language's oppositional binary system and for the inherent lack of intersectionality in Lacan's definition of 'woman' (Minsky, 1992). Nor does it provide the semiotic depth required to answer my research questions which centre on social action and the interactional relationship between audience and text. Social constructionism as demonstrated, however, provides a solid epistemological framework consistent with feminist research objectives that prioritise experience as a way to develop knowledge about the world (DeVault, 1996; Stanley

and Wise, 2002; Finch, 2004). In recognition that there is no definitive feminist epistemology, I situate this thesis in a feminist epistemic community that seeks to interrogate and challenge Cartesian notions of 'perfect knowledge' which do not recognise or acknowledge the context and social location of knowledge production, values the complexity of intersectional experiences and makes only partial claims to truth (Hill Collins, 1991; DeVault, 1996; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019).

In this section I have demonstrated how my analytical framework makes a unique and rigorous contribution to empirical audience studies and speaks to existing research paradigms and methodological approaches. I have done this by introducing mediated discourse analysis as an innovative analytical framework that empirically engages with the complexity of social life and centres individual experience, meeting the methodological limitations of previous studies detailed in chapter three. I have set out the analytical tools within MDA that I used to interrogate my data and located them within a broader philosophical framework, highlighting how they fit together and reinforce each other to provide a robust theoretical toolkit. I have defined the terms in which this thesis makes original claims to knowledge and located it in the body of western feminist thought.

4.2 Research processes

Sampling

> "…the process [of sampling] is inextricably linked with the development of analytical ideas and strategies for the collection of data" (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007: 38)

To meet the requirements of my research questions I developed a strategic, selective, purposive sampling strategy that directly sought the kind of person I was interested in and makes no claims to generalisability or representativeness (Thomas, 2011). Parameters of selection were that participants must watch music videos and use social media, fall within a pre-determined age-range and live, work or study in Birmingham, a young, diverse and growing city in central England. When determining requirements for participant selection I chose not to use identifying characteristics like ethnicity or sexuality, and instead adopted an anticategorical approach that rejects pre-defined social categories as products of social discourse and leaves space for the authentic complexity of individual intersectional experiences to emerge and direct data collection, reflecting MDA's intercultural perspective and feminist critiques of binary dualisms as discussed above (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; McCall, 2005). Importantly, I chose not to include sexuality as a criterion because my interest was in the *effects* of heterosexuality which are felt by everyone, not only those who identify as heterosexual. Participants self-identified all identifying characteristics to avoid researcher-identified categorisations, in line with my anticategorical intercultural approach, apart from one example which is explicitly indicated in chapter six. The resulting selection criteria, justified below, reflects the boundaries and limitations of my research aims (McCall, 2005).

Interaction with music videos and social media: Applicants self-identified as viewers of music videos and users of social media. All recruitment materials stressed this as the defining criteria for participation.

Age: Participants were aged 18 – 24. This age-group reflects the established relationship between popular music and youth culture and represents the intended audience of music videos which makes them knowledgeable, experienced and literate readers, familiar with the texts and the texts'

cultural references, presenting rich examples of action-practice within a MDA framework (Lull, 1987; Fiske, 1989a; Pink, 2001; Scollon, R., 2001; Bennett, 2002; Bennett, 2005; Martino et al., 2006; Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Pauwels, 2010; Wohlwend, 2014). Additionally, sex is increasingly linked to youth cultures (Attwood, 2006) which is recognised as the most significant time in the development of interpersonal sexual scripts (Simon and Gagnon, 1984, in Wiederman, 2015: 9). It is also significant that 18 to 24-year old women are the most at-risk age bracket for sexual violence over age 18 and male partners, past and present, are the most likely perpetrators of sexual violence against women (Home Office, 2002: 21; Ministry of Justice, Home Office and the Office for National Statistics, 2013: 16).

Gender: Heterosexuality positions people as 'male' or 'female' at institutional and interpersonal levels (Rich, 1980; Jackson, 2006). In order to understand how this is experienced at a broad and more locally situated level (e.g. genre-based gender norms), it was important to work with people from each of these gender positions, however, my anticategorical sampling approach allowed space for diverse gender positions to emerge and did not preclude non-binary people from taking part. Participants self-identified as male or female (one self-identified as having an androgynous style) allowing significant insights into how they operationalised, understood and experienced gender and its emergent fluidity as discussed in my findings chapters. The inclusion of men's voices is also significant for adding depth and insight to understanding of sexual politics in this feminist research (Stanley and Wise, 2002).

Geographic location: Participants were recruited in Birmingham, England. As a diverse and growing city of 1.1 million with 45.7% under 30 (compared to a national average of 39.4%) and 46.9% non-white British (Birmingham City Council, no date), Birmingham represents a culturally

diverse population. Specific locations for recruitment were identified in formative research, discussed in the following section.

A secondary criterion was **musical taste.** Social groups can be defined by shared meaning making, by their giving of symbolic meaning to music, clothes, words, art, places… Anything can become meaningful in various ways (e.g. legal, moral, status) and bond the group (Patton, 2015). I wanted to understand the cultural significance of music videos in different music taste communities to understand how those groups created meaning in relation to sex and relationships and so sought participants with different musical tastes. A formative review of the music charts (Official Charts, no date) identified four dominant music genres from which participants were sought and recruited: (1) Pop (2) Hip-Hop / Rap / RnB (3) Dance / Electronica (4) Indie / Acoustic. By sampling multiple taste communities, I was able to identify diverse meaning making mechanisms and practices, and explore their intersectional dimensions (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001; McCall, 2005; Patton, 2015).

Another advantage to selecting participants from diverse taste communities was in its foregrounding of participant-identified texts, addressing the limitations of previous studies detailed in chapter three. All music videos in this research were participant-identified meaning they reflected the taste of the participant and were decoded in a knowledgeable, authentic and culturally situated way, giving an informed and reliable interpretation (Middleton, 1990) bringing insight to my research questions and reflecting my analytical framework. Using participant-identified music videos stimulates emotions (Pauwels, 2010), empowering the participant, generating deeper recall, and potentially removing power imbalances in the researcher-participant relationship (Prosser and Loxley, 2008).

In chapter one I set out the appropriateness of music videos and social media as critical objects. I add to this here by arguing that as youth orientated popular culture, music videos are implicated in the production, construction and communication of cultural definitions which re-present those sexual stories deemed significant i.e., not the valueless stories; in short, they represent the culture of the dominant (Hall 1998). The role of social media in determining the credibility of music videos is also of significance in this inquiry; has the changed relationship between musician and fan facilitated by social media blurred the line between reality and fantasy and what are the implications of this for how music videos messages are interpreted? By using music videos and social media as analytical tools *and* elicitation devices to empirically explore how my participants interpreted, understood and attached meaning my interdisciplinary sampling approach "recognizes the interwovenness of objects, texts, images and technologies in people's everyday lives and identities" and their significance in sexual relationships, practices and politics (Pink, 2001: 6).

Recruitment

Chapter three outlined disciplinary approaches to studies of this kind. When reviewing those empirical studies, I was surprised by the tendency to sample exclusively from university students (see for example Zhang, Miller and Harrison, 2008; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Wright and Craske, 2015; Wright and Qureshia, 2015). This sampling bias is problematic in its implicit assumption that university students are representative of the wider population and in its exclusion of people from socio-economically and/or culturally disadvantaged backgrounds, or those who simply choose not to go to university. I purposely developed a recruitment strategy that did not replicate this model and ensured I recruited in areas away from my own and other university campuses, selecting recruitment sites with diverse socio-economic, ethnic and religious and age profiles, detailed below, to encourage the inclusion of people from varied social

positions. In this way, I recruited participants from wide-ranging cultural groups illuminating diverse examples of cultural meaning making.

Formative research of Birmingham's wards by ethnic, socio-economic, religious, and age criteria informed my initial identification of recruitment locations (Birmingham City Council, no date; Daniel, 2012). I then researched each selected ward to identify venues including public buildings, bars/pubs, cafes, and other sites relevant to the appropriate taste communities. An extensive process of formative online research identified social media networks and groups to support physical recruitment, in addition to personal and professional networks. I spent four months distributing leaflets and posters to pre-identified sites and locations, handing out leaflets to passers-by including several days spent at the Frankfurt Christmas Market in Birmingham which draws 5.5 million visitors annually (Birmingham Live, 2020), posting digital copies of my leaflet to social networking sites and emailing gatekeepers to subscription lists and online groups to recruit participants. This stage of the research process was arduous and very challenging because while I had lots of interest in my research, when people found out it was an ethnography with a weekly commitment over several months most withdrew their interest. To try to address this I secured a financial incentive (detailed below), although I don't claim this was what convinced those that did agree to take part to do so. All those who were happy to commit to the ethnography were included in the study.

In total, six participants (three female and three male) were recruited all through leaflets: two at their place of work, two through professional contacts, one in a bar, and one at the Library of Birmingham. Each self-selected to take part and went through the same process: they contacted me after seeing a leaflet, we had an initial telephone conversation where I outlined the purpose and nature of the research, I emailed an information sheet which they read, then we met, I

confirmed their eligibility to take part and they had the opportunity to ask further questions. Once they had confirmed they were happy to take part I gave a participant information sheet, they signed a consent form and we scheduled our first session. All participants received a £10 retail voucher after completion of two months in the research and were entered into a draw for one of three £50 cash awards on completion of the full term.

Methods

Feminist research stresses the importance of objectives over methods, highlighting the impartiality of methods and partiality of researchers (DeVault, 1996; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Finch, 2004). Reflecting my feminist, analytic, and symbolic interactionist perspectives and disciplinary approach, my ethnographic, qualitative, and biographical method prioritises the lived experience of my participants (Plummer, 2000). Over the period January to October 2018 I met with each participant as frequently as possible, aiming for once a week. Allowing for holidays, illness and work/life commitments on both sides, I completed a total of 90 1-hour minimum participant sessions. I used a range of qualitative methods in these sessions (detailed below) and got to know my participants in a way that would not have been possible with any other methodological approach, the importance of which should not be underestimated in this study into attitudes on a subject as intimate and sensitive as sex and relationships. I observed my participants in their everyday lives and their own space, gradually building up a picture of their social, familial and professional networks and connections, where and how they interacted with music video and social media, their patterns of appropriation and the varied social practices they engaged in, all of which contributed to and informed my analysis. Through this longitudinal ethnographic method, the initial barriers and inhibitions that characterised our early meetings dropped away (from us both) and my participants revealed a more intimate and, I believe, more honest, version of themselves. This depth of insight and interpretation would not have been

possible in a shorter period. The relationships I developed with my participants during this time were essential in enabling me to ask questions and obtain answers that revealed attitudes and beliefs on a topic as sensitive and personal as sex and relationships (Wolcott, 1999; Geertz, 2000).

I communicated with my participants face-to-face, over text and email and developed a depth of relationship that enabled me to identify what was important (and what was not) to them. I asked if I could connect with them on social media (Twitter and Instagram) and followed their activity online supplementary to our sessions. The forming of this longer-term relationship was significantly beneficial to the research process in several ways. It meant: I was able to observe the inconsistencies and contradictions each participant inhabited and explore in detail the belief systems that shaped and underpinned their interpretations; I was able to ask questions I could not have asked in a one-off interview (for example challenging contradictions that appeared over time); I was able to engage in open and frank conversations on their sexual views, opinions and experiences; my participants felt comfortable to share information, opinions, contradictions, inconsistencies and embarrassing or secretive admissions they would not have done without the bond of trust developed over weeks and months. The resulting data, detailed in my findings chapters, presents an unparalleled depth and richness of insight into the readings and interpretations of my young adult participants, of their lived experiences of cultural struggle negotiated in acceptance and resistance characterising the patterns of hegemony in practice, of "ascendancy achieved through culture, institutions, and persuasion" (Hall, 1998; Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005: 832).

Throughout the fieldwork I undertook a range of activities with my participants, viewing them in multiple contexts, revealing how different settings, occasions and topics of conversation exposed inconsistencies and/or contradictions in their accounts and challenging my own interpretations

by shifting my gaze. My primary method of data collection was participant observation, spending time with my participants as they went about ordinary, and extraordinary, actions and practices in varied times (e.g. day/night) and in varied places, as far as they were happy to grant. My objective was to identify the structures, discourses and practices that situated, guided, and influenced their understandings, but also crucially, to develop relationships with them. I began with open sessions on a broad theme (e.g. what music they liked) and allowed the participant to lead the conversation to allow me to get a wide-ranging view of their social and cultural influences and tastes and later introduced more structured observations, focused on specific areas of interest (e.g. masculinity in music videos). I tried as far as possible to keep sessions to one hour to manage completion of fieldnotes and transcription, but some sessions ran beyond two hours. Within the sessions I used varied methods including:

Open observation: Spending time with participants socially and/or entirely unstructured, doing something as part of their day-to-day activity (for example: socialising with friends, attending a birthday party, attending live music, going shopping), visiting a site/location of their choosing.

Semi-structured /unstructured conversation: Usually with just an overarching topic and the flexibility to allow the participant to change direction but sometimes including pre-set questions. See appendix 3 for a sample transcript.

Open media time: Observation of participants watching music videos and/or using social media.

Semi-structured media time: A planned viewing of a music video from the participant's library (see appendix 1) with a detailed semi-structured analytical reading.

Review session: Review of participant profile (see appendix 1) to see if my interpretation resonated with them (Social Science Bites, 2012).

Q sort: Adapted from Q Methodology (see van Exel and Graaf, 2005), this activity presented the participant with a selection of YouTube comments from a music video in their music library which they arranged on an inverted pyramid in order of preference/agreement giving insight into thought processes, discourses, and practices.

Debrief interview: In the final session participants were given a debrief sheet that set out the study's broader interest and took a more structured approach with set questions (see appendix 3). Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions and withdraw their data at this point.

Additional data was obtained from:

Participant recorded sessions: Participants used free-to-use screen and audio recording apps to record themselves accessing music videos and/or social media. A total of twenty recordings were submitted from five participants.

Site observations: I undertook seven additional observations at locations identified as significant to participants culturally and/or socially to enhance and support participant observations.

Researcher critical reflexive account: I kept an ongoing reflective account of the research process detailing my thought processes, research choices and changes as advocated in MDA (Scollon, 1998; Scollon, R., 2001; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Lane, 2014; Dooly, 2017).

Documentary / artefact analysis: I spent many hours following up online sources that participants mentioned and entering their digital, musical, and cultural spaces, observing and/or

reading interactions in those spaces. This 'unofficial' data collection added to my mental and intellectual construction of the individual, providing a bridge into the digital architecture of their social lives (Marres, 2017). As part of this, I conducted analysis of music videos and social media posts my participants engaged with, their own social media posts and internet browsing histories to enhance my insight and understanding.

Analysis

> "Analysis, then, is sorting out the structures of signification" (Geertz, 2000: 9)

Using an abductive analytical approach, I applied theoretical depth, meaning and insight from feminist theory, cultural studies, sociology, social theory, sexuality studies and media studies to my empirical data. In this way, I moved between my data and existing theory to find ideas that explained patterns, themes, correlations and contradictions (Bernard, 2011) and did not adopt the grounded theory inductivist approach of some symbolic interactionists, 'building up concepts from experience' (Denzin, 1992; Plummer, 2000).

The analytical process began in my first participant observation session and continued as I refined my arguments and wrote this thesis; it was not a distinct 'stage' in the research process but messy and difficult to explain, part of every participant interaction as I continued to develop insights and hone my understanding and argument (Bernard, 2011; Gill, 2018). Each time I met a participant I took fieldnotes on what they did (their social actions and practices), what they used or appropriated (their mediational means), who was involved in the action and their role/function/effect (interaction order), the discourses in place (i.e. all the discourses involved in the action or practice) and my personal reflections and observations. As my insight into my participants grew and I developed ideas about the direction of the research, I developed

investigative questions to shape the flow of research and support my analysis. These included, for example:

1) What power structures are identified in music videos and what is their intertextual and interdiscursive relationship to social media?
2) What are the significant social actions and practices that contribute to the reproduction of social identities and social groups?
3) How does hegemonic postfeminism materialise in sex and relationships in music video, and social media through hegemonic heterosexuality?
4) How do the participants appropriate media? What does this mean for decoding? What does it mean for my assumptions of their readings?
5) How does the intertextual relationship between music videos and social media influence readings e.g. audience's relationship to musician?
    a. How do audiences interact with musicians?

To support my notetaking, I audio-recorded sessions when it was practical to do so. I did not transcribe recordings verbatim but paraphrased in a narrative style conveying the 'gist' leaving out irrelevant conversation and always used the participant's vocabulary to retain their 'voice' and footprint on the data (Ricoeur, in Geertz, 2000: 19). My analytical insights, personal observations, ideas, reflections, interpretations and feelings from the session were included in transcriptions and clearly indicated as such, in line with the ethnographic method of transcription (Mason, 2018). I sometimes found when listening back to a recording that my attention would be caught by something I had not noticed in the session, or my interpretation of the participant's meaning would change. I included these observations in my transcriptions, using this stage of thick description (Geertz, 2000) as a first level coding opportunity (Wolcott, 1995; Ezzy, 2002; Saldaña,

2016) and used paragraphs to indicate a shift in topic, tempo or conversational flow in preparation for later coding (Saldaña, 2016). As time consuming as this process of transcription was, it was invaluable in establishing a familiarity with my data and allowing me to become more reflexive and questioning of my own observations and interpretations (Mason, 2018). I input all fieldnotes, transcriptions and audio-recordings into NVivo (qualitative data analysis software) which I used for coding and organising my data. NVivo was not only useful but essential for collating, sorting and coding my data which had the potential to become unwieldly given how much I gathered. It also enabled me to quickly and easily access specific and appropriate data as I progressed with my analysis in an iterative process.

All excerpts and quotes used in the findings chapters are taken directly from transcriptions in the style outlined above. I use extended excerpts where appropriate (for example when explaining a complex point) to reveal my interpretive processes and to reflect the authentic voice and culture of the participant, making them more accessible and allowing them to speak rather than speaking for them, as far as possible (Geertz, 2000).

When this stage of data collation and analysis was complete, I reviewed all fieldnotes to identify recurrent and significant patterns and themes. I revisited the analytical framework literature and reflected on my initial motivations and aims for the research. From this, I developed a coding strategy, outlined below, that reflected my data and the requirements of the research (Saldaña, 2016). I began with a rigorous line-by-line coding in NVivo of my complete data corpus to observer-identified codes informed by MDA, plus individual participant codes for personal information and a code called 'Reflections' to separate my analytical observations from participant data (see appendix 2). I took this approach because of the amount of data I obtained over the extended research period and the fallibility of my memory to identify 'significant' data

without risking what I will call a bias of recency, i.e. I would have forgotten early topics and conversations that informed my later thinking, or offered complementary or contradictory perspectives (Wolcott, 1995; Saldaña, 2016). I then re-read the data corpus by code, noting themes and topics as they emerged which I labelled onto individual paper notes as new participant-identified codes. I then reviewed these codes, removing duplicates and irrelevant 'codes' and grouped the remaining ones together thematically reflecting the research questions and aims (see appendix 2). The result of this abductive analytical process was a final set of conceptual codes as included in appendix 2[5].

This process of thick interpretation, of reading and re-reading and coding my data as patterns, themes, correlations and contradictions emerged, generated ideas and alternative accounts for explaining participant interpretations and actions and continued in an iterative fashion throughout the development of this thesis (Bernard, 2011; Patton, 2015: 606). What emerged through this process was the significance of internalised discourses of practice in shaping and informing interpretations (significant discourses), the way discourses were rationalised or incorporated as cultural and sexual identities (cultural struggle), and the way discourses were recognised in the texts (modality).

To address my research aim of identifying, interrogating and addressing the intersectional implications of contemporary sexual scripts in hegemonic heterosexuality I focussed on discourses that informed interpretations of representations of sex and relationships and within that, the most significant discourses as they appeared in the data corpus. This analytical approach drew out the gendered, interpersonal and behavioural aspects of discourses (as scripts), highlighting how they were experienced by my participants in the act of interpretation, and

[5] I did not re-code data under 'Reflections' because my analytical observations were not empirical evidence

avoided a Foucauldian discourse analysis centred on macro-level materialisations of discourse indicating subject positions, consistent with my MDA informed symbolic interactionist perspective (Fine, 1993; Jackson, 1999; Plummer, 2000; Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Beres, 2013). I then traced the discourses edges and borders and identified their intersectional limitations and boundaries. Chapters five and six set out my findings in relation to the most significant discourses that emerged as shaping interpretations and chapter seven deals explicitly with sexual scripts, outlining the concepts underpinning them, empirically explaining how they were managed within my participants' identities, and considering their implications for contemporary sexual politics. In this way, I develop and empirically evidence my argument that hegemonic heterosexuality is enduringly coded in ways that discriminate based on gender, sexuality, race and class, that its sexual scripts in postfeminist media culture are enduringly discriminatory despite popular discourse to the contrary, and that cultural dissonance is required to manage these discourses in contemporary identities.

The plurality of methods, data sources and theoretical perspectives detailed in this chapter were used to view actions and practices and search for convergence or consistency in my data. They revealed alternative explanations and challenged my assumptions and beliefs, allowed for the emergence of significant actions and addressed the potential for bias in my method (Shipman, 1988; Patton, 2015). I also discussed my findings and interpretations with my supervisory team throughout the research process who constructively challenged me to consider new and alternate perspectives.

4.3 Ethics and reflexivity

Ethics

This research was granted ethical approval by The University of Birmingham in September 2017 (reference ERN_17-0682). An amendment allowing financial incentives was approved in December 2017. All fieldwork was undertaken in strict accordance with the University of Birmingham's code of ethics and code of practice (University of Birmingham, no date) and Social Research Association's Safety Code of Practice (Social Research Association, no date). All participants were informed of the general purpose and nature of the research in advance, and in full in the debrief interview to minimise the potential of directing perceptions and biasing the findings (Hammersely & Atkinson, 2007: 211). All gave informed consent, are anonymous and referred to by pseudonym throughout. All data will be stored on the University Research Data Store for the required ten years.

I adopted a virtue ethics model in my fieldwork (MacFarlane, 2010) prioritising interactions based on respect, humility and sincerity for participants and researcher alike integrated into my day-to-day practice. My commitment and attention to ethical relationships was foregrounded on several occasions, two of which I discuss here as exemplars of the type of ethical considerations I encountered.

1) A short while into the fieldwork period a participant's disclosure of violence at home left me concerned for their safety. After taking advice from my supervisor I signposted them to appropriate domestic abuse services. When I followed up with them, I was assured the incident was resolved and no longer a problem. However, I had ongoing concerns for the emotional wellbeing of this participant which frequently manifested in stories of

emotional, financial and relationship difficulties, alcohol and drug use and missed sessions. This participant arrived stoned and reticent to engage on several occasions and dropped out of the study after five months which I took as symptomatic of their emotional state. My relationship with this individual was challenging because they repeatedly insinuated they saw our sessions as a kind of therapy and because of the very intimate nature of some of information they shared. These behaviours left me feeling uncomfortable at times and required me to actively manage the boundaries of our relationship. For example, in a morning session (11.30am) at a local pub they asked me to buy me them a pint of cider. I was uncomfortable because I believed this would frame the day ahead for them but I also believed it was not my role to monitor their actions and so I ordered the requested drink.

2) This example concerns managing the relationship with a participant I developed a rapport with and who received a mental health diagnosis during the fieldwork and underwent a period of physical and emotional instability. I had to balance my role as researcher (needing to continue with the research) with my participant's health (needing space and time away from the study) and my personal feelings towards them (wanting to offer emotional support). I managed this by maintaining contact with the participant during their period of withdrawal from the study, checking in and asking about their wellbeing, but without crossing what I thought of as a professional boundary of engaging on an emotional level and becoming part of their support network.

A final point reflecting my ethical commitment to my participants is that I have not included any information not strictly relevant to the study.

Reflexivity

All good research ought to be clear about the conditions from which it arises (Stanley, 1990) and ethnography, feminist research, symbolic interactionism, critical realism and MDA all emphasise the importance of the researcher in the research process arguing she is not a neutral observer but an active part of the process (Kelly, 1988; Scollon, 1998; Plummer, 2000; Skeggs, 2002; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Saunders and Townsend, 2016). As a woman conducting feminist research I was inextricably located as the oppressed in my research (McRobbie, 1982; Kelly, 1988), and taking the approach I did placed me in my participants' lives working *with* rather than *on* them in a process of co-construction necessitating a close relationship (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004; Lane, 2014). Feminist research foregrounds reflexivity in the research process, recognising the situatedness of the researcher and researched as unavoidably connected to the knowledge produced in an effort to reduce the potential of harm, symbolic or otherwise, for the participants involved (DeVault, 1996; Stanley and Wise, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010; Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

The imbalance of power in the research relationship is a highly sensitive issue and in this section I detail my positionality in recognition that it directly shaped the research and to frame the relationships I shared with my participants (McRobbie, 1982; England, 1994). I focus on class, age and race because these were the social locations I felt most profoundly throughout the process and the characteristics that emerged as significant intersectional dimensions in the research process. I give an overview of my research participants in appendix 1.

Class: My family and background are working class. I was the first person in my family to get an undergraduate degree in the 1990s and worked in the creative industries, after some years in managerial positions. I am now a full-time PhD research student at a Russell Group university.

These academic and professional accomplishments locate me as middle-class (Saunders, 1990) and grant me a level of educational capital (Bourdieu, 1984). However, this realisation of capital is not paralleled in other areas of my life (e.g. economic, inherited, cultural or social) and results in what I experience as a complex and imprecisely defined educated yet working-class ever-shifting class position. Conceptualising social class as a social structure that has real social effects and is continually (re)constituted through interaction (Fine, 1993; Skeggs, 2002) frames my subjective experience of social class as dependent on who I am talking to and where I am. I draw attention to this distinction because 'class' caused me significant moments of tension and confusion during my fieldwork. For example, a middle-class participant frequently used the word 'our' when describing their social world, implying a shared social position. Not only did I not feel any affinity with this person in terms of class, I held oppositional views to them on most subjects and on occasion found their descriptions of class identities personally challenging. In contrast, a working-class participant seemed to feel socially distanced from me and I secretly desired to reveal information about myself to bond with them.

Age: At the beginning of the fieldwork process I was 42 years old. The significant age gap between me and my research participants presented significant advantages. Firstly, my distance from youth culture meant I was alert to things (sayings, customs, practices) that perhaps would not be noticed by younger researchers. Also, my participants repeatedly assumed I was unfamiliar with their social worlds and consequently spent more time explaining what they considered the significant aspects of it, thereby adding insight into thought processes and what they consider important (Scollon, 1998; Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012). Secondly, barriers were removed when talking about sex and relationships, particularly with my male participants, because my age placed me outside of their social group, I was not a 'threat' to ego and they opened up in a way I don't think they would have had I been their age. Another advantage was

that my age conferred on me first-hand experience and knowledge of the 1990s and the sexual and dating norms of that time. This gave me a framework to conceptualise their views of, and comparisons with, that period which emerged as romanticised and significant.

Race: I am white British. I had not interrogated my 'whiteness' prior to this research process and found it to be an illuminating and, at times, unsettling experience. It was in interactions with my black participants I most acutely felt a power imbalance, for example in a session with an 18 year old black female participant in a busy café. Some way into this session a black woman and man aged around their 30s sat on a table next to us and I became uncomfortable as I imagined them listening to me interviewing this young black woman about her race and sexuality (which was the conversation at that moment). I felt the power imbalance of myself as the older white woman 'mining' the young black woman for data and wondered if they saw this too and if they judged me for it. I never felt uneasy or judged with my white participants and never worried about 'exploiting' them in the same way. Another significant consideration in relation to race was the way racism emerged in the research. Two white participants expressed racist attitudes to me. I assume they would not have done this had I not been white. One black participant told me they believed there was no racism in Birmingham, a claim I did not and do not support but felt unable to challenge because of our racial positions. These observations have influenced my alertness to the question of race in my research.

By including this information, I draw attention to the significance of my socio-cultural background (Saunders and Townsend, 2016) and the intersection of social identities and power that inform my subjectivity (Hill Collins, 1991). My socio-cultural position informed and shaped the rapport and degrees of 'intimacy' of my interpersonal relationships with my participants and the level and type of data I probed for and was given. I have here located myself in the research,

setting out how I am 'involved' in it stating who I am and how my significant social identities locate me in relation to my participants, my selection of research topic, development of research questions and methodology, analysis and findings (Stanley and Wise, 2002; Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

Recognising my lenses of (dis)identification is significant in consideration of the validity of my knowledge-claims which are based on my representations of my participants' voices through the analytical and writing processes (Stanley and Wise, 2002), and has challenged me to question my biases, assumptions and views of myself, and power in the research process. Through this process I have examined my position in relation to my research and questioned what intellectual and emotional baggage I brought to it (Social Science Bites, 2012). My ontological and epistemological position, my understanding of the composition and significance of that position, detailed above, allowed me to step back from my data and confer an analytical lens that frames my positioning of this thesis as *an* interpretation shaped by and through my values and social identities (Bocock, 1986; McRobbie, 1991; Plummer, 2000).

4.4 Concluding remarks

In this chapter I have detailed my feminist ethnographic methodology and set out how it prioritises the lived experiences of young adults allowing me to interrogate the theoretical mismatch between what we are told is happening in social life (e.g. postfeminist tales of female success) and what is really happening. I have demonstrated how my methodological and analytical approach foregrounded social action and participant-led analysis, looking at meaning making as a dynamic two-way process to provide a robust answer to the limitations of previous studies and addressing how media representations influence the way we understand our lives.

I have shown how my qualitative social science approach illuminated hegemony in action (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005) by engaging with the lived realities of young adults in a unique and unprecedented way, revealing the complexities and contradictions in their day-to-day lives as they managed sexual identities and made sense of contemporary sexual politics. In this explanation, I have set out how my novel and innovative methodology provides new insight into understandings of postfeminist female sexuality and the sexualisation of culture extending knowledge on the relationship between sexual representation and practice (Attwood, 2006), ideas and action (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2007), contemporary sexual scripts and gender relations.

Importantly, I highlight the empirical base of my work and stress that my findings stem from engagement with young adults and reflect their lived experience, advancing purely theoretical constructions and deepening understandings of social practice. My participants are real people who I built genuine relationships with, based on trust and respect. I honour those relationships and the information they shared with me in the remainder of this thesis. I am deeply grateful to each of them for their time, energy and commitment to the research process.

In the following chapters I set out the findings that emerged from the in-depth, complex and extended engagement with six individuals as detailed above, contributing to broader knowledge and understanding on why human beings behave as we do and speaks to the adequacy of existing theories and paradigms contemporarily used to study these issues.

Chapter 5:
Generation as identity

Chapters two, three and four detail the conceptual, theoretical and methodological frameworks that directed this research. In this the first of my three findings chapters, I critically discuss my finding that the identity position that emerged as of central significance in shaping and informing interpretations of music videos and the wider world was 'generation', evidencing how even with distinctions around class, race, gender and sexuality, it created a specificity that shaped interpretations. In chapter six I outline how generational identity influenced notions of gendered and sexual identities, before detailing in chapter seven how my participants interacted with the sexual scripts they identified in music videos.

Identification with a distinctive generation emerged as *the* significant differentiating identity characteristic informing notions of self and interpretations of representations of sex and relationships. Generation is recognised as an important identifying characteristic that carries meaning and material implications (Bourdieu, 1984) yet has been noted to be largely absent from studies of sexuality (Plummer, 2010). As Plummer (2010) notes, generation plays a major role in shaping and informing sexual meaning making as individuals interact with and take symbolic meaning from those around them and dominant and alterative ideas indicating time-specific notions of (un)acceptable behaviours to create notions of self and other. In this way, each generation has a sexual 'narrative' that organises social and sexual life as sexual meanings change over time, effecting change in ourselves as we interact with them. For younger generations this narrative is typically assembled from meanings associated with notions of what is 'new' and

‘experimental’ as past narratives appear routine, are forgotten and not present in the current moment (Plummer, 2010).

This chapter details how my participants demonstrated their generational identity through words and actions and draws attention to the intersecting identity characteristics within that identity that informed understandings of self and others. I highlight incongruencies and instances of cultural dissonance that emerged as I got to know my participants, revealing the role and implications of ‘generation’ in the interpretive process. Crucially, this chapter details how belonging to a distinctive generation framed what my participants understood themselves *as* and *as not*, highlighting the distinctions this conceptualisation revealed as important, and addressing the role of social media in that process.

Millennials can be defined by birth date (roughly those born between the early 1980s up to 2000) and the term is widely used in popular culture to refer to young people more generally (Rogan, 2018). Not all my participants called themselves ‘millennials’ but I use it as a researcher-identified category to describe the way my participants, who were born between 1993 – 1999, self-identified as a generation uniquely defined by technology and distinct from all previous generations, thereby using the term to identify a generational characteristic.

Using Hall’s theory of cultural domination (1998) I empirically demonstrate the complexities, the ‘cultural struggle’, in my participants’ readings and show how they were grounded in notions of generational distinctiveness by examining instances of recognition and differentiation to/from popular culture revealed over several months. The examples I include exemplify the negotiation that takes place when interacting with and accommodating dominant representations with one’s own inner sense of self and highlight the complex role music videos play in the process of cultural domination. This chapter enhances understandings of how young adults navigate popular culture and create meaning through interaction.

Throughout the fieldwork my participants repeatedly framed their interpretations in understandings of their 'generation', conceptualising actions and behaviours in music videos as being consistent with, reflecting, or out of step with it. While this type of identification can be understood as expected, what emerged as the fieldwork progressed was the way this identity was experienced as directly connected to social and digital media and the consequent distinctiveness they believed this conferred, for example:

> [Alex] says his generation, if they have a problem, they Google it first, anything from technical advice to relationship advice (fieldnotes: Alex 23.07.18)

> [Indy] says "it's just the culture" and that she's just doing it for the culture which is a phrase everyone uses, I ask what culture she's talking about and she laughs saying she doesn't know […] it's just a term people her age use, like friends and Twitter captions (fieldnotes: Indy 12.03.18)

This conceptualisation of themselves, and their generation, as intrinsically connected to digital media (for example Google and Twitter as highlighted above) extended to interpretations of sex and relationships and mediated how music videos were interpreted. This central finding underpins this thesis and is significant for understanding how my participants navigated contemporary notions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. This chapter discusses how 'generation' materialised and how it was experienced and argues the hegemonic heteronormative notions underpinning it demonstrate the enduring cultural power of 'dominant descriptions' (Hall, 1998); it sets out how generational identification made music videos culturally resonant enabling a powerful connection between the text and my participants' inner thoughts and feelings, reinforcing a gendered, unequal and heteronormative sexual politics; and demonstrates with examples how notions of generational identity determined agentic capacity and (un)acceptable discourses for living contemporarily within the current individualised and

depoliticised social and cultural landscape. This chapter unpacks the significance of generational identity as follows:

(5.1) This section empirically evidences how generation was claimed as a centrally important identity characteristic, informing interpretations by generating resonance and recognition through shared cultural meaning. It unpacks this finding to uncover the limitations of generation as a unifying signifier and reveals the intersectional dimensions that disrupted its meaning, evidencing examples of cultural re-signification and demonstrating the enduring domination of heteronormative and postfeminist notions of (un)acceptable sexuality and gender.

(5.2) This section unpacks the significance of my participants' nostalgia for the 1990s as a contrasting discursive period, detailing how this nostalgia revealed the cultural struggle underpinning successful social identity construction. Illustrating the contradictions and cultural dissonance of generation as an identity position, this section draws on data gathered over several months evidencing processes of identity construction.

(5.3) This section sets out the role of social media as culture-maker, determining, policing, and shaping notions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics for this generation. Close readings of participant interpretations of music videos and social media texts empirically evidence the enduringly heteronormative and gendered basis of this process.

5.1 Unpacking the generational identity

A shared notion of generational identity influenced the interpretive process by creating a 'space of recognition' (Hall, 1998) in my participants. When watching young adult characters in music videos, across all genres covered, my participants watched themselves being represented and responded in terms of agreement or disagreement, of "resistance and acceptance, refusal and

capitulation" (Hall, 1998: 447), dependent on the specific composition of the representation. When asked if they felt their age had any influence on their readings all participants agreed, recognising the characters as peers and consequently finding the videos "more relatable" (fieldnotes: Alex 17.02.18). This recognition meant they were able to accommodate, or integrate, the action taking place in the video within their historical body, meaning it actively engaged with and had the potential to become part of their internalised practice, what I will also call a 'script'.

The historical body in MDA has been defined as "the abstraction of the aggregation of social practices or repeated experiences of the social actor in the course of life" (Wong Scollon and de Saint-Georges, 2012: 71). It differs from the Bourdieusian concept of habitus by being situated *in the body* of the social actor, rather than being predetermined by group membership, social class or 'field' (Scollon, R., 2001: 70 - 71). This means a fundamental difference between the two concepts is that within MDA, individual historical bodies can overlap, producing linked and shared habitus', but ultimately remain specific to the individual's lived experience. My participants' shared yet diverse experiences of recognition based on notions of generation, detailed below, support this idea.

Visual representations of young adults in music videos generated resonance for my participants but the depth of this resonance was affected by the specific composition of the representation; the closer the representation was to their self-identity, the stronger the recognition and acceptance of that representation. This was clearly discernible as all participants self-selected music videos, illustrating their individual tastes, likes and dislikes, and evidencing discourses of identification and disidentification. A range of factors were involved in the music video selection process (including personal, social and algorithmic) but by far the most significant was 'taste'. Taste is often characterised as defined by demographics, but this characterisation does not address the masses of people who share demographic traits but not taste (Lull, 1987).

Conceptualising musical taste as a social world determined by interaction and based on shared subjectivities allowed me to interrogate taste-based decisions from the diverse intersectional positions of my participants and understand how they created meaning in readings (Plummer, 2000; Attwood, 2006).

My participants had varied musical tastes (see appendix 1) but all explained its development as following a similar pattern: early exposure to music in the home from immediate family members, peer group influence at school, the development of a more refined and individual taste from around age 14 marked by a few key episodes or individuals introducing them to a new sound or artist. That the historical body of musical taste is formulaic is perhaps no surprise, but when overlaid on their individual personal histories, which was made possible by my in-depth ethnographic approach, it demonstrates the intersectional boundaries of influence on musical taste, social worlds, overlapping and contradictory historical bodies. For example, family shares racial, ethnic, socio-economic characteristics and values; peer group shares socio-economic characteristics, age, cultural and social values. My intercultural approach (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001) uncovered how my participants, each with their own distinct musical taste, produced culture and revealed where they converged and diverged in the interpretive process (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2001). Through this analytic lens and the reduction of barriers to sharing potentially controversial beliefs achieved by my ethnographic approach, I observed how seeing characters of the same or similar age in music videos generated resonance but significantly, how these readings were disrupted through interpretations of class, race, gender and sexuality. These intersectional, social and cultural identities marked out the limits of generation to define how my participants saw themselves and others and exposed how notions of 'generation' intersected with 'taste' to reinforce dominant heteronormative postfeminist definitions of gender and sexuality.

Conceptualising the ability of a representation to communicate 'truth' as inextricably linked to its ability to make sense in the mind of the audience (Eco, 1981; Cobley, 1996; Chandler, 2002) means that when my participants saw themselves represented in music videos by characters of the same generation and with culturally specific signifiers (e.g. race, sexuality), these videos were considered to be more authentic, to communicate a more reliable truth, and to hold a high cultural status. This has implications for how the sexual scripts in music videos were interpreted, which I discuss in chapter seven, and demonstrates the relevance of musical taste in illuminating cultural meaning making and cultural (dis)identification processes, highlighting how they intersect with notions of class, race and sexuality. Participant interpretations of black femininity exemplify this process and demonstrate the diversity of interpretation in the signification process, showing the limitations of generation as a cohesive identity position and its intersections with notions of race, ethnicity, gender and class.

Indy is a 20-year-old black woman. Her musical taste consisted of hood music, rap, 90s/00s RnB, and neo soul. Most of the artists Indy was interested in were black with the notable exception of Gwen Stefani, a favourite from her teen years that has stayed with her. In a close reading of *Ashanti: Foolish* (2002), as was typical for all my participants, Indy applied the storyline to her own life experiences as a way to make sense of what she watched. In this case, the storyline revolves around Ashanti's (a young black female singer) romantic relationship with a man who cheats on her, is abusive, and who she feels she cannot leave. In interpreting this, and explaining why she believes Ashanti not only fell for the man but struggles with his behaviour as the relationship develops, Indy, with a visceral sense of fatalistic resignation, tells me she has been in similar situations, integrating Ashanti's experiences and her own, and providing one reading for both:

> [Indy] says he's just that kind of person and it's that kind of lifestyle, they rope you in and you think everything is good and cushty and then the true colours show after (fieldnotes: Indy 25.07.18)

In this example, Indy paralleled her real-life personal experience with the video representation, recognising herself in Ashanti's character, and consequently had a deeper resonance with the video. The iconic signs of age, race, and culture (re)presented a realistic representation of romantic relationships, corresponding with Indy's life experience sufficiently enough to make sense for her (Eco, 1981). This example demonstrates a straightforward process of uninterrupted recognition and resonance.

I turn now to Chris, a 19-year-old white man into guitar-based indie-rock and indie-pop, to illustrate a disruption of the interpretation process through his readings of women in music videos. Chris usually discussed women in music videos in terms of their sexual attractiveness and desirability, locating them as sexual objects. Musicians in his musical taste were almost exclusively male and white and when race was discussed Chris used it as a differentiating characteristic with implications for how he felt towards the person being discussed, for example

> I ask if Chris thinks his race (i.e. being white) influences the way he sees Post Malone and he says "yeah, I probably like him more than I like other rappers that I've seen (laughs) who are black (more laughing) (cough) but I don't know (cough) I dunno" (fieldnotes: Chris 26.02.18)

When I asked Chris how he felt about the black women in *Post Malone: Congratulations* (2016) his usual interpretation (women as sexual objects) was disrupted and he interpreted them

> […] as kind of less of a (pause) sexual object or person or like (pause) thing yeah because they're not white (fieldnotes: Chris 26.02.18)

In this example Chris' interpretation of women has changed, resulting from the intersection of race with gender, to signify an absence of sexuality, or at least sexual attraction. The visual representation of a woman no longer makes *the same* sense in his mind (as when the women are white) and his usual interpretation of women in music videos has been disrupted, causing him to offer an alternative reading. This example demonstrates how race and gender intersect with generation to limit its potential to resonate with the audience. The following example from Carla details further limitations of generation as it intersects with notions of sexuality, race, ethnicity, gender, and class to inform notions of (un)acceptable female sexuality.

Carla is a 22-year-old, white, middle-class German woman who likes European, particularly German, rap and rock. Most of the musicians in Carla's musical taste were white and all the rap she shared with me in the research was by white artists. Carla routinely drew on notions of race, class, age and ethnicity in her interpretations of music videos, as demonstrated in the following excerpts where she highlights intersectional implications of representations of female subjectivity. *Eminem: River* (2017) tells the story of a love affair between Eminem (a white male American rapper) and a married woman. When the lead female character (also white) screams and shouts at Eminem during an argument, Carla's reading presented a complex intersectional analysis:

> […] Carla says if the actors were of a different race it would change the message when it comes to the aggression level. She says in America there is a certain prejudice against black people when it comes to their street language and aggression and for her it would seem more "normal" (said using quotation marks) to have a black woman scream, get loud and be more passionate, saying they are more like this whereas white women... she trails off [then says] if you think about a low class environment, […] we are in an academic setting and have a different way of talking and stuff and this is what she would expect from a white middle-class person. She says she would be less surprised by some of

> the reactions if the characters were black […] she would expect this passionate and loud behaviour more from black people, particularly the woman's role. For the guys she says it makes less difference. It's about culture, not race […] I summarise that because they are American it makes no difference if they are white or not white. She agrees and says culture dictates not race

I asked Carla if she thought this translated to the UK:

> She laughs and says she hopes not, that this video is violent and completely destructive, based on lies, based on cheating, everything she hopes our society is not. At least in her generation, maybe if you go back a couple of generations (fieldnotes: Carla 16.04.18)

For Carla, the representations were complex, encompassing several axes of identity which she identified as differentiating factors. In her interpretation, Carla paralleled black femininity with 'low-class' femininity and middle-class femininity with white femininity. In this categorisation Carla outlined how the representation disrupted her ability to find resonance because it showed a white woman behaving in a way she associates with black women thereby not making sense for her. Carla's negative interpretation of this type of behaviour is clear in her follow up statement and was expressed repeatedly in other sessions. Carla located male behaviour in the more ambiguous category of an ethnic 'culture' as the cumulative product of these intersections, and in her final comment differentiated herself *and* her generation from the gendered identities represented by associating them with 'previous' generations. This example demonstrates how 'generation' is used discursively as an identity position obscuring racial, ethnic and classed identities that are conceptually located in notions of 'culture' and absorbed in discourses of taste.

Illuminating how notions of taste inform and intersect with interpretations, Alex, a 24-year-old white, middle-class man who describes his musical taste as indie, folk and alternative, explains how his music differs from what he identifies as 'mainstream' music:

> […] I summarise that Alex thinks mainstream music particularly rap/RnB/Hip-Hop has rules around relationships and power dynamics, he says yes. I ask how he feels the music videos he watches differ. He says there are a whole lot more clothes being worn for one thing, and I ask why this is significant […] He pauses and says it is less obviously using sex to sell the music, he stumbles around his words saying he finds any music video that has people dancing around scantily clad a turn-off, calling it crass, saying he's not interested. I don't say it but wonder how he squares these thoughts with his enjoyment of *Dua Lipa: New Rules*. He says "I'm just going to go ahead and say it" the kind of music he listens to has more storytelling, it's higher-brow and has less overt references to sex. He says it might reference a relationship, but it would be about the emotional and psychological aspects rather than the physical side being on show […] I ask what the significance of this distinction is, why one is better than the other. He says one is more sophisticated, that someone might listen to his music and not like it, finding it too quiet etc, so he won't say better (fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18)

I examine the contradiction between this statement and Alex's enjoyment of *Dua Lipa: New Rules* in the following section. Here, I discuss how Alex uses 'taste' conceptually to differentiate his 'higher-brow, less sexualised and more sophisticated' music from what he calls 'urban' music. In the above example, Alex cites visual representations of overt female sexuality and uses words and phrases linked to notions of class (e.g. high-brow and sophisticated) to justify his argument that rap, RnB and Hip-Hop music genres, commonly associated with black youth culture (hooks, 1994), (re)present oppositional characteristics e.g. uncultured, carnal, and crass. Analyses of the representation of black women in music videos have highlighted the various ways the black female body has been fetishized and sexualised, and frequently used to represent an untamed sexuality (Hill-Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012. See also Whiteley, 2000; Railton and Watson, 2007). In Alex's reading, knowingly or otherwise, he demonstrates how black female sexuality continues

to be associated with a deviant sexuality (Hill-Collins, 2004) through its symbolic representation of low-brow overt sexuality.

Alex repeatedly called on rap, RnB and Hip-Hop to exemplify the mainstream culture he disdained throughout the fieldwork (for example *Lil Dicky: Freaky Friday ft. Chris Brown; Robin Thicke: Blurred Lines ft. T.I., Pharrell; Roll Deep: Green Light*) and in so doing excluded it from his culture and differentiated himself from that taste community (Bryson, 2001). Notions of class and race were central to Alex's characterisations of musical taste, as demonstrated above, which he used discursively to differentiate himself within his broader generational identity.

These examples show how 'generation', a foundationally important identity position for my participants, had limited meaning and intersected with class and race to signify (in)appropriate notions of gender and sexuality through discourses of 'taste'. Empirically evidencing my participants' interpretive processes drew out how 'generation' was grounded in definitions of class and race which had implications for how representations of gender and sexuality were interpreted. Unpacking how my participants saw definitions of themselves and others 'reworked' and 'reshaped' in music videos reveals hegemony in action by empirically demonstrating how representations (dominant definitions) find a place of resonance, of recognition, the "real effects" of which are their integration into internalised discourses of practice as social and sexual scripts (Hall, 1998: 447).

5.2 Navigating dominant and alternative discourses

The previous section addressed how generation as a discursive identity intersected with class and race through discourses of taste to maintain enduringly discriminatory notions of gender and sexuality. In this section I draw out the contradictions I found in my participants' appropriation of 1990s popular culture, demonstrating how popular culture is characterised by a set of

dynamics that absorbs and neutralises alternative and resistant discourses to maintain dominant notions of gendered behaviour.

My participants expressed a nostalgia, which I came to observe in wider society, for the 1990s. This was demonstrated through references to television programmes, music, fashion, the social scene and other cultural artefacts of that time. The 1990s was thought of as a "modern day belle epoch" in British history characterised by political stability and vibrant cultural scene (fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18) and was repeatedly called on to illustrate the distinctiveness of the contemporary period and generation. By contrasting themselves and their lives to what they saw as the technological simplicity of that time, a notion that for them extended to relationships and dating practices as I later discuss, they created a specificity for their generation as inherently connected to technology, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

> [John] shows me *Bicep: Glue* […] He says it is nostalgic of a time around the 90's in British rave culture. He wasn't around then but feels that he has an idea of this time "when people used to go to raves in fields" and says it isn't like that anymore. He says it feels like a unified concept. He calls it a "part of history" and says he wishes he could have been there, part of that scene because it isn't around in that way anymore (fieldnotes: John 07.02.18)

> [Sam] says the 90s are between two eras which makes it so prominent, it's like the good times where you kind of had media but you kind of didn't so you experienced both so there was a balance whereas now there is no balance (fieldnotes: Sam 17.05.18)

> [Alex] says online dating exposes the cruelty of human nature […] He talks about his parents' relationship and how they were friends for a long time before they got together and seems to have a rose-tinted view of relationships pre the social media age (fieldnotes: Alex 14.03.18)

In the above excerpts Sam and Alex link technology to their generation and imply it has negative implications. This conceptualisation of contemporary technology as inherently problematic was routinely expressed through discourses drawing on media reports of the negative effects of social media. I discuss the role of social media in informing their generational identity in the following section but here return to the significance of their appropriation of the 1990s as a contrasting concept to distinguish themselves. My participants made repeated references to 90s music, TV shows and culture in our conversations about their leisure activities and in readings of music videos demonstrating an admiration for, and at times replication of, its popular culture particularly in music, style and fashion. This was an interesting finding because of the contradictions in dominant discourses between the periods. Popular culture in the UK in the 1990s was characterised by an overtly sexist lad culture and postfeminist discourses of female sexual empowerment, personified as the 'always up-for-it sexual subject' (Gill, 2003; McRobbie, 2004; Goldthorpe, 2015; García-Favaro and Gill, 2016). This contrasts with dominant contemporary discourses expressed by my participants as representative of their generation, which centre on diversity and inclusion and the importance of being 'WOKE' ("awake to the sufferings and experiences of others particularly women and ethnic minorities, or the disabled, anybody who wouldn't be considered privileged in society" fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18), and popularity of feminism (Banet-Weiser, Gill and Rottenberg, 2019). Through my interrogation of this discursive contradiction I found examples of 1990s discourses being appropriated to facilitate social actions that did not resonate with contemporary gender identities. In the following examples I demonstrate how 1990s discourses neutralised contemporary WOKE identity positions allowing engagement with dominant definitions of gendered behaviour without disrupting generational identity or social location.

I return to Alex and his contradictory relationship with "people dancing around scantily clad" (fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18) in music videos to demonstrate how this discursive identity

contradiction materialised. This example is significant because of Alex's self-awareness of the contradiction he was participating in revealed over several months through his personal and critical reflection which brought added richness and depth and highlighted his active construction of self-identit(ies).

Alex was introduced to *Dua Lipa: New Rules* (2017) by a male work colleague who recommended it by saying the singer was "really fit" (fieldnotes: Alex 31.01.18). Alex watched the video with this colleague in a way he described as "ogling the singer" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18) and had complex reactions to this experience. Initially, Alex said he found it "amusing" and "enjoyable" to "indulge in that sort of behaviour" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18). However, on reflection, Alex said it was not the sort of thing he usually does, and he felt a sense of regret at his participation and enjoyment. To understand his reaction, it is helpful to explore Alex's relationship to the song.

As introduced above, Alex is a 24-year-old male whose musical taste is indie, folk and alternative. Music is a significant part of Alex's friendship groups and social life, he regularly attends live music events and music festivals with friends and enjoys the kudos of being conversant on music in his taste culture and in touch with what he considers "left field stuff" (fieldnotes: Alex 26.04.18). Alex is active in left-wing local politics and associates with an alternative cultural scene and hipster lifestyle that values independent, vintage and second-hand shops, services and goods. He socialises at food and drink venues associated with this culture and locates himself and his social group as outside of the mainstream. Conversely, *New Rules* is a mainstream pop song that reached number 1 in the UK charts and was nominated for the Brit Award Song of the Year in 2018. Alex called *New Rules* a "guilty pleasure" he wouldn't share with his gig-going friends and explained his fondness for it saying it was "catchy" but the "salacious naughty element is the real appeal" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18). Alex berated himself for participating in the 'ogling' of Dua

Lipa, describing the action as "sleazy" and compared it to telling a sexist joke, which he said is "obviously clearly abhorrent" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18). Alex is expressing a crisis of identity here; he has participated in and enjoyed the sexual objectification of Dua Lipa for personal gratification but believes this behaviour is not consistent with his identity of alternative hipster with WOKE sensibilities and his left-wing politics.

Alex demonstrated the same inconsistency of identity in his reading of *Shaggy: It Wasn't Me* (2000) which he shared during a separate conversation several weeks later on representations of masculinity in music videos. Alex described *It Wasn't Me* as glorifying promiscuity and took visible amusement in the video, calling it "cheeky and very very naughty" with a smile, adding "watching it back I'm not sure it would survive this more censorious PC age" (fieldnotes: Alex 13.05.18). In this exchange Alex visibly enjoyed the video and complained about what he called 'censorious' contemporary social norms, expressing none of the shame and remorse he felt about *New Rules*, calling the video "cheeky" and "naughty", which we may take to imply 'harmless', and identifying it as unacceptable in the current "censorious PC age". By locating his problematic musical tastes and actions as 'guilty secrets' (for example *Dua Lipa, Savage Garden* and *Tears for Fears*) and only engaging with them alone (walking or exercising) or with people (like the work colleague) who are outside of his social and friendship groups, Alex's social identity is maintained and he can live without fear of reprimand, shame or embarrassment by his political activist friends or high cultural status music friends (Norris and Jones, 2005). It is important to note here that Alex's behaviours are consistent with the notion that identities are inherently contradictory (Hall, 1986) and that 'self' is actively managed, ever-changing and developed in interaction (Plummer, 2000).

Returning to my argument that discourses of 1990s popular culture contribute to the type of contradictory behaviour exemplified by Alex, this is observed in contextualising Alex's comments

detailed above in his understanding of and relationship to sexism. Over time as I got to know Alex better, he increasingly revealed 'cringey' parts of himself and his life. Part of this was his younger (secondary school up until around age 21) attitude to women which he linked to "toxic attitudes towards women and relationships and sex" found in internet pornography, "lads passing around a copy of page 3 or watching videos or whatever of celebrities scantily clad" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18). Alex said he used to talk about women in more sexualised terms, had offended people and been accused of being sexist because of saying things "without thinking", and used what might be considered "misogynistic" language, but that if he uses that sort of language now, it is in a "tongue-in-cheek" way (fieldnotes: Alex 31.01.18; 14.03.18). What caused Alex to reflect on and change his behaviours was becoming involved in local politics and "becoming part of the discourse on discrimination" and broadening his social circle to include "committed and campaigning feminists" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18). Alex said he consciously chooses his language with me as well as in other social and professional settings to manage how he is perceived, reflecting a neoliberal subjectivity that requires individuals to carry responsibility for their actions (Gill, 2008a), and made clear the 'work' involved in this in the following disclosure

> [Alex] tells me a story about seeing some friends on Sunday and says they got quite drunk together and talked very openly about sex and relationships and he didn't monitor himself in anyway and said this was "a nice release" (fieldnotes: Alex 14.03.18).

In his explanation, Alex identified his continued use of sexualising and sexist language as 'ironic' thereby locating in the 'retrosexist' 1990s lad culture pastiche pervasive in the postfeminist sensibility (Attwood, 2006; Gill, 2007c; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Phipps, 2016). This conceptualisation allows Alex to safely distance himself from "uncool" beliefs and "have it both ways"; to use sexist language but claim that is not what he really meant (Gill, 2007c: 159 – 161) as

demonstrated in the examples above. Alex's 'cultural struggle' is not without effort, as demonstrated by the way he monitors his public speech to avoid being seen as sexist and fit in with his social group, but by adopting these 90s discourses of irony Alex was able to engage in sexist behaviours without disrupting his social identity.

This theorisation demonstrates how 1990s discourses of irony enabled Alex to self-construct and maintain a social biography that evolved from sexist teenager to socially successful alternative hipster adult through associations with social and institutional systems e.g. political parties and feminism, despite his continued engagement with sexist practices. Alex managed and maintained his identity by secreting away music videos and actions that did not 'make sense' (resonate) with his public identity, minimising risk (e.g. being accused of being sexist and the consequent implications for his political career and sex life) and maximising his potential for social success without disrupting his generational identity. This is supported by theories of identity that argue the individualisation of late modern society has led to a need for people to create their own ever-shifting biographical identities and discern the rules, opportunities, dangers and consequences alone as traditional modes of social life (e.g. religion, family, the state) break down (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Conceptualising this process in a hegemonic framework where agentic resistance to the structures of power is essential (Bocock, 1986; Neizen, 2018) reveals dominant discourses in popular culture (for example 1990s retrosexist lad culture) neutralising resistance (for example feminism).

Conceiving of themselves as alternative to the mainstream, as Alex did, emerged as a significant finding influencing how my participants conceived of themselves and their sexual politics. I discuss this finding in depth in chapter six but draw attention to it here to clarify its centrality to the broader generational identity with a high cultural status regardless of musical taste. Being 'alternative' was an identity position claimed or implied by all my participants and evidenced

through consumption (e.g. brands), socialising customs (e.g. venues), musical taste and political affiliations and rejections.

Interpreting cultural struggle through the lens of hegemony and resistance provides a framework that recognises the contradictory and ideologically fractured subject of 'self' revealed in this study. For Gramsci, the complex of subordinated ideologies, of "popular consciousness", that make up the 'self' are inevitably contradictory and consequently, the self is also contradictory as it is socially constructed (Hall, 1986: 27). In this conceptualisation Gramsci allows us to understand how we all absorb ideological beliefs that work against our best interests, as demonstrated above with Alex; his contradictions of identification reveal hegemony in action, the neutralising of subordinate discourses of resistance. I have not wanted to suggest that Alex rejects anti-sexist or anti-racist discourses, on the contrary, he actively seeks to develop his knowledge in these areas and be perceived as 'on the right side of the debate'. However, his secret behaviours and interactions with media texts demonstrate the contradictory nature of his social life and identity.

In this section I have demonstrated how 1990s discourses of 'irony' allowed Alex to engage with sexist behaviour without disrupting his generational identity or social location. I have argued that while 'generation' was a centrally important and influential identity for my participants it distinguished on race, class and sexuality to maintain dominant heteronormative and postfeminist definitions of gender and sexuality.

5.3 The role and significance of social media

This chapter sets out and discusses my finding that generation was a singularly defining identity characteristic for my participants, shaping and influencing their interpretations by acting as a lens through which they understood sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. The preceding sections discuss how this identity was experienced, drawing out its enduringly discriminatory

foundations by illuminating its intersectional implications for notions of (un)acceptable gender and sexuality and appropriation of 1990s discourses to facilitate contradictory actions and practices. I have demonstrated how despite these inconsistencies and complexities, my participants identification with their generation was not disrupted.

In this section I discuss the role and significance of social media as part of my participants' generational identity because they claimed its influence and dominance in their lives was a fundamentally differentiating characteristic, something they said they became increasingly aware of, and critical of, as the research process continued. Interrogating the role of social media revealed its significance in defining notions of gender and sexuality, as illustrated in the following extract by Sam, an 18-year-old black woman who was very active and strategic in her social media use:

> A lot of influence with gender comes from social media, like how you're meant to be, cos we're more susceptible to it, cos there's studies that say women spend more time on social media. I ask what mainstream femininity looks like, she goes to Instagram models and says in the media its appearance it isn't how you are as a person. "I don't wanna say that when you're a woman that's the first thing someone views you as, your appearance not what you say cos that would be a stereotype, but I do think female identity is a lot to do with appearance" (fieldnotes: Sam 04.05.18).

As discussed, readings of music videos were primarily made through the lens of the participant's own (or occasionally friends') life experiences. When this was not possible, the representations were understood within discursive frameworks provided by social media, or occasionally other media, e.g. film or TV. In Hall's (1998) terms, this process of making sense of representations is one of cultural struggle. In this section, I argue that the intertextuality and interdiscursivity provided through social and digital media strengthens the dominance of hegemonic discourses

through its near impenetrable coverage, making genuine resistance increasingly challenging and limiting the potential of this generation to embody the alternative identity position they claim.

The influence of social media in informing music video readings was demonstrated by the way my participants repeatedly called on it to evidence their claims of 'what life is like' and 'what people think'. What emerged as I got to know my participants better was the complexity of the relationship music videos shared with social media and the way social media simultaneously gave space and voice to multiple and diverse discourses, facilitating the ability to engage with infinite social groups and/or experts to meet any emotional, intellectual or social need, and at the same time acted as a policing force, limiting social actions in their lived experience.

Conceptualising social media as a site of engagement similar to peer group, where it sets the definitions and rules of appropriate gender behaviour, highlights its integral role in the interpretation process. This is exemplified in the following extended excerpt from a close reading of the video *Ashanti: Foolish* (2002) with Indy. Introduced earlier, Indy was a young black woman of 20 into RnB, hood and soul. Indy did not identify as a feminist and rejected feminists as angry and always "going on about they deserve rights" (fieldnotes: Indy 12.03.18), yet, Indy's discussions of female sexuality frequently called on (post)feminist notions of choice and empowerment, as the below example demonstrates:

> I ask if it was reversed, if a woman initiated physical contact with a man would that be unusual, she says no, go for it. The way she says this I think she is talking about real life. I ask if it would be unusual in a music video, she says the way social media is now, people are saying go get your man, don't wait for him to come to you, she thinks it would be perfectly normal for a woman to go and speak to a guy […] I ask if it would change the way the woman was perceived, she hesitantly suggests "more confident?". Indy says on Twitter they call it shooting your shot, they say woman go shoot your shot, which means

> go be your own cupid, go to him, if you like him go to him shoot your shot. I ask what she thinks of women who are sexually assertive. She says she thinks it's fine. I ask how it is seen socially. She says it depends to what extent; she says she thinks it's silly if people judge you, but if people are more confident with it (meaning female sexuality) ... I think people are more likely to have an opinion on women ... (pause) ... than men if you know what I mean [for] anything to do with like sexually or just talking to someone ... if a woman does it compared to a man, like if a woman has sex more than a man does she gets judged, gets called a hoe or a slag or that sort of thing, when really you're just doing the same thing that a man's doing but apparently it doesn't "effect" (said with quotation marks) men the way it effects women (fieldnotes: Indy 25.07.18).

Indy immediately appropriated social media discourse to evidence and support her position on female sexuality in both real life and music videos, seeing no distinction between the two and demonstrating social media's peer group role. What this example also demonstrates is the variation of resonance this discourse of 'go shoot your shot' had dependent on its site of engagement; when Indy tried to apply it to her lived experience it was disrupted. Indy began this conversation positively supporting and encouraging the idea of women being sexually assertive in real life and in music videos, citing social media discourse as evidence of its social acceptability, but ended up falling back on the social norms and material consequences of her lived experience which limit women's opportunity to practice these 'freedoms'. In this example Indy is articulating the 'double entanglement' of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004); the contradiction between liberalised representations of female sexual agency in music videos and on social media, and the obdurate reality of her lived experience where women must negotiate the norms and ideals of compulsory heteronormativity that limit female sexual agency (Bay-Cheng, 2015; Moran, 2017). Female sexuality in music videos and on Twitter is a liberated postfeminist sexuality, but for Indy it is not so straightforward.

I discuss the significance of site of engagement for notions of female sexuality in chapter six, but here draw out social media's role as 'peer group' for this generation by illuminating its appropriation to justify and evidence opinion, which emerged in gendered form. Evidence of depoliticised neoliberal postfeminist discourses of personal responsibility and individualisation (Gill, 2007c; Budgeon, 2015; Moran, 2017) emerged in my female participants' speech, irrespective of their intersectional characteristics or sociocultural position, in their consistent framing of their opinions in the following ways: 'that's just my opinion'; 'it's my personal opinion'; 'for me it means…'; 'It's just what I think'; 'I can only speak for myself'; 'I would argue'[6], which had the effect of negating any political or agenda-based position, or cultural influence (Gill, 2007c). It could be argued this phrasing is consistent with a female conversational style which is typically less assertive and couched in non-direct and non-challenging phrases (Maltz and Borker, 1983), certainly it is interesting that none of my male participants used these or similar phrases in any remarkable way if at all, but what was significant was that when my female participants wanted to make an assertive, non-debateable statement they called on social media to evidence and justify it. My male participants also cited social media as evidence, but as they offered no, or little, expression of doubt in their opinions in a more general sense, it served a different purpose, being used to support, rather than hold-up, their claims. This is observed in Indy's appropriation of the Twitter 'go shoot your shot' and 'just for the culture' discourses above and in Sam's identification of social media as central to defining contemporary notions of gender.

The centrality of social media for my participants was exemplified in interpretations of female characters in music videos which were justified by reference to social media technology and discourse. Women in music videos were praised when they were represented as empowered, in

[6] 'I would argue' was only used by Carla, a higher education (HE) student. Indy completed one year of HE before leaving, and Sam did not attend HE.

control and fully autonomous[7], reflecting discourses of "being oneself" and "pleasing oneself" central to the postfeminist sensibility and symbolic of wider social discourses of empowerment underpinned by neoliberal postfeminist rules of individualisation (Gill, 2007c: 153 - 155). Female adherence to this characteristic was a defining criterion for positive interpretation and was identified as integral to their generation, thereby serving as a lens through which women were judged, regardless of musical taste. This is illustrated in the following extract in which Indy, who does not identify as a feminist yet continues to demonstrate a sensibility rooted in feminist notions of anti-sexism, articulates how the notion of 'pleasing oneself' captures the zeitgeist of the contemporary moment:

> [Indy] says when she listens to the song [*LAMDDB: Shade* (2017)] it reminds her of the culture now, that's what the music is now, people don't care, they're just doing their own thing and it's working. I prompt around the lyrics and she says the "whole vibe of it screams I don't care, I'm just doing my own thing and that's what I like about it" […] She talks about the singer calling her "a boss" and I check what this word means, she says doing her own thing, being in control and not being told how to act (fieldnotes: Indy 12.03.18).

Similarly, in an earlier conversation Indy identifies her admiration for Gwen Stefani as rooted in her independent manner:

> [Indy] says Gwen Stefani is "so cool" because she just doesn't care, does her own thing as expressed by her looks, lyrics and style (fieldnotes: Indy 13.01.18).

Illustrating the depth of Indy's commitment to the notion of female independence, the following excerpt reveals an uncharacteristic response in her criticism of the female lead in *Ashanti: Foolish*

[7] Men were conversely praised for demonstrating vulnerability, a finding which presented interesting contradictions and is considered more in chapter six.

(2002). Throughout the duration of the time I spent with Indy she showed herself to be thoughtful, reflective and compassionate, reserving judgement and offering considered and alternative explanations for people's words and actions, even when those actions were counter to her own best interests. In this reading, Indy had a strong and critical reaction to the woman's actions and suggests they were justification for the man's mistreatment of her.

> [Indy] says they were together and she seen he had money but because he showed her that he had money and then she was asking for money ... not just saying can I have money but kind of that. Indy says she never noticed that before. She pauses and says obviously I don't agree with cheating but maybe he got tired of her asking for money […] Indy says, "I'm not saying she doesn't love him" and a massive 'but' hangs in the air for several seconds. The way she says this betrays her words. She says she personally couldn't ask someone for money and they hand out a whole wad, she'd be like no, chill out, it's your money, I can get my own. There is a clear judgement here on the woman in the video and I am surprised, Indy is normally non-judgemental to a fault, but this feels like it has touched a nerve with her (fieldnotes: Indy 25.07.18).

Indy went on to describe two separate episodes where men/boyfriends had offered her money and she had refused. Her personal identification with the female character in this video (touched on earlier in reference to the intersectional and cultural resonance) perhaps explains the strength of her response, but it is also significant that the action which caused this response was material dependence. Similarly, the following extended excerpt from a conversation with Sam shows the same judgement this time applied to women who seek out male attention. In this excerpt Sam outlines how she believes social media has changed contemporary gender norms, facilitating this behaviour.

> Sam says [of the female lead] she is being quite flirtatious and inducing it. I say he is blowing her off and has done a couple of times. Sam says that's more common now and is part of how gender is changing and we're straying away from traditional norms where women are "to be sought out by a suitor", like something really old. Sam says this in a very precise manner, very received pronunciation, implying 'properness' and followed up with a gentle chuckle. She adds that some people are still very traditional, well some girls, and they won't approach men first, adding she doesn't know if it's out of fear of rejection or if they feel they shouldn't have to, that if someone liked you they would speak to you. I clarify does she mean in real life, she says yes, adding that more girls, because of how social media works, it's not like we have to go up to people's faces, you've got Instagram and Snapchat, and if it's ignored or not replied to or written off as a joke it's much easier than having to go up to someone's face. She says the barrier social media gives us makes it easier, and that is how the woman in the music video is acting towards Jordan. She says this is interesting, that it's about confidence as well, that being self-assured in yourself means you can laugh it off. I ask if Sam thinks the woman being shown as the initiator is indicative of a more general change in gender roles and it now being more acceptable for women to make the first move. Sam says yes, in a very particular way because there are girls who are like that in real life...because they like male attention, not because they like the male in question. Her eyes squint as she says this and her body language changes, her disapproval is palpable (fieldnotes: Sam 08.06.18 *Majid Jordan: Small Talk,* 2016).

When I first met Sam she said she had no male friends and did not relate to men, that she did not date and had no interest in dating and did not know if she had any gender preference in that area (fieldnotes: 19.01.18; 25.01.18). Sam disidentified with feminism because of what she called her 'sexism towards males' and said she feels she needs to 'work on her relationship to males' (fieldnotes: Sam 22.03.18). Sam's feelings about men and dating are perhaps responsible for her

characterisation of a 'confident' female sexual assertiveness as representative of a more general shift in gender norms in music videos but as undesirable in 'real-life', but also suggest a more general contempt for women who simply 'need men' in a broader sense, reflecting postfeminist notions of empowerment and individualisation.

Sam argued social media was responsible for changing gender norms by making it easier for women to approach men. In this conceptualisation, she reiterates the centrality of social media in distinguishing her generation. Sam best exemplifies the generational connection to social media because she was the heaviest user of social media among my participants, gave many insightful and precise articulations of how she perceived social media influenced social life, and prior to and throughout the research had no personal romantic or sexual relationship experience[8], yet had very clear views on how romantic relationships and intimacy worked. Sam was very open that her opinions and beliefs were based on her engagement with social media and limited observations of friends' relationships. Resultingly, Sam's interpretations were uniquely shaped by social media discourse, providing a rich and valuable insight into how discourses are internalised to form scripts informing notions of generation, gender and sexuality.

Sam described her musical taste as broad and not defined by genre but talked about liking rap and alternative. She took music very seriously and gave considered interpretations that referenced her knowledge of the artist, the genre and social context of the music. Sam was consistently thoughtful, serious and her conversation was grounded in a socio-political awareness that underpinned her identity. Although she did not identify as a feminist Sam was knowledgeable and supportive of women's rights campaigns in the UK and America including those against violence against women and girls, which she knew about from Twitter. In the following excerpt, Sam gives an interesting and significant insight into how social media discourse informs notions of

[8] At the end of the research period Sam said was open to the idea of an intimate relationship with men.

(un)acceptable female sexuality through her interpretation of a music video which revolves around the implied murder of a woman by a disgruntled ex-boyfriend. The excerpt begins with Sam explaining what she believes is the significance of the murdered woman wearing white (see appendix 3 for image):

> It signifies her purity and clashes with the red after she's impaled and how this signifies that she is no longer pure, why is she no longer pure because she's got a red splodge on her dress? Sam talks about how small things like this indicate that her "worth" has been altered. I ask for clarification. She thinks and talks about how if in that relationship the woman had been the bad one, had cheated for example, he thought he had this pure woman and now she's cheated on him, she's got these red blotches, somehow her worth is less. She says lots of times if a woman does something wrong, even if it's something simple, there's a worth factor and "like, you've lost 2 points (laughs)". Sam says it's women who are viewed more in this way and talks about "there's this whole thing about self-respect on the internet and Twitter" rather than for men and she says when she thinks of self-worth she thinks of female and not male. I ask for examples of what she means when she says "do something wrong", she says something that isn't even wrong for example if a woman has slept with more than 3 people (Sam is clear that 3 is the optimum number). I ask according to who and she says just consensus on the internet and "obviously, like, men (laugh)" (fieldnotes: Sam 09.03.18 J*oji: Will He*, 2017).

In this explanation Sam demonstrates how social media discourses have informed her interpretation of the music video. Sam reads the scene as representing the female character's reduced 'worth' which is inextricably connected to her sexual conduct (e.g. infidelity, promiscuity), an interpretation she considers as common-sense based on her interaction with 'the internet'.

Both Sam and Indy's interpretations of female sexuality mediated by social media reveal assumptions grounded in essentialist heteronormative notions of natural difference between the sexes (Jackson, 1999; Jackson, 2006). For example, Indy's claim that promiscuity doesn't 'effect' men like it does women, and Sam's recognition that women are expected to demonstrate a self-respect (through appearance and manner) not expected of men. Reassertions of 'natural' sexual difference are central to a postfeminist sensibility which, significantly, emerged around the 1990s and is embedded in the lad culture of that time, discourses I have demonstrated as deeply meaningful for my participants (Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017). The enduringly heteronormative basis to what is thought of as distinctly generational understandings of sexuality mediated by social media discourse and revealed in these examples support the central argument of this thesis.

A further illustration of the role social media played in determining notions of generation and gender emerged in discourses of mental health. The following excerpts from Sam and Alex illustrate the conceptual predominance of mental health for this generation, its gendered implications, and the role and significance of social media in this process. These examples exemplify how poor mental health was conceived of as emergent from engagement with social media, which is inextricably connected to their generational identity, and therefore a component part of their generational identity.

Sam's favourite male artist, American rapper Mac Miller, died suddenly and unexpectedly of a drug overdose in September 2018. Sam had significant knowledge of his personal and professional life, revealed in multiple sessions, and a strong emotional reaction to his death. When we talked about his death, Sam was keen to talk about the gendered basis of its coverage saying social media linked Mac's death to his ex-girlfriend, Ariana Grande (a successful American pop/RnB singer): "the two biggest themes on social media were oh he's dead, and it's her fault" (fieldnotes: Sam 01.10.18). Based on her engagement with comment and articles circulating on

the internet around Mac's death, Sam took a critical approach to this, noting its gendered biases. Sam noted that the usual online rush to protect the mental health of those under scrutiny (Ariana) and send out the 'right' messages about drugs (Mac) was not present, demonstrating a double standard for celebrity drug use (celebrated in men and critiqued in women) and mental health (little if any concern was shown for Ariana who was showing signs of immense emotional stress) (fieldnotes: Sam 01.10.18). Sam's engagement with Mac's death was entirely mediated by social media; she learnt about it through social media, she expressed her grief on social media, she identified the important discourses connected to it from social media, she observed its ramifications evolve on social media and she engaged with online analysis of the whole process. What Sam read online shaped how she interpreted and responded to Mac's death, how she felt about her generation and its relationship to mental health and informed her understanding of gender in that process.

I turn now to Alex who identified with an alternative hipster masculinity and defined himself, his friends and music as emotionally evolved, aware of and alert to mental health issues and ready to support each other when necessary, as demonstrated in this excerpt:

> "I think in the videos that I watch, not to be all high and mighty about it or anything […] I think the men in those videos might be a little bit more sensitive than ... we might have talked about with traditional masculinity" which he says places no value on emotions beyond anger (fieldnotes: Alex 07.03.18).

In this statement Alex is problematising what he calls 'traditional' masculinity by drawing out what he sees as its limited emotional capabilities and establishing the superiority of his own masculine identity, established through this distinction, in discourses of musical taste. Alex identified 'toxic' masculinity, which was separate to but not unconnected from traditional masculinity, as contributory to poor male mental health, suggesting the two were connected and

that men who participated in it were deserving of genuine concern. What emerged over time, however, was that Alex's emotional sensitivity and concern for the mental health of others was gendered when it materialised in social media and mirrored the double standard observed above by Sam. This is best demonstrated in an excerpt from a session where we were looking at Alex's social media.

As was usual, Alex initially struggled to articulate himself in a conversation about representations of femininity on Instagram, saying "I don't want to be…" before trailing off, perhaps resulting from his internal monitoring discussed previously. When he picked up his thread, he talked almost exclusively about women posting selfies doing the "duck face" (which he mimicked in a mocking manner) or posing in suggestive, erotically teasing or sexually alluring poses. Alex called this activity vain, briefly suggested then instantly dismissed its similarity to posting a picture of yourself after exercise (a staple feature of his own Instagram feed) and ultimately conceived of it as a way:

> […] to get attention and to show off a bit. He says this is everyone's right to do, but he associates it more with... he struggles here and says he doesn't want to make mass generalisations […] [he] says if someone wants to do it that's OK but you have to question why they are doing it, if it's a one-off, and they're trying to do it to boost their self-esteem, fair enough, but if they're doing it a lot that makes him think they've got low self-esteem, and they're just trying to get attention. If you see it happening loads and loads, you might think it's a bit desperate. A bit of a turn-off really, or I dunno, you get a bit worried about them I guess (mocking laugh) (fieldnotes: Alex 11.05.18).

In this excerpt Alex demonstrated none of the sensitivity to mental health he expressed in relation to 'male bravado' social media posts connected to traditional or toxic masculinity. Instead, he mocked the infamous 'duck face' and the women doing it saying he found them

'desperate turn-offs' acting from a personal desire for (presumably male) attention. Alex locates women in a sexual framework by saying he finds them a "turn-off", revealing his motivations, mocking them and labelling them "desperate" for participating, demonstrating the gendered double standards present in social media use and interpretation and its fundamental role in determining (un)acceptable notions of gender.

These examples show how a postfeminist sensibility of empowerment and individualisation does not accommodate social or cultural influence, positioning women as individualised autonomous and personally responsible subjects. Consequent from this a double standard emerges as young women are at once normatively required to present an empowered sexual subjectivity (Gill, 2012a: 737) and are judged negatively for it reflecting the double entanglement of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). This is exemplified in my participants' conceptualisations of emotion, and particularly expressions of vulnerability, as highly desirable and representative of a high-cultural status in men and derided as a weakness or failure in women, consistent with the affective life of postfeminism described by Gill (2017: 618). The examples above illuminate how women had to be 'above' an emotionality which in men was regarded as a sign of progression, of personal growth, and firmly seen as positive. Women carried a (frequently negative) personal responsibility for their emotional actions (as for their sexualised appearance on social media), whereas for men, personal failings were conceptualised within a framework of toxic masculinity which generated concern for their mental health. I return to this finding in chapter six.

In this section I have set out the role and significance of social media as part of my participants' generational identity, drawing out its influence in shaping discourses of gender and sexuality and demonstrating its centrality as a differentiating characteristic through which they felt distinguished. It was significant, and reinforced this finding, that in their exit interviews each of the participants discussed in this section identified for themselves the significance of social media

in framing their cultural understandings. Sam, illuminatingly, made a point of saying she had realised through the research process that a lot of her opinions were formulated *in* social media discourse and had reflected that she needed to be careful not to get trapped into a cycle of being spoon fed in the same way she felt she had been at school by teachers.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter has set out and discussed the central significance of generational identity as it emerged in my data, highlighting and detailing its role in shaping and informing interpretations of music videos and revealing its intersectional characteristics and implications for understandings of self, gender and sexuality. Uncovering and interrogating common-sense assumptions, this chapter has revealed notions of (un)acceptable gender and sexuality within this generational identity. This chapter argues that while my participants considered themselves distinguished from previous generations, the notions informing their identity have not changed in any significant way from those of previous generations (as evidenced in the feminist work discussed throughout this thesis) and are enduringly heteronormative discriminating on axes of class, race and gender.

This chapter highlights how taste operated as a discursive means to communicate these distinctions and provided examples of hegemony in action in processes of re-signification. For example, the re-working of discourses of 'irony' to mask sexism and discourses of 'empowerment' to mask processes of individualisation and depoliticisation revealed in this chapter point to the enduring relevance of a postfeminist double entanglement reinforced through popular culture representations contributing to the 'undoing of feminism' (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017).

By adopting feminist theory and cultural studies as an analytical lens I have highlighted the interplay between representation and reality and demonstrated the significant role representations

of gender and sexuality play in informing contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. Showing the complex process of establishing and maintaining a successful social identity through notions of generation and discourses of taste extends academic understandings of how meaning is made in complex cultural locations and demonstrates how popular culture creates a space of recognition in which social and sexual scripts may be established in a process of cultural domination (Hall, 1998).

This chapter discusses the terms in which generational distinctiveness is inextricably connected to social media. By conceptualising social media as a site of engagement this chapter has set out its central significance for informing interpretations and notions of self, gender and sexuality, contributing to and developing academic work on female sexuality and the sexualisation of culture. This chapter argues that the centrality and dominance of social media in the generational identity limits the potential for genuine resistance as it works intertextually and interdiscursively to (re)affirm dominant descriptions of gender and sexuality. Further, this chapter sets the ground for my argument, progressed in chapter six, that the enduringly heteronormative and postfeminist discourses underpinning this generational identity offer a depoliticised 'resistance' achieved through consumption and the 'alternative' characteristic central to its perceived distinctiveness.

The depth of insight required to gain access to instances of cultural dissonance, complexity and contradiction revealed in this chapter were achieved through my unique ethnographic audience studies approach. By meeting repeatedly with my participants over an extended period and developing an authentic relationship with them, I was able to identify inconsistencies and incongruities in their words and actions which led to the findings discussed in this chapter. My position as cultural outsider meant they often felt it necessary to explain things to me, demonstrating what they thought was important or significant, for example how social media

informs notions of an (un)acceptable female sexuality down to the optimum number of sexual partners, and shedding light on their thought processes.

The findings discussed in this chapter inform the central argument of this thesis that the social and sexual scripts underpinning contemporary manifestations of hegemonic heterosexuality in postfeminist media culture have not changed in any significant way despite popular discourses to the contrary. I argue contemporary hegemonic heterosexuality continues to be informed by the same heteronormative patriarchal norms grounded in notions of biological and natural sexual difference that prioritise male dominance and pleasure which have been challenged by feminists since the second wave.

By identifying and interrogating 'generation' as the primary identity adopted by my participants and central to informing interpretations, this chapter has given insight into how contemporary discursive identities are recognised and experienced. In the next chapter I discuss how my participants' gendered identities, understood as created within the distinctive generational specificity outlined in this chapter, informed their understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. Developing insight into significant discourses of gender and sexuality introduced in this chapter, I reveal examples of cultural re-signification and theorise the complex ways representations of female sexuality were conceptualised and navigated.

Chapter 6: Mediated Sexual Subjectivities: enduring heteronormativity

In the previous chapter I discussed the scope, limitations and categorical distinctions of generation as a singularly significant identity determining, shaping and influencing my participants' social interactions and cultural conceptualisations. In this chapter I develop and build on this, arguing that while my participants felt distinguished by their generation, the notions informing it were enduringly heteronormative and discriminated on axes of class, race, sexuality and gender. I argue that gendered identities, framed in notions of a distinctive digital generation, informed understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. I set out the notions of acceptable and unacceptable (hetero)sexuality that emerged in my data and highlight their intersections with gender, race and class empirically evidencing internalised discourses (scripts) of gendered sexual behaviours and extending academic knowledge on sexual subjectivity. The depth of insight and understanding revealed in this chapter was achieved through my innovative empirical approach which uncovered the nuances in crafting, managing and living contemporary sexual subjectivities, revealing hegemony in action.

This chapter is grounded in the assertion that hegemonic understandings of heterosexuality govern everyday gender relations by locating individuals in gendered subject positions and determining (un)acceptable notions of broader sexuality. In short, that the patriarchal foundations of hegemonic heterosexuality result in a gender inequality that frames contemporary sexual politics. This chapter sets out the intersectional dimensions of that hierarchy as they emerged in my data through notions of race and class.

In Hall's (1998) theory of cultural power, popular culture is the site of struggle for and against the culture of the powerful. Through the lens of this theory, I argue hegemonic neoliberal ideology and postfeminist sensibilities in media culture reproduce a heteronormativity that reinforces the culture of the powerful, exerting cultural dominance and legitimacy through representations of sex and relationships, thereby reproducing sexual and gendered inequalities that prioritise men and subordinate women (Connell, 1995; Hall, 1998; Gill, 2007c). Further, that the gendered inequality inherent in this heterosexuality legitimates an unequal sexual politics founded on notions of female sexuality enduringly defined in heterosexual, white, male, middle-class terms and essentialist discourses of natural sexual difference (Scully, 1990; Gavey, 2005; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Moran, 2017).

By revealing discourses of sexuality that emerged as central to informing interpretative frameworks I empirically evidence hegemonic heterosexuality as the sexual culture of the powerful and discuss how my participants responded to representations of it (Hall, 1998). In so doing, I discuss significant instances of cultural dissonance from my data that undermined my participants' identification as an inherently 'alternative' generation and draw out how the intersectional categorical distinctions of hegemonic heterosexuality discussed in chapter five influenced their potential to 'live' alternatively gendered and sexed lives. I empirically demonstrate in this chapter my finding that late modern liberal notions of gender and sexual fluidity which informed their 'alternative' identity, for example an 'alternative masculinity' and 'agentic female sexuality', were not applicable to their lived experiences which, as I demonstrate, were governed instead by traditional heteronormative notions of sex, gender, and sexuality, indicating the enduring relevance and applicability McRobbie's (2004) double entanglement. These findings, based on research into music video representations, are meaningful in a broader media framework.

I argue hegemonic heteronormativity determines accepted patterns of behaviour and interaction (scripts) in contemporary sexual practice by highlighting inconsistencies between my participants' identities and practice. It was in the disjunctures between words and actions, often revealed inadvertently, that these findings emerged. My findings and argument in this chapter draw on data from my extended and in-depth fieldwork which included many hours spent with my participants observing them in their social lives undertaking daily activities, using and interpreting music videos and social media, talking to them about a broad range of topics, and additional hours spent immersing myself in their online cultural environments. I am not able to convey all the conversations and interactions I had with my participants, but my findings emerged from this breadth of data and are exemplified in the examples included.

This chapter is divided into three sections:

(6.1) This section evidences my finding that the heteronormative beliefs underpinning my participants 'alternative' identity position did not transfer to practice by unpacking what it meant to be 'alternative' and revealing examples of cultural dissonance and contradictions in words and action, underscoring how discourses of 'taste' masked discriminatory practices to maintain hegemony.

(6.2) Following on from 6.1, this section demonstrates how popular culture appropriates and neutralises discourses of resistance by unpacking the re-signification of discourses of sexualisation and objectification of women to (re)assert dominant, heteronormative postfeminist notions of acceptable female sexuality based on race, class and sexuality.

(6.3) This section uses 'sites of engagement' to conceptualise the contradictions between ideas and action, representation and reality, in my participants' understandings of female sexuality, demonstrating its enduringly heteronormative and discriminatory materialisation in lived experience.

6.1 What is 'alternative'?

In this section I unpack what 'alternative' meant to my participants by discussing the three most determinate themes of the 'alternative' identity that emerged in my data: consumerism; gender and sexuality; masculinity. These themes emerged as integral to determining opinions of what 'alternative' meant and how it was achieved, providing rich evidence of the cultural dissonance and struggle I argue was central to constructions of 'self'. Through the examples I present in this chapter, I demonstrate the disjuncture between my participants' identity and practice and reveal the heteronormativity that governed their lived experiences, as I observed it and as they shared with me throughout our time together in overt and subtle ways, illuminating the process of identity construction for social and sexual success (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). I argue 'alternative' is a commercially derived neoliberal identity without political substance that works to neutralise resistance. To clarify how I understand the term 'alternative', I recognise it as connoting 'resistance', sitting with 'subversive' in the lexicon of power, signifying that one operates outside of, implicitly challenging, the dominant order. In this way, 'alternative' implies alternative to hegemony, counter-hegemonic, in a cultural dynamic of subordination and domination and conjures an embodiment of those practices and values which are not currently accepted as 'the norm', which are not reflected in or by institutional power, that are subordinate (Connell, 1995; Hall, 1998).

Heteronormativity, which I argue is the culture of the dominant, normalises heterosexuality above and to the detriment of other sexualities through social structures, practices, and institutions (Sinclair, 2017; Javaid, 2018). It works at all levels of social life limiting, policing and shaping interaction and plays a fundamental role in facilitating our gendered and sexual lives through defining the rules and assumptions which underpin common-sense notions of heterosexuality (Barker and Scheele, 2016). That heterosexuality is represented as 'neutral',

‘natural’ and ‘normal’ through essentialising discourses of biology is the key to its hegemonic success; heteronormativity is institutionalised heterosexuality legitimised through representation and cultural ascendancy (Connell, 1987).

My participants’ individual relationships to what they considered mainstream culture were complex, but each identified their musical taste as outside the mainstream, which they defined as UK Top 40 Charts (allowing for some nostalgic and/or secretive admissions). Their ‘alternative’ identity credentials were revealed to me gradually in overt and subtle ways through material purchases, musical choices, political views, and social practices and customs. What their revelations and disclosures illuminated was the similarity of their ‘alternative’ social practices, regardless of socio-cultural identity, and their limited potential to engage with genuinely alternative cultural forms in any meaningful way; that being ‘alternative’ had more to do with consumptive practices than challenging hegemony (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

I turn to Carla to illustrate the inherent and inescapable consumerist foundations of this identity. Carla, a 22-year-old white higher education student who liked rap and rock music, was a vegetarian and identified strongly as environmentally and ethically responsible, therein locating her alternative identity as challenging dominant neoliberal norms of individualism, consumption and depoliticisation. Carla communicated her ethical and environmental identity by showing me and telling me about her consumption of high-end ethically sourced clothing and knowledge of YouTube food, style, and travel Vloggers. Carla’s aspirations materialised in her love of travel, fascination with designer handbags, high-end fashion and make-up, all practices consistent with neoliberal and heteronormative ideals of beauty, material wealth and branded luxury, and operating in opposition to the values of ethical environmentalism she holds dear. I am not suggesting that Carla does not hold these values, but rather, that the reality of living to these ideals *to the exclusion* of their neoliberal counterparts is not achievable for Carla; to mark out that

she belongs to this social group, Carla must purchase the right labels, clothes, make-up and accessories (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

I turn now to Alex to demonstrate the active self-construction of a biography for social success (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Alex, a 24-year-old white professional man into indie, folk and alternative music, identified strongly as 'alternative' culturally and politically, was active in left-wing politics, and openly and vociferously critiqued mainstream society for being consumerist and commercially driven, sexualised and heteronormative, with pre-determined materialistic life goals signifying success. In conversation, revealed over time in multiple sessions, Alex revealed intentional and unintentional examples of what he considered his successes or high-cultural status activities leading to increased social status in financial, professional, social and sexual terms that mirrored the same values he critiqued in mainstream society. For example, he replaced his plain brown leather satchel bag with a Herschel Backpack which retails between £80 - £100 and is recognised as part of the hipster uniform (Lee, 2016; Rushall, 2017); he prided himself on frequenting 'independent' shops, bars, restaurants and cinemas, spoke frequently of his appreciation of high-cultural status craft ales, and proudly showed me his *Independent Birmingham* membership card unprompted on several occasions; and took pride in what he perceived as an increase in his sexual desirability and achievements, as the following excerpt from a conversation about his romantic history demonstrates.

> I ask what he is looking for [now], a relationship, a fling, a one night stand and he says preferably a relationship but that he isn't averse to something else with a cheeky smile and goes on to tell me that something has changed for him with regards sex and appeal in the past year. He says, "I don't want to boast but..." he has had many more "opportunities" and that while he thinks it's sad to keep a running tally he has "doubled" his number in the past 12 months from last spring. He seems proud of this and the information is given

> entirely unprompted […] I ask what he thinks has changed for/within him and he talks about becoming more physically active which has led to increased confidence and body confidence and tells me that without being passive or facetious about it, more than half of his romantic connections over the past year he has "not initiated" - this said with a broad smile and sense of real pride in himself (fieldnotes: Alex 14.03.18)

Alex bemoaned his financial situation on multiple occasions, identifying as part of the 'precariat' because of his fixed term work contract and not having "massive" savings (fieldnotes: Alex 17.02.18). In a conversation about social class Alex reluctantly identified as lower-middle class and expressed a belief he would "go on to have the trappings of a middle-class lifestyle in a few years" (fieldnotes: Alex 17.02.18). In these examples I have shown how Alex betrayed an alignment with and aspiration for those same consumerist, material life goals and heteronormative practices as signals of success he critiqued as mainstream. Alex's valued alternative hipster identity was primarily evidenced through consumption, e.g. where he ate out, the locations and frequency of his social life, what he drank and what brands he purchased. As with Carla, Alex adopted neoliberal practices of consumption to claim his alternative identity, yet in his practice replicated hegemonic neoliberal heteronormative rules of masculine behaviour: beer, sexual achievement, material wealth, professional success.

Similarly Sam, an 18-year-old woman on a legal apprenticeship into rap and alternative music, actively distanced herself from all things mainstream, lived a vegan lifestyle and prided herself on her political awareness, requested and received a pair of the globally bestselling rose gold coloured *Beats by Dr. Dre* wireless headphones (Kinports, 2018) for her 19th birthday because, as she animatedly told me, they are the brand celebrities wear and therefore must be the best (fieldnotes: Sam 30.01.18). The contradiction in Sam's professed intellectual and material rejection of all things mainstream and her justification and desire for a global signifier of just that

demonstrates the pervasiveness and dominance of popular celebrity culture. Sam's acceptance of the expertness of celebrity knowledge and her willingness to appropriate this symbol of celebrity culture meant that knowingly or otherwise, in this action, Sam joined the mainstream.

Pointing out that Carla, Alex and Sam actively participated in cultural activities they claimed to disassociate with is not meant as a criticism, rather, it demonstrates the limited and constrained opportunities within neoliberalism for identification and resistance. Popular culture, the site of struggle for the hearts and minds of the people, the site of public legitimacy of representation shaped by the creative industries, absorbs resistance (for example environmentalism and anti-consumerism) negating its potential to disrupt the status quo, and offers in its place an 'alternative' branded identity accessible to all through consumption; identity and transformation are achieved in the purchasing of products which signify a lifestyle, a belief, an attitude (Hall, 1998; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008). Underpinning these practices are heteronormative and neoliberal ideals, evidenced above, signalling that political change is absent, hegemony endures, and resistance is neutralised as individuals are offered a way to claim association with 'alternative' discourses through consumptive practices.

Turning from material to sexual practices, representations of non-binary genders and non-heterosexual sexualities in music videos, what I call 'alternative' because of their location outside the current hegemonic ideal, were interpreted as 'cool' and formed part of an 'alternative' music video repertoire, signifying high-cultural value across all genres for my participants. What became apparent as I got to know my participants' lives and heard about their daily experiences and interactions, however, was that the liberal attitudes to gender and sexuality in music videos did not translate to their lived experiences, indicating a postfeminist double entanglement of discourses around sexuality and gender relations (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2007c). Sam's reading of the video *Dounia: Shyne* (2017) best exemplifies this inconsistency.

Sam (fieldnotes: Sam 08.02.18 and 16.02.18) admired *Dounia: Shyne* for what she considered its alternative representations of gender, sexuality and multiculturalism epitomised in a scene featuring two black men she interpreted as "gay", saying you would only usually see this in a "gay video". Sam (who herself had an undefined and emerging sexual identity at this time) identified their sexuality through clothing, style and actions which she said were representative of messages on social media encouraging people to be "more fluid" in their choices. Sam's framing of this representation of sexuality within social media discourse made it resonate with her generational identity by locating it as contemporary and with her alternative identity by locating it as 'fluid'. The limitations of this representation to resonate with Sam's obdurate reality became evident in her comments about the representation of the two black men when one of them cuddles the other and sticks his tongue out suggestively (an act Sam took as confirmation of their homosexuality). Sam said this act would be cause for violence among her straight male friends, highlighting a significant disjuncture between representation and reality; in the video, Sam sees sexual and gender fluidity represented openly and proudly and admires the video for it, linking it to social media discourses advocating fluidity, but in her lived reality expressions of this kind (a playful male-to-male interaction with sexual undercurrents) have the potential to cause violence.

Sam's cultural struggle with this representation of sexuality was further complexified by the race of the actors. Sam said "the black community isn't good with male homosexuality", there is a lot of "hyper-masculinity" (which she described as not being seen as/or doing 'stuff' considered female), and argued that consequently she found representations of this kind, representations of "alternative masculinity", culturally important in challenging ideas and providing an alternative space of recognition. Typically, Sam used Twitter to substantiate her argument and claim the actions in the video represented *a* reality before moving on to outline the reasons (heteronormativity and race) they would not be acceptable in *her* reality. Sam's conceptual framing demonstrates how social media discourse has the potential to confer a high truth value to music

videos, forming part of the discourse of 'what life is like' even when it is in opposition to the reality of one's own social experience. The process of cultural struggle is illuminated in Sam's attempt to reconcile this representation with her obdurate reality; she believes and supports the 'be more fluid' discourse but cannot apply it to her social and cultural environment. For Sam, gender and sexual fluidity are aspirational, their representation in music videos argued for based on their symbolic importance and potential to generate change, rather than for reflecting her social world.

Through this illustrative example of the disjuncture between representations and reality I have introduced the significance of site of engagement for mediating and determining interpretations. I have shown that music videos provide an idealised space for representations of diverse sexual (and other forms of) expression which are mediated through social media spaces (for example Twitter and YouTube) to determine their social acceptability or otherwise based on popular discourses. Finally, they meet the obdurate reality of social life and interaction (Blumer, 1969; Fine, 1993) where people need to live successfully within the boundaries and requirements of their socio-cultural environment and the norms of neoliberal heteronormativity which limit their potential for engaging with 'alternative' sexual identities. This was also in evidence in Indy's 'go shoot your shot' example (chapter five) in which she positively framed her interpretation of a desiring female sexuality in Twitter discourse ('go shoot your shot') before talking about the negative social consequences it generates in her obdurate reality. I develop this conceptual framework later in this chapter.

Heteronormative views of sex, gender, and sexuality were dominant in participant interpretations of sexuality and met with discourses of 'alternative' in significant ways, illuminating the struggle in interpreting representations of sexuality. This is exemplified in the following excerpt from a close reading of the video *Steve Lacy: Ryd/Dark Red* (2017) with Indy, a 20-year-old black woman

who had previous romantic and sexual experiences with men and was at the time of this conversation beginning her first homosexual relationship. I had just asked Indy why she thought Steve Lacy, a black bisexual male neo-soul musician, is singing about a heterosexual relationship.

> Indy says because it's the norm and that even though Tyler the Creator [a black rap musician] put out some sort of gay coded message subliminally in his songs (she adds his fans were all over Twitter decoding the message) he hasn't come out and said he's gay but he's put it in his music, and she thinks this is why Steve Lacy hasn't. Indy stops and asks me where I found this out and I explain I googled him and found a story where he'd been criticised for saying he wouldn't have a relationship with a black man. She seems a bit lost for what to say then says it's probably because he doesn't feel comfortable putting it out there completely, especially if there's criticism for that statement. Saying he's done what he thought was normal (fieldnotes: Indy 20.03.18)

Indy struggled to answer the question and was visibly perplexed by it, repeatedly calling on concepts of 'normal' and using examples of the public censure Steve Lacy and Tyler the Creator had faced as justification for Steve Lacy conforming to heteronormative representations. As stated, Indy was beginning her first homosexual relationship around this time which continued for the duration of the fieldwork. Indy had complex feelings about her relationship, telling me she didn't identify as a lesbian (although she softened to this term as time progressed) and initially kept it secret from friends and family because of concern about how they would feel about it. It could be that Indy's reaction was a personalisation of the artist's situation, not wanting to 'come out' for fear of censure, but I think it was something deeper as this excerpt from a conversation five months later about representations of homosexuality in music videos illustrates.

> [Indy says] "It depends on how they do it in the video because if they do it normally like it's nothing and just chill whereas other videos do close ups of like, two people of the

same sex kissing, and it's like, why be so intense?" […] I ask if it was a close up of a heterosexual couple kissing would she think anything of that, she says "It's probably easier to look at 'cos it's normal but I just don't see the need" […] She says people would be less judgy with a hetero couple and adds "I'm not homophobic obviously but..." and trails off (fieldnotes: Indy 07.08.18)

Hall (1986) uses hegemony to conceptualise the internalisation of racist ideologies by its victims and I apply the same principle here; Indy's social world of working class[9] black Caribbean and Indian culture, her immersion in hood (street) culture, all reinforce a dominant heteronormative ideology which denies the legitimacy of homosexuality. Indy, five months into her first homosexual relationship, struggles to accommodate this ideology (her social identity) with her emerging sexual identity. Her internalised discourses of heteronormativity recognise heterosexuality as 'normal' and socially acceptable and rationalise attempts to hide or obscure her own homosexuality. At the time of the later session Indy was negotiating a delicate process of 'coming out' to friends and family which mirrored this discursive balancing act as she found her way between claiming her sexuality and managing others' emotional responses to that.

Representations of non-heterosexuality signifying 'illicit otherness' in popular culture is nothing new. Over 35 years ago Rich (1980) articulated the invisibility of lesbianism and the lesbian experience in heterosexuality and Rubin (1984) argued that popular culture perpetuates the idea that erotic variety is dangerous, depraved and unhealthy. More recently Rowan Ellis (Hunt, 2017) and Gill and Orgad (2018: 5) have argued YouTube restrictions of LGBT content imply its very presence challenges the boundaries of appropriateness marking it out as inherently "too sexualised", sentiments enduringly echoed in Indy's analysis. Popular culture framings of non-

[9] Indy was unsure what social class was and how it worked and guessed she was middle class because her mum was a manager. Based on her academic career finishing at A Level and her employment as a receptionist I identified her as working class.

heterosexual sexualities as subordinate reinforce the hegemonic dominance of heterosexuality and illustrate the power popular culture has in reinforcing existing power structures through, in this case, music videos (Connell, 1995). Steve Lacy may not conform to hegemonic heterosexuality in his personal life but in his role as a contemporary musician he (re)presents, and thereby reinforces, the dominant sexuality. As Indy pointed out, he is not significantly powerful enough as an individual to be protected from the political and social harassment alternative representations may incur (Connell, 1995).

Through Sam and Indy's paradoxical interpretations I have demonstrated once again the 'double entanglement' (McRobbie, 2004) in interpretations of representations of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics observed across sites of engagement; processes of liberalisation are visible in music video representations and mediated in social media discourse, but neo-conservative values of sexuality regulate social life.

Definitions of (un)acceptable male sexuality were central to understandings of 'alternative' for my participants, as observed in the significance of the visual representation of 'gay' men indicating the alternativeness of *Dounia: Shyne.* Significantly, understandings of female sexuality were not discussed in these terms and instances of non-heterosexual female sexuality were interpreted within a heterosexual framework of an assumed male gaze (Diamond, 2005), a finding I discuss later in this chapter. Interpretations of masculinity continued to draw directly on the 'alternative' discourse and the notion of a distinct, 'alternative', contemporary masculinity, separate from and frequently understood in opposition to a 'traditional' and/or 'toxic' masculinity, emerged as a 'common-sense' notion in my data. Reflecting the gendered conceptualisation of sexuality introduced above, 'alternative masculinity' had no parallel in interpretations of femininity which were instead differentiated through discourses of 'taste', race and class. The 'alternative masculinity' was identified in symbolic differences marking its distinction from 'traditional

masculinity'. Significant and important differences emerged as emotional intelligence, an openness to vulnerability (in self and others), a WOKE attitude, and was closely associated with a white, middle-class, alternative social identity. Universally recognised by all participants, this masculinity was most closely embodied by Alex.

The term 'traditional masculinity' was often used interchangeably with 'toxic masculinity' and was characterised by a lack of emotion and emotional expression outside of anger, a hyper-sexualised physicality, tough, physical strength, competitiveness, and a lack of attention to and care for others' needs. The emphasis on a man's ability to express emotion, and specifically emotional *vulnerability*, emerged as an important and significantly high-cultural status characteristic, discursively linked to concerns for male mental health, and representative of an 'evolved' individual. Conversely, when female characters were represented displaying emotion and vulnerability they were frequently derided for it and emotionality was interpreted negatively, for example as observed in Carla's negative interpretation of the woman in *Eminem: River,* or Indy's negative interpretation of the woman's emotional reliance on the man in *Ashanti: Foolish,* or in Alex's negative interpretation of 'desperate' women on social media, indicating an emotional double standard that not only assumes women are biologically determined to be emotionally competent and literate and men are not, but that celebrates men and shames women for the same actions.

Traditional masculinity was associated with mainstream culture and mainstream media representations identifying it as hegemonic and locating 'alternative masculinity' as subordinate (Connell, 1995). There was a general contempt for traditional/toxic masculinity and men who participated in it were thought to be uneducated and working-class (Carla), young (Sam), and/or famous (Chris and Alex). Reflecting the significance of site of engagement for understandings of female sexuality, musicians who were symbolically linked to traditional masculinity (for example

through clothing, style, demeanour, actions) were frequently admired for their sexual prowess and material wealth, whereas non-famous men who were perceived to embody it (for example friends, acquaintances, people on social media) were viewed negatively, othered with the 'toxic' label.

The distinctions between these masculinities became blurred when they were discussed in 'real-life' examples, demonstrating a disjuncture between identity and practice. Carla exemplified this cultural dissonance when she observed that the attitudes and behaviours of her 'modern' 'highly educated' male friends demonstrated their enduring connection to 'traditional' masculinity:

> they still have this kind of […] 'I can't cry because I'm a guy' or 'I pay for the drinks when I go on a date' or 'I have to be the one who's asking a girl out' mentality (fieldnotes: Carla 17.05.18).

Alex and Chris' appropriation of discourses and behaviours of masculinity, discussed below, illuminates this contradictory distinction. Alex identified with hipster culture and the 'alternative' 'vulnerable' 'emotionally literate' masculinity introduced above. However, as I spent more time with him, observing his lifestyle practices, meeting his friends and learning about his social life, talking to him about his daily interactions, listening to his readings of music videos and social media, and learning his views on gender and sexuality, I saw similarities emerge between the masculinity he disassociated with and his actions. For example, Alex cited physical strength and competitiveness, bragging, professional and sexual achievement as central to the performance of traditional masculinity and regarded them negatively, arguing they directly contributed to male-specific mental health problems. Yet I observed Alex perform all these actions on- and offline in his social media posts and in stories he recounted to me about his social life. For example, his social media profiles were populated with images of him drinking craft-ales with groups of male friends and wearing medals having just completed marathons and bike races; he took pride in his

beard and participated in a 'hipster beard culture' following 'beard' accounts on Instagram and reading articles on how to grow and maintain a beard, because as he told me, beards are 'a big thing now' and significant 'signifier of masculinity and having lots of testosterone in the hipster culture'; he told me he enjoyed the kudos of knowing obscure bands and musicians and festivals and the 'bragging rights' this conferred; he boasted to me that he had 'doubled' his number of sexual partners and researched online how to be a better sexual partner.

These examples exemplify the process of re-signification that has taken place around masculinity which still requires participation in defined ways (beer, competitiveness, virility, sexual achievement), but has changed the meaning of these practices through consumption and identity: as an alternative hipster Alex can drink (craft ales), demonstrate his virility and sexual accomplishments (crafting a beard, increasing his number of sexual partners), brag (about his alternative musical taste and knowledge), and objectify women (ironically), without associating with a traditional or toxic masculine identity, thereby gaining access to the social and sexual rewards this contemporary identity confers.

Chris, a 19-year-old unemployed white male whose identity was 'alternative' 'cool' 'skater' 'musician', saw himself as operating outside mainstream culture and adopted a self-identified androgynous style. Chris was questioning his emerging sexuality throughout the time I knew him, was preoccupied with his sexual status as a virgin, and openly struggled to align his subjective feelings and experiences with discourses of heteronormativity which resulted in a profound existential conflict that left him questioning if he was "normal". Chris saw no distinction between being male and being masculine and expressed this explicitly and implicitly in his beliefs and opinions about 'masculinity', in conversation and in readings, revealing the heteronormative notions of sex and relationships underpinning his understanding. Problems emerged for Chris when he tried to accommodate his sexual identity within his notion of masculinity (maleness)

which did not resonate with his questioning and androgynous experiences. For example, Chris said sexualised music videos made him feel 'insecure sexually' because he didn't know if he was 'normal', as explicated in the following excerpt from a conversation about his observation that pornographic imagery is highly present in music videos, and belief that this is done intentionally to sexually excite the (presumably male) audience:

> [Chris] says he doesn't know if he's normal, if when he gets to a sexual situation what he does or wants to do is normal. He seems almost despondent about this […] I ask if he thinks what he sees on TV is normal and he says on one level he knows that there is no normal, that everyone's normal is different, but that on another level these images make him wonder "if everyone else is doing it one way and I'm not so I'm not normal" (fieldnotes: Chris 09.02.18)

These examples demonstrate how notions of masculinity interacted with Alex and Chris' lived experiences, revealing contradictions and cultural dissonance in their appropriation of masculine identities.

Discourses of 'taste' emerged as highly significant in determining if a person exhibited an alternative or traditional masculinity, reinforcing its importance for meaning-making and shared subjectivities. Resonating with my previously discussed findings around taste, taste culture definitions of masculinity materialised through notions of class and race; traditional masculinities were associated with working-class and black taste cultures, and alternative masculinities were associated with white middle-class taste cultures. For example, Alex performed actions consistent with a traditional masculinity, but because of his social location as a white middle-class professional male with hipster style and taste, those actions were re-signified to mean 'alternative', removing their potential to be labelled 'toxic'. Carla characterised traditional masculinity as 'a

tough working class masculinity' and categorised representations of masculinity in raced terms, typified in the following excerpt from a reading of *Bastille: Laura Palmer* (2013):

> you don't think about black in this way, of being on quads in the middle of nowhere in a junk yard. You would see them in a different neighbourhood, with different behaviour, with different gangs, different looks, more hip-hop rap gang behaviour. The same with Latinos, I would assume a more Mexican style, not on quads, different behaviours, drug related (fieldnotes: Carla 02.05.18)

'Alternative' masculinity's commodified construction through brands and style means it can be identified with through physical appearance, consumption practices and social activities to confer high-value cultural capital, representing the potential for cultural, sexual and commercial success. In other words, appropriating the accruements of an alternative masculinity facilitates a successful identification that results in social success (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Through material purchases, physical appearance and social practices including musical taste, Alex, Chris and John were able to identify as 'alternative' and access its advantages while continuing to participate in 'traditional' masculine behaviours. The (emotional) work involved in maintaining this identity became apparent when I questioned Alex and Chris about it directly; their body language became more rigid and less relaxed, and their language became less colloquial and more scripted, using words and phrases that did not fit with their ordinary speech. In their shift in manner, gesture and language, Alex and Chris revealed a disjuncture between intended and unintended communication, illuminating the complex and nuanced construction of 'self' which takes place in and through popular culture (Hall, 1998; Scollon, R., 2001).

In this section I have unpacked what 'alternative' meant to my participants, demonstrated how they managed their 'alternative' identities and the cultural dissonance that necessitated, and

illuminated the neoliberal heteronormative ideals and beliefs that underpinned their practices. I have empirically evidenced with examples the contradictions and disruptions between identity and practice that characterised the cultural struggle of their lived experience and shown how the 'alternative' identity is constructed and commodified drawing on discriminatory classed and raced notions of 'taste'. I argue that in adopting 'alternative' as an identity, discourses of resistance are appropriated conferring social and cultural status without challenging hegemonic heteronormativity and unequal gender relations.

Before ending this section, I want to clarify that I am not suggesting there is another, better way to practice resistance that my participants were failing to achieve. That they appropriated an identity that advocates for sex and gender fluidity and social change is a positive indication of their will for positive change. I argue instead that genuine resistance is near impossible in contemporary western society as demonstrated in my examples of popular culture appropriating, accommodating and neutralising discourses of change and resistance in the neoliberal 'alternative' identity (Hall, 1998; McRobbie, 2004).

6.2 Re-signifying discourses of sexualisation and objectification

Exposing and problematising the sexual objectification of women in media representations has been a central concern of feminist media criticism since the second wave (Mulvey, 1975). The practice has endured as the continued sexualisation and objectification of women remains a defining characteristic of a postfeminist sensibility in media culture (Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017). Each of my participants demonstrated an awareness and support of feminist arguments against sexualised and objectifying imagery of women, explicitly denouncing it in readings and conversations about the sexualisation of culture. The common-sense way this belief was accommodated identified it as an internalised discourse. What became apparent when I

questioned how my participants' understood this practice, its shape and form, its cultural location(s), its visual cues, was that notions of sexualisation and objectification had been re-signified to mark out definitions of appropriate and inappropriate sexualities in classed and raced terms, reinforcing postfeminist hegemonic heteronormative ideals of white middle-class Anglo-American beauty and sexuality instead of challenging the normative representation of women as sexual objects. This is important because it demonstrates how popular culture appropriates and neutralises discourses that challenge hegemony, re-appropriating them in ways that continue to reflect descriptions of the dominant culture (Hall, 1998).

This section empirically demonstrates my participants' cultural struggle as they navigated contemporary understandings of sexuality and sexual politics to establish a sexual identity. I draw out how my female participants experienced their gendered subjectivity through their physical appearance and highlight how this intersected with class, race and beauty. I set out how my male participants accommodated discourses of sexualisation and objectification within their 'alternative' masculinity revealing the contradictions and dissonance that entailed, and argue scripts of hegemonic heterosexuality in contemporary postfeminist media have not changed in any significant way despite contemporary discourses to the contrary.

Representations in postfeminist media culture have shifted from the sexual objectification to the sexual subjectification of women (Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017). Simultaneously, the sexualisation of culture has seen a growth in emphasis placed on the value of the female body to the point where a woman's body is her source of value (Gill, 2007a; Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017; Gill and Toms, 2019), and an emphasis on the importance of sexuality that one's sexuality has come to articulate our very sense of self (Attwood, 2006). My participants, who demonstrated media literacy and an awareness of popular debates on social media influence, echoed feminist sentiments critical of the emphasis on women's appearance and overt displays of sexualised female bodies. Significantly, I

use the term 'appearance' and not 'beauty' because sexuality was complexly coded as confident or modest through a multifaceted combination of clothing, style, demeanour, and attitude. A woman's appearance was the visualisation of her (sexual) subjectivity.

My female participants demonstrated in overt and subtle ways the actions and practices that made up their rigorously managed methods of personal maintenance through processes of self-surveillance and discipline in diet and exercise (Sam and Carla), fashion (all), and beauty practices (Carla and Indy) (Gill, 2017). These behaviours were revealed in a matter of fact, uncritical way, usually without prompting indicating their internalisation as common-sense, and occasionally left me feeling sad about the activities they engaged in or aspired to. This was exemplified in Sam who was permanently monitoring her food intake, berating herself if she ever 'slipped' (for example ate a cookie), trying to meet ever decreasing weight goals in a bid to wear certain clothes and shed her mental self-perception as an overweight child. Her Twitter feed was a stream of self-loathing, self-fat-shaming posts and she talked about wanting fat transfer and discussed other cosmetic surgery procedures. All the while, Sam vociferously advocated for body-positivity (a main reason she said she liked the musician and 'body positive' model *Dounia*) and voiced opposition to postfeminist media heteronormative body standards she observed around her in mainstream and social media, seemingly unaware of the contradictions between her ideas and actions, her dissonance between discourse and practice.

The female beauty ideal was always present in readings of women for my male and female participants and 'appearance' emerged as a central category through which women were interpreted. This was not disrupted by representations that ostensibly sought to undermine and challenge dominant cultural norms. For example, in Sam's reading of *Dounia: Shyne* (2017), she talked admiringly of the way the female characters were challenging dominant representations with their 'body positivity', their 'unconventionality' as plus size women "not policing what they

wear" (fieldnotes: Sam 16.02.18). In this excerpt Sam admired the female characters in the video for not conforming to normative beauty standards through their 'more fluid' and 'modern femininity' clothing choices, but her reading of them was framed in their relationship to beauty, thereby (re)asserting the achievement of beauty as a goal for women. Heather Widdows (2018) agues beauty objectification has replaced sexual objectification, that women are now objectified in a beauty ideal as objects to be looked at in a way that transcends the sexual objectification of the past. I found that while my female participants objectified *themselves* in this way, conceiving of their beauty practices as normatively demanded features of their lives and the achievement of beauty the intent of those practices, they read other women's appearances in terms of their sexual signification, as did my male participants who frequently interpreted women in terms of their sexual desirability, suggesting the sexual objectification of women endures.

The following excerpt from a conversation with Sam, a young black woman with no sexual or romantic history or intentions, on the visual representation of a black woman in the opening scene of *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE* (2017) (see appendix 3 for images) illuminates the complex interpretive framework for identifying female sexual subjectivity.

> I … ask [Sam] to describe the woman. She says she can't really see her face so has nothing to say … She eventually says 'more conservative' but that "modesty comes from how you interact not just what you wear" […] I had thought the woman was positioned as exotic other. What Sam is seeing is how she is positioned as a sexual subject. She went straight to her modesty which I know from previous conversations connects to her sexual behaviour. Sam adds that the look the woman gave doesn't suggest modesty, that it was a confident look to camera which doesn't compare with shyness […] Sam reasserts that modesty is in your behaviour not just in the way you dress and elaborates on this. She

> sounds quite judgemental talking about this, like she knows what modesty is and some girls pretend to in their dress but don't 'live' it (fieldnotes: Sam 14.06.18)

I return to this excerpt in the following section but here draw out Sam's assessment of the woman's appearance in terms of her sexual subjectivity, noting that her dress (modest) contrasted with her actions (confident). The value placed on female modesty in dress and manner is representative of notions of respectability, which are linked to class and race (Skeggs, 2002; Skeggs, 2005). This conceptual parallel between appearance and sexual subjectivity was demonstrated repeatedly by my participants when interpreting music video representations and emerged in discourses of 'art' and 'artistry'. Music videos and musicians who were thought of as 'artists' or 'artistic' were considered to have high-cultural status, and those who were thought of as commercially driven and produced had low-cultural status and were rejected as lowbrow, insincere, and trash(y). However, as demonstrated with Alex and *Dua Lipa: New Rules* and *Shaggy: It Wasn't Me* and as I observed with other participants, music videos of this type were enjoyed in secretive, ironic, and nostalgic ways. Status indicated worth or cultural value, characteristics which transferred onto the audience through appropriation; liking highly artistic and creative music meant the listener was also culturally high-status. This contradictory practice of accommodating music videos that were simultaneously critiqued for not being 'art' illuminates the cultural dissonance in the 'alternative' identity; music critiqued can be enjoyed if it meets taste culture sensibilities, e.g. 90s nostalgia.

The process of interpreting music videos was revealed through my data to work semiotically, creating meaning through a complex process of signification including through readings of the musician (e.g. singer-songwriters were high-cultural status), musical genre (taste culture), and lyrical and visual content (cultural signifiers e.g. location, language). Readings integrated signifiers of class, gender and race with 'creativity' and 'authenticity' to mean high or low cultural status, a

finding I go on to discuss. I turn to Alex now, who identified with hipster culture and an alternative masculinity, and his close reading of the video and YouTube comments of *Father John Misty: Nancy from Now On* (2012) to exemplify the relationship between 'art' and 'status'.

Alex called the overt sexualised content (which includes a woman dressed variously in a latex corset and leather metal studded bra and leather knickers as a dominatrix 'dominating' the male lead, the same dominatrix sitting open legged in thigh high black leather stiletto boots, bra and knickers on a pillow on a man's face, and a woman's exposed breast and nipple as she is woken up in bed) 'erotic', viewer reactions in YouTube comments 'cheeky', and took visible pleasure in the content and comments celebrating it. Alex said the video was heavily influenced by internet pornography and was complimentary about it, saying it was positively "pushing the boundaries but [not] deeply shocking". I was interested in how Alex distinguished this content, which was highly sexualised and overtly objectified the female character, from other videos which he vociferously disdained for the same practices. I asked him how it was different from, for example *Miley Cyrus: Wrecking Ball* (2013), a music video notorious for its highly sexualised content. Alex's demeanour changed and he became visibly uncomfortable, struggling to answer the question. After thinking, he offered a comparison of the musicians' public personas, gender, and professional credibility as reasons *Miley Cyrus* faced a "harsher judgement", before adding that *Nancy from Now On* had a narrative context which made it 'art', and therefore gave it an artistic license *Wrecking Ball* did not have (fieldnotes: Alex 07.06.18). Alex employed discourses of art to justify what was a taste-based distinction underpinned by signifiers of respectability (class) which marked out acceptable (highbrow) sexuality from unacceptable (lowbrow) sexuality. In Alex's taste culture *Father John Misty* had high cultural status as an "avant-garde" male singer-songwriter outside of the mainstream, whereas *Miley Cyrus* was a low cultural status, low-credibility, female one-time child TV star turned mainstream pop star (fieldnotes: Alex 07.06.18). Alex's explanation of the difference in meaning between the two videos, which he said were "both sexually explicit

videos" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.06.18), through his understandings of the musicians' meanings demonstrates that sexual signification was determined by the normatively accepted meanings outlined above (highbrow = artistic / low-brow = trashy and promiscuous) before and outside of their actions in music videos (Berger, 1972).

Alex's cultural struggle to find a place of recognition (she is like the women I am attracted to), or resistance (she is trashy, too sexual) exemplifies the complexity involved in interpreting representations of female sexuality in music videos and the way class and gender signified (un)acceptable sexuality; in other words, the way discourses of sexualisation and objectification were classed in discourses of 'art'. Race was also a significant sexual signifier as demonstrated through Chris, Alex and Carla's interpretations which resonated with established notions of black sexuality as signifying an 'untamed' and 'rampant' sexuality, dangerous in males and promiscuous in females (hooks 1994; Hill-Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012). Returning to Sam's interpretation of the opening sequence of *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE*, her critical attention was drawn to the woman's directness of gaze which disrupted what Sam saw as the sexual modesty signified by her clothing. Sam's interpretation of this black female character was given heavy with disapproval and it is perhaps significant to note that for Sam (working-class, black, emerging and undefined sexuality), sexual modesty was desirable, whereas Carla, a white, middle-class woman in a long-term monogamous heterosexual relationship, advocated a sex-positive approach to sexual subjectivity in her readings and in conversation as the following excerpt demonstrates:

> [Carla] says how they illustrate the relationship is fine, they have sex when everything is fine and then argue, we don't see if they have sex after they argue, but it seems their take on healthy relationships is they are happy and they are lying in bed, they have a sexual life […] she says sexual drive is normal, in stories and music videos (fieldnotes: 16.04.18)

It is perhaps significant to note that the protective privilege of Carla's socio-cultural position confers on her the ability to identify with an active sexuality without the same potential social cost (Rubin, 1992; McIntosh, 1998; Hill-Collins, 2004; Durham, 2012).

My male participants displayed visible discomfort, sometimes apologising for themselves, when asked to describe representations of women and female sexuality, claiming not to value sexualised music videos and categorising them as "bad media" (fieldnotes: Chris 07.03.18). However, my analysis of their music videos produced different findings of sexualisation and objectification, and in general discussion they routinely described women in music videos in terms of their sexual attractiveness and/or beauty. The following excerpt from a conversation with John best exemplifies this complex and contradictory relationship:

> [John] says he doesn't like [sexualised and misogynistic] video, he can watch it, but it isn't his preference […] and thought this video was an interesting example in that regard […] He talks about the "ordinary people" that are "still beautiful" and "choreographed" […] He says it is "refreshing […] they are not copy and pasted 20-somethings with photoshop" (fieldnotes: John 07.02.18, *Bombay Bicycle Club: Luna* (2014))

John wanted to actively distance himself from 'sexualised and misogynistic' content and chose to show me this video featuring 'ordinary but still beautiful women'[10] to demonstrate this. However, in introducing the video, John reinforced the essential requirement for a woman to be beautiful, even if in an 'ordinary' way, and offered an interesting contradictory preface in saying he doesn't like that type of video but '*can'* watch it (in what contexts? with who? for what purpose?). In this brief statement John demonstrated his 'alternative' masculinity (in rejecting sexualised and

[10] Members of the synchronised swimming troupe A*quabatix*

misogynistic music video), but retained a testosterone charged 'traditional' heterosexual masculinity by pointing out that he *can* enjoy the sexual objectification of women.

A sexualised response was also typical when I asked my male participants if they felt their gender influenced the way they interpreted representations of women in music videos, a question they interpreted as meaning 'were they sexually attracted to the women in the videos?' Their shared conceptualisation of the meaning of this question evidences hegemonic masculinity requiring a sexualised consideration of women which is emphasised when contrasted with the way my female participants responded to the question, which was to try and imagine the male mind and offer suggestions of what men might see differently in the storyline or 'feel' about the representations. Chris's response in particular illustrates the depth of resonance of this finding. Chris talked freely and frequently about his ambiguous sexuality and sexual insecurities and shared with me homosexual fantasies locating him outside hegemonic heterosexual masculinity. When I asked him if his gender influenced his reading of women in music videos he immediately interpreted the question as about sexual attraction and gave an emphatic "hell yeah" (fieldnotes: Chris 26.02.18), identifying strongly with a hegemonic heterosexuality at odds with his usual complex relationship to sex and sexuality. Male sexuality and masculinity were conceptually linked for my participants, and Chris saw no distinction between being male and being masculine, thereby creating a conflict in his creation of a sexual gendered self because of his conflicting sexual and gender identities.

I observed many contradictions between discourse and practice in relation to the sexualisation and objectification of women epitomised in the common-sense critical opposition to it when questioned about it directly, and routine categorisation of women in terms of their sexual signification in readings and conversations illuminated above and throughout my findings chapters. The cultural dissonance revealed here is perhaps explained in drawing out how and

where discourses of sexualisation and objectification were recognised by my participants, demonstrating their re-signification in notions of class and race.

None of my participants identified with sexualised and objectifying music video which they conceptually linked to hip-hop and rap music videos, and the subgenre of mainstream hip-hop and rap for those whose taste included hip-hop and rap. In chapter four I discussed how the 'othering' of sexual objectification eludes its visibility in other genres and problematises black men, here I argue discourses of sexualisation and objectification have been re-signified, 'reworked and reshaped' (Hall, 1998: 447), to define (un)acceptable sexual subjectivities based on discriminatory definitions of class and race, reflecting hegemonic heteronormative ideals. Dominant definitions of sexualisation and objectification emerged as having been internalised in limited and genre specific terms that support hegemonic notions of sexuality and meant sexualised or objectifying representations outside those boundaries were not recognised as such. In practice this meant any music video featuring (often brown skinned) women in bikinis was instantly recognised as 'sexually objectifying', labelled sexist and 'bad' and dismissed, whereas a multitude of solitary passive (white) women in expensive looking and revealing clubwear in *Suede: Trash* (1996) was admired and interpreted as "glamourous and lonely" (fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18). In its strong conceptual connection to hip-hop and rap music videos, often referred to collectively as 'urban music', and occasional admissions from pop music (e.g. Miley Cyrus), sexualisation was opaquely but squarely linked to hyper-sexualised black and/or working-class bodies.

In this section I have demonstrated how discourses of sexualisation and objectification have been re-worked and re-shaped to reinforce limited and limiting postfeminist heteronormative ideals of gender and sexuality, neutralising their political potential and reinforcing the culture of the dominant (Hall, 1998). I have empirically evidenced the disjuncture between the anti-sexist

discourses against sexualisation and objectification my participants appropriated and their media choices revealing how contemporary notions of resistance contradictorily reassert discriminatory hegemonic notions of acceptable sexuality in classed and raced terms. I argue popular culture appropriates discourses of resistance within a postfeminist sensibility to negate their potential for meaningful social change. In the next section I discuss the contradictory and complex relationships my participants had to representations of female sexuality.

6.3 The significance of site of engagement

Representations of sex and relationships in music videos offer a postfeminist female sexuality consistent with a progressive sexual politics and liberal attitude to gender and sexual diversity (McRobbie, 2004; Levy, 2005; Gill, 2007c; Tasker and Negra, 2007; Attwood, 2009; Genz and Brabon, 2009; Gill, 2009a; Gill, 2017). Through my in-depth and innovative empirical approach I uncovered social media's role and significance in interpreting and making sense of these representations, the nature of its dynamic interaction with music videos and its role in mediating the terms through which representations of female sexuality were understood, accepted, or rejected. In this section I argue social media mediated the process of cultural struggle, reinforcing dominant descriptions of sex and gender and shaping understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics.

In chapter five I argued social media was a centrally significant category in informing how my participants understood their generational identity and demonstrated how it was routinely called on to support and/or evidence their claims and arguments. Social media is a diverse field with multiple platforms offering the full gamut of social opinion (Marwick and boyd, 2011). My participants expertly navigated their social media environments and offered considered and thought through explanations for which platforms they engaged with, when, and for what

purpose, demonstrating the social and emotional affordances social media platforms gave them (Madianou and Miller, 2012; Thomas et al., 2018). Individual relationships to social media were complex; my participants were simultaneously critical of it and yet saw it as a necessary part of their lives. Examining historical bodies of social media use revealed interesting consistencies in patterns of appropriation as 'real-life' social practices and taste cultures (informed by socio-cultural location) determined which platforms were engaged with and were consequently responsible for shaping the interpretative process. Participants were drawn to and engaged with platforms that addressed topics already of interest to them and people they already had knowledge of and which/who offered a reciprocal benefit by dispensing relevant information and opinion in return for their time and attention.

Engagement with social media led to new contacts and new information which went through a filtering process, either being adopted into the historical body or rejected, in the same process of cultural struggle I have shown with music video representations. This meant the architecture of their social media worlds closely reflected that of their material worlds, functioning as an extension of their off-line world rather than as separate to it (Plummer, 1995; Jones, 2005; Marres, 2017). The presence and significance of slut-shaming discourses in my female participants' on- and off-line lives best demonstrates this relationship and its influence on appropriation. All my female participants had experienced slut-shaming personally and/or witnessed it online and in their social environments. This had a direct impact on their day-to-day on- and off-line decisions, for example whether they attended social events, and if so, how they chose to present themselves (e.g. clothing choices) and deciding whether to participate in online conversations.

Challenges to their social worlds, to their beliefs and values, expressed in online debate and discussion around events and opinions, had the effect of clarifying and reinforcing dominant

norms through the explication of values and rules of behaviour which were consistent with their cultural identity, and, of particular interest here, notions of female sexuality. This is best illustrated in online discussion of the acceptable number of sexual partners for a woman (her 'body count'). According to the internet, the maximum acceptable number of sexual partners for a woman is three, although apparently as every girl now says this, none are believed. Any woman who exceeds this number of sexual partners is deemed to have lost 'value' or 'worth' (fieldnotes: Indy 25.07.18; Sam 09.03.18). This concept was identified by Sam in her online activities and experienced by Indy in her real-world interactions with men. In this discourse, notions of an active female sexuality are subtly but squarely squashed as norms indicating socially acceptable behaviours are (re)enforced, as was also demonstrated in Indy's cultural dissonance around the social media 'go shoot your shot' discourse, Sam's critical judgement of girls actively seeking male attention in her social environment, and Carla's male friends' implicit belief they should be the ones to approach women. This contradictory framing of discourses of female sexuality was aptly illustrated in a conversation with Alex about social attitudes to an assertive female sexuality. Alex relayed to me an exchange from the 90s/00s American sitcom Family Guy:

> Alex explains that the character Meg talks to her mum about dating and her mum says, "It's the 21st century, a woman can ask a man out". Then Meg asks her mum if she has ever done that and her mum says, "Oh don't be silly, I'm far too beautiful for that" (fieldnotes: Alex 07.06.18).

In Alex's wry example the idea that a woman would only be sexually assertive if she *needed* to be, if she was not beautiful enough to generate male sexual interest, is amusingly communicated and the generational divide emphasised with Meg's mum delivering the punchline that undermines contemporary notions of a positive female sexual agency. Resistance is neutralised and hegemony is (re)asserted; female sexual assertiveness is identified as an act of the desperate and unattractive,

reinforcing heteronormative ideals of female beauty and the sexual desirability it confers. This example also simultaneously reinforces hegemonic male sexuality as active and dominant, playing on biological arguments of natural sexual difference.

Reinforcing the undesirability of presenting oneself as a sexually assertive and active woman, Sam, a heavy user of social media, spoke at length about the negative comments and abuse she observed women who post pictures of themselves online wearing bikinis or revealing clothing received, grounded in a common-sense notion that they had lost "value" because the act indicated a lack of self-respect (fieldnotes: Sam 09.03.18). Sam's observations mirrored Alex's interpretation of female Instagrammers posting sexualised images of themselves as 'desperate turn-offs' (fieldnotes: Alex 11.05.18). This correlation between clothing and character, between appearance and sexual subjectivity, was applied to or experienced in real-world interactions by all my female participants. Chris did not offer a judgement in his appraisal of sexualised representations of women, but gave the following astute observation of *Dua Lipa: New Rules*:

> It's quite clever really, empowering girls and using them as sexual objects at the same time. It's fucking incredible (fieldnotes: Chris 07.03.18)

The constancy of negative outcomes for women in these examples, social and material, demonstrates the heteronormativity underpinning contemporary notions of (un)acceptable sexuality and gender reinforcing the subjugation of female sexuality and the enduring inequality of gendered sexual relations (Jackson, 1999; Moran, 2017). The routinely applauded postfeminist liberal and sexually progressive female sexuality of music videos is limited by and through social media discourse which determines the rules and normative expectations my participants were required to manage in their daily lives.

The dominance of heteronormativity and discourses of natural biological difference underpinning notions of gender and sexuality are best exemplified in the following excerpt from a conversation about female sexuality with Alex who identified with a progressive alternative masculinity.

> There are penalties, slut-shaming and that kind of stuff but that is changing […] it's different for men and women, for men it's good to be promiscuous when younger and then settle down in a relationship. For women, they should have boyfriends but not necessarily sleep with them, and then settle down and have a baby, raise a family […] He says it is more acceptable for women to have lesbian and bisexual experiences, saying it is quite normal for women to have experimented in that. I ask about for men and he says while it is changing there is still a lot of stigma around that. I ask if the acceptance of female lesbian/bisexual activity is connected to male titillation and Alex smirks and says possibly yes. He says there is still such prestige around being a man and sleeping with lots of women and that's still very much a boundary of masculinity, whereas women's sexuality is deemed as more complex and more dismissed. I ask what he means by 'complex', he says as 'other', 'complex', 'dismissed' in mainstream society so it's titillating for men and not deemed to be as important as male sexuality and that's why it's more ignored (fieldnotes: Alex 16.05.18)

This excerpt clearly reveals the hegemonic heteronormative lens which conceptualises sexuality in gendered terms, normalising and reinforcing the biological dominance of heterosexuality through notions of an active male sexuality and passive subservient female sexuality (Rich, 1980; Richardson, 1997; Jackson, 1999; Diamond, 2005; Jhally, 2007). The active female sexual subject of postfeminist media culture does not move freely between that space, social media, and the streets of contemporary Birmingham; she is limited to the screen or faces real social consequences. This example also reveals a further example of the cultural dissonance in Alex's

masculine identity as he reports uncritically the normative enduring 'prestige' of male sexual achievement, irrelevance of female sexuality and disapproval of female sexual 'promiscuity'. That Alex shared these intimate and potentially controversial thoughts with me demonstrates the advantages of my ethnographic approach; without having established a non-judgemental relationship based on trust this depth of insight would not have been achievable.

Conceptualising music videos, social media, and 'real life' as sites of engagement within an MDA analytical framework identifies the action taking place within them as resulting from interaction with cultural tools, in this case, notions of female sexuality (Scollon, 1998; Scollon, R., 2001; Jones, 2005). The MDA notion of site of engagement conceptualises "spaces and times as arising *from* actions" (Jones, 2005: 143 italics added); actions do not occur *in* sites of engagement (locations or moments), but *as* sites of engagement, as the result of mediated interaction. Using this framework, the ideological work involved in interpreting representations of female sexuality may be observed and its connections and disruptions across interpretive sites of engagement (music videos, social media, real life) identified, highlighting the convergence of social practices and social identities to discern the relationship between discourse and action (Jones, 2005). Jones (2005: 144) outlines categories of online space[11] which, as demonstrated, intersect in appropriation and effect. What emerged in my data was that my participants' interpretive sites of engagement affected their online and physical spaces, shaping actions and identities, as follows:

1) **Music videos** operated as a site of engagement where high-cultural status liberal and progressive contemporary notions of sex, gender, sexuality were (re)presented and where sexual identities could be vicariously enacted.

[11] Physical space e.g. office; Virtual space e.g. web page; Relational space created by interaction; Screen space e.g. windows; Third spaces i.e. those not inhabited but referred to (Jones, 2005: 144).

2) **Social media** worked dynamically as a site of engagement actively and continuously (re)constructing notions of sex, gender, and sexuality through representation and dialogue. This made it a site for the construction of a sexual identity integrated into the historical body (Jones, 2005).
3) **Real world**, physical (site of engagement) interactions were where sexual identities emerged through social practice as sexual politics. It was at this level the disjuncture between the postfeminist sexual subject, alternative masculinity, and social action was most profoundly visible as the material consequences of social actions were observed and felt.

Each site of engagement had a distinct ideological framing of female sexuality: music video representations offered liberalised depictions; social media included space for those representations but also set out their limitations and implications; and 'real life' was a site that had little if any space for a liberated female sexuality, was heavily regulated by rules and had the potential for real social costs e.g. slut shaming and social censure. Each site intersected dynamically resulting in a dissonance where representations of an active and assertive female sexuality were advocated, believed in and aspired to, supported by social media discourse, while discriminatory heteronormative rules for sexual practice were simultaneously set out on social media and enforced on the self and others in the obdurate reality of lived experience.

Jones (2005: 153) argues "sites of engagement are sites of political struggle between competing Discourses with competing *attention structures*" (italics in original), echoing Hall's (1998) cultural struggle and reinforcing its underlying assertion that any interaction between an individual and mediated communication (representation) necessitates a process of struggle between external stimuli and internal feeling. The close relationship, observed by my participants, between music videos and their life experiences, or their understandings of real-life gained through social media,

indicated social media conferred a high truth value (modality). My participants understood music video representations of social and sexual interactions, of topics including age, sex and relationships, and representations of musicians' lives and personalities as resonant and authentic, reflective of their understandings of 'truth', if they accorded with what they observed on social media. This has significant implications for how sexual scripts were interpreted, as I discuss in chapter seven.

A high truth value consistently meant high cultural status and underpinned what emerged as a intercultural desire for authenticity in any materialisation, including music video, musician persona, and beauty; the more authentic something or someone was thought to be the higher cultural status it/they achieved regardless of taste culture. Modality, the 'reliability' of a sign to communicate 'truth' (Chandler, 2002; van Leeuwen, 2005), was achieved for my participants through production techniques (in music videos) and through platform (on social media). The effect of this was to make high modality (authentic, realistic) music videos appear achievable, aspirational and 'normal' to my participants. As demonstrated, my participants repeatedly called on their life experiences to inform and illustrate interpretations through what they saw as parallels.

When applied to female sexuality, this ideological work informed the interpretive process outlined above in the following way: music videos celebrate a contemporary liberated and progressive female sexuality; when this sexuality enters the online space it is critiqued and limited by social rules; should it make it to the obdurate reality of social life, it is socially sanctioned and suffers the consequences of slut-shaming and social censure, having failed to construct a socially (instead of representationally) successful sexual identity (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). This reinforces the notion that women must be sexy *not* sexual (Levy, 2005).

This section empirically demonstrates the complexities involved in interpreting multi-site and multi-platform representations of female sexuality and the enduring heteronormative virgin/slut continuum that informs it (Bay-Cheng, 2015). I have shown how my participants' engagement with social media extended in size not composition their social world, and the significant role it had in mediating interpretations of sex, gender, and sexuality. I have illustrated the disjuncture between media representations of female sexuality and my participants' lived experiences and conceptions of it, underscoring the complexities and contradictions involved in navigating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. I have demonstrated the enduring applicability of McRobbie's (2004) double entanglement and addressed social media's influence, setting out its role of simultaneously celebrating and limiting, in a circular way, contemporary notions of female sexuality. I have argued that enduringly dominant heteronormative notions of natural biological difference inform interpretations of female sexuality, setting out how these notions are (re)enforced through social media and in social life, positioning an active and assertive female sexuality as symbolically celebrated yet implicitly unachievable and arguably undesirable. I argue popular culture has assimilated and neutralised resistance to hegemonic heteronormativity and (re)asserted dominant notions of sex, gender and sexuality.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I argue the sexual and social scripts underpinning contemporary manifestations of hegemonic heterosexuality in postfeminist media culture have not changed in any significant way despite contemporary discourses to the contrary, and that they continue to discriminate based on race, class, gender and sexuality. I argue a postfeminist sensibility appropriates contemporary pro-women discourses to neutralise political feminism by re-signifying them with common-sense

hegemonic heteronormative scripts, creating a cultural struggle in its depictions of gender and sexuality and a disruption between representation and reality (Bocock, 1986; Gill, 2007c). I have done this by setting out my finding that the notions underpinning my participants' interpretations of gender and sexuality were enduringly heteronormative and consistent with a postfeminist sensibility, revealing contradictions between their discursive generational identity and their actions and practices. I did this by:

- Unpacking the 'alternative' identity and demonstrating its limitations, contradictions and absence of potential to challenge or disrupt neoliberal heteronormative hegemony, locating it instead as a commercially driven subject position that appropriates and neutralises discourses of resistance by conferring social and cultural status through consumption and discourses of 'taste'. I demonstrate that those discourses enduringly discriminate based on race, class, gender and sexuality to reinforce hegemonic heteronormativity and unequal gender relations. I reveal through in-depth engagement with young adults the nuanced and contradictory process of identity construction and the cultural dissonance required in aligning identity and practice. This contributes to knowledge on identity construction, cultural meaning making, and the relationship between representation and reality.
- Evidencing the re-signification of discourses of masculinity and of sexualisation and objectification in postfeminist media culture through notions of 'art' and 'artistry' to reinforce discriminatory hegemonic heteronormative definitions of (un)acceptable female sexuality that subordinate women and female sexuality. This extends understandings of how sexual subjectivity is created, how meaning is made, and how popular culture appropriates and neutralises counter hegemonic discourse.

- Showing how social media interacts with music videos to increase their truth value and resonance for the audience by using signs of high cultural status, for example authenticity and art, to add a dimension of reality to them. I conceptualise music videos, social media and 'real life' as sites of engagement to reveal contradictions in the complex ways female sexuality was represented and interpreted, and the significant mediating role of social media in shaping and informing notions of (un)acceptable sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics.

By engaging with my participants in the innovative way I did, meeting with them repeatedly over several months and developing a relationship with them, I uncovered the contradictions and complexities required to construct and maintain successful social and sexual identities discussed in this chapter. I observed the nuances and cultural dissonance involved in navigating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics. The significance of my approach cannot be underestimated. It simply would not have been possible to gain the depth of insight or richness of data I did without establishing a relationship and bond of trust; I could not have asked the questions I did or my participants given the responses they did without us knowing and trusting each other.

The next chapter sets out the scripts that emerged as informing interpretations of sex and relationships, reveals their heteronormative and gendered basis and discusses their limiting and negative potential implications. I discuss how violence emerged as a normative and significant feature of heterosexuality, outline its features and role in informing meaning making and set out how digital media emerged as centrally significant in communicating and determining dominant norms of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics.

Chapter 7: Scripts of Sexual Attraction and Interaction

Chapter five outlined the key discourses though which my participants positioned themselves as a distinctive generation, defined by their unprecedented connection to digital media and grounded in notions of being 'alternative'. Chapter six unpacked these identity positions and beliefs to reveal contradictions and conflicts between identity and practice, indicating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics are enduringly informed by discriminatory heteronormative discourses of natural biological difference. Chapter six also set out the significance of site of engagement for mediating interpretations, providing context and defining notions of (in)appropriate sexuality. This chapter details the scripts of sexual attraction and interaction that emerged as central to informing interpretations of sex and relationships and details their heteronormatively gendered basis and negative implications for contemporary sexual politics.

In this chapter I present my findings that the scripts of sexual attraction and interaction revealed in my data were enduringly formed from heteronormative and essentialist 'natural order' discourses of biological difference. I argue this is significant for understanding contemporary notions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics because in (re)producing unequal gendered scripts of social and sexual interaction, music video representations legitimise existing power relations and continue to (re)present dominant definitions which discriminate based on gender, sexuality, class and race. This is important to study because representations inform social interaction (Hall, 1980; Rubin, 1992; Hall, 1998; Gill, 2008a), which for real-life sexual

interactions too often means sexual assault and violence against women (Jhally, 2007; Coy and Garner, 2012: 295).

In *Telling Sexual Stories* (1995), Plummer engages with the profusion of contemporary sexual storytelling, what I also call the sexualisation of culture, arguing sex has become the 'Big Story'. Plummer argues people tell sexual stories in order to "turn themselves into *socially organised biographical objects*" (Plummer, 1995: 34, italics in original), stressing the importance for people to *have* a sexual story worthy of sharing, regardless of its relation to their 'truth', and draws attention to the relevance of time and place in the story's production and consumption. For Plummer (1995: 34 – 35), sexual story telling evolves over four levels: the personal (motives for telling stories); the situational (how people find their story or stories and locate themselves within it/them); the organisational (the contextual shaping of the story); and the cultural/historical (the moment the story is received publicly).

Music videos are an important part of this sexual storytelling and have been theorised as contributing to understandings of gender and sexuality through their visual and thematic representations, illuminating the relationship between representation and practice (Jhally, 2007). This relationship is not directly causal, as demonstrated through the contradictions and nuanced readings of my participants, but rather, contributes to what I argue is a 'conducive context' for a 'grey area' of sexual interaction. This argument draws on Gavey's (2005; 2019) conceptualisation of everyday normative functions of heterosexuality (e.g. sexual scripts) as providing a 'cultural scaffolding' for rape, sexual coercion and a 'grey area' of sexual relations that are not rape or consensual mutually enjoyable sexual encounters, and Coy and Garner's (2012: 288 - 289) framing of sexualisation as a 'conducive context' (Kelly, 2007) providing "hegemonic templates" that enable men to abuse women and girls.

This research takes place in a cultural and political environment that is increasingly concerned with questions of sex and power and highlighting the global effects of gendered sexual inequality (Gill and Orgad, 2018; Valenti, 2018a; Cosslett, 2019; Wildfire, 2019; Willis Aronowitz, 2019). Feminist academics have theorised and empirically evidenced social, cultural and structural forces that contribute to and sustain sexual inequalities and their material consequences for women (Kelly, 1988; Gavey, 2005; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Coy and Garner, 2012; Cahill, 2016; Kelly, 2016; Moran, 2017; Gavey, 2019). The scale of sexual harassment and sexual abuse experienced by women and girls and given voice by these and other academics and movements like #MeToo suggests the effects of patriarchal heterosexuality are a global phenomenon. It is beyond the potential of this thesis to address the intersection of power and sex at that level, but this thesis identifies those internalised discourses of practice which inform sexual meaning making, evidencing hegemony and notions of (un)acceptable sexual practice for my participants, empirically supporting this academic work.

In response to those who would argue this analytic perspective positions women and girls as victims (e.g. Camille Paglia, Rene Denfled, Natasha Walters, Naomi Wolf and Katie Roiphe), I do not offer essentialising claims for all women, but recognise that substantial numbers of women, as evidenced in the body of work and global movements already discussed, have and continue to experience sex in ways that are less than pleasurable and argue that conceptualising this phenomenon as connected to axes of power and gender does not position all women as victims (Kelly, 1988; Gavey, 2005; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012; Coy and Garner, 2012; Cahill, 2016; Kelly, 2016; Moran, 2017; Gavey, 2019).

Sexual scripting theory (Gagnon and Simon, 1974) asserts sexuality is socially constructed in scripts which operate externally (organising interpersonal interactions) and internally (shaping intrapersonal motivational details) to produce arousal; in other words, interactions are governed

by scripts and scripts make interaction possible. Beres (2013) advocates the use of sexual scripting theory in analyses of discourses of sexuality, arguing scripts are the materialisation of discourses and reveal how (hetero)sexuality is constructed, that the cultural and historical formation of discourses are manifest and available for analysis in scripts. This theoretical conceptualisation is consistent with MDA which foregrounds social interaction in the production of discourse. Using this analytical lens, I interrogated Plummer's (1995) organisational (context of the story) and cultural/historical (time of receiving the story) levels of sexual storytelling in music video, what I call 'the tale and its time'. This illuminated patterns and sequences of representation that shaped the stories (scripts) and the contemporary discourses that informed their consumption (interpretation) thereby enhancing understandings of the relationship between representation and practice. My findings are located at the intersection of popular culture, sexuality, gender and power, and reveal the embodied sexual politics of my participants, extending knowledge of how young adults make sexual meaning.

My findings illuminate patterns of appropriation in my participants daily engagement with popular culture, addressing what they chose to appropriate, why and how, and the discourses surrounding those acts. By revealing the meaning attached to sexual scripts (stories), my findings identify the notions of (hetero)sexuality that oriented my participants' gendered sexual politics. It is important to note that in discussing scripts I do not suggest *all* music videos follow the same pattern, but rather that within the scope of my research that encompassed the four dominant music genres (Pop; Hip-Hop/Rap/RnB; Dance/Electronica; Indie/Acoustic) I identified patterns and (in)consistencies in scripts that represented expected, normal and dominant representations of sex and relationships for my participants. This in-depth audience-centred analytic approach foregrounds participant interpretations as they emerged in complex social interactions and engages with the intimate processes of cultural meaning making in a novel way.

By uncovering the turning points on which sexual scripts resonated, or not, with my participants existing conceptual frameworks i.e., what they thought was normal, acceptable or expected and what was not in sexual interactions, this thesis extends knowledge of the cultural struggle involved in reading sexual scripts, shedding new light on how people learn how to behave in sexual situations (Hall, 1998). I argue that representations of gendered sexual practice inform and mediate contemporary sexual politics in a way that sustains patriarchal heteronormative sexual inequalities contributing to knowledge on contemporary sexual politics. I set out my argument in this chapter as follows:

(7.1) Sets out the scripts of sexual attraction and interaction that emerged in my data and their potential implications for sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. I present my finding that the scripts informing my participants' interpretations were consistent with hegemonic postfeminist heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality that subordinate women and female sexuality.

(7.2) Following on from 7.1, this section unpacks the significance and meaning of the prominence of violence in scripts of heterosexual sex and relationships as it emerged in my data. I address the intersectional implications of representations of sex and violence for notions of (in)appropriate sexual and romantic behaviours.

(7.3) Argues social media increased the potential of sexual stories (sexual scripts) to be read as a valid and reliable 'truth' in music videos through setting out my findings that semiotic thematic representations and musician personas influenced the interpretive process. This section also addresses the significance of this finding in relation to the scripts as detailed in the preceding sections.

7.1 Scripts of sexual attraction and interaction

Gagnon and Simon (1974: 262) contend all human sexual behaviour is socially scripted, that sexual arousal is defined socio-culturally through recognisable attributes (signs) applied to the actor and situation; that is, arousal (intrapsychic) is signified symbolically, through scripts, and learnt in an interactive process with the social world (interpersonal), for example family, peers and media (cultural) shaping our understandings of gendered (hetero)sexuality. Sexual meaning is created within this tiered framework of sexuality and scripts. For my participants, scripts of sexual availability and interest, heterosexual relationships and initiating sexual contact emerged as dominant in readings of music videos. These cultural scripts presented in music videos went through a process of cultural struggle, finding either resonance or rejection with their existing notions of sex and relationships (interpersonal scripts). The scripts I discuss were identified as dominant resulting from their repetition across all music genres included in this study and their intercultural meaning and acceptance indicating hegemony through legitimisation and normalisation.

The hegemonic nature of sexual scripts means they are deeply embedded and so I, as researcher, had to work hard to overcome my own internalised beliefs about sex and relationships to identify and unpack their manifestation in my participants' interpretations of music video representations. Explicit visual representations of sexual contact in music videos is limited and sex was typically referenced in subtle, symbolic, and metaphorical ways meaning sexual scripts emerged as embedded in scripts of gendered behaviour. The 'ordinariness' of scripts meant they were identified and expressed in a matter of fact common-sense way, only being explicitly referred to when they (re)presented oppositional or out of the ordinary representations, for example, objectification of male beauty (Dan Smith from *Bastille*) or the exposure of a woman's nipple (*Father John Misty: Nancy From Now On*). It was in a reading of *Camila Cabello: Havana* (2018) with

Carla that the simplicity of the 'sexual availability' script became visible and from this insight other deeply embedded scripts, from Carla and other participants, became more apparent.

What emerged in the reading of *Camila Cabello: Havana* (2018) was that to signal sexual availability, a woman simply had to be present. That was it; female presence was symbolic of female sexual availability; no other actions or signs were required, and this was implicitly understood. Typically, the woman would perform some level of 'work' to attract the attention of the male(s) present. This 'work' took place through clothing which was extremely polysemic with almost any style or type of clothing having the potential to signify sexual availability, or her actions, for example dancing or hair flicking. Women in music videos were understood as indicating sexual interest if they made eye contact, smiled or laughed (eye contact was the most cited sign of sexual interest, and laughter was considered irrefutable evidence of sexual interest by Sam).

In response to the women's actions outlined above, men were understood to indicate their sexual interest through their physicality, perhaps by standing in front of the woman to block her path, by touching her face, arm, shoulder or back, or, as in *Havana*, by placing a hand on a woman's stomach to stop her walking past. Typically, the woman happily and willingly acquiesced to male advances but could disengage by physically removing herself from the interaction; if she remained, her interest and consent to further attentions from the male were implicit. Rejecting male sexual advances was unusual not only in the videos I watched with my participants but also in my participants' collective consciousness of music video representations of sex and relationships. This is remarkable because of the predominance of sex and relationships as a theme in music videos and can be understood through an appreciation of the relationship script in music videos.

Representations of relationships in music videos revolved around sex and/or discord. The following script of heterosexual relationships, closely reflecting that outlined by Rich in 1980, was either explicitly represented in music videos or offered by my participants as an assumed justification for unexplained actions or events in music videos. In heterosexual relationships, which almost all relationships in my sample were, the man behaved badly, most often by being promiscuous (invoking the male sexual drive script), but also by being emotionally and/or physically abusive, neglecting, lying to or otherwise not being respectful to the woman. The woman, in response to the man's actions, would scream and shout at him, cry with and/or be emotionally supported by her friends, before eventually taking him back. This script, enduringly reflective of heteronormative biologically deterministic notions of gendered sexual behaviours, was consistently and repeatedly cited by participants as 'how relationships are'.

The post-discord reunion was frequently cited as evidence of the strength of the couple's bond and explained in the following terms: that despite all *his* bad behaviour, *their* love is such that they get past it. Interpretations of this script were repeatedly supported by real-life experiences, particularly by my female participants, evidencing its resonance for them and was the first explanation offered for any plot gaps. Indy's reading of *Steve Lacy: Ryd/Dark Red* (2016) provides a particularly illuminating illustration of this. In this video a woman kidnaps a man, puts him in the boot of her car and drives off with him before letting him out and physically assaulting him. In her interpretation of this sequence of events, Indy (fieldnotes: 20.03.18) surmised the woman must have been angry with the man and guessed it was because "he cheated on her or something", saying there are "loads" of videos with that storyline, that it was particularly prominent in the 1990s (again drawing attention to this period as of contemporary significance), saying that although it's negative, "you get a good song out of it". There is no reference to any prior relationship in the video, the woman's actions are unexplained and so Indy had to guess at the motivation which she did by referencing the 'male bad behaviour script'.

This script is reiterated by Sam in her analysis of the video *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE* (2017) which she described as a couple going through 'stages of a relationship, with extreme good times leading to extreme bad times', represented through sex, arguments and violence, solitude and contemplation. In the closing scene the man arrives at the woman's home and she lets him in. Sam interprets this as the artist's:

> portrayal of proper like real love, his experience of it, it doesn't matter the hard times they've been through, they always end up going back to each other. But not in it a toxic way, just in the stage of development [...] at the end of the day, like, after the things that's happened we're all sort of aware of the fact that if there wasn't some feelings so strongly about each other maybe they wouldn't care that much about having arguments, they'd just leave it (fieldnotes: Sam 14.06.18).

Sam's personal history makes her a good example of how the internalising of scripts work. Because she had no personal relationship experience at the time of this conversation, her understanding of sex and relationships (which were always very definite and detailed) were based on what she observed around her in the media and in her lived experience, and what her friends told her. Sam was the heaviest user of social media among my participants and her conversation reflected this. For example, she frequently cited American sociocultural news and events learnt from Twitter (for example American trans activism and race debates) to support her arguments. Through her interpretations, Sam illuminates how meaning is made and how scripts are internalised in a process of cultural dominance (Hall, 1998); Sam engages with scripts on social media which frame her interpretations of relationships in a mutually reinforcing dynamic. Interestingly, Sam reflected on her reliance on social media in her exit interview when she said that through the research process she had become aware of the extent social media formed her

opinions and compared it to 'being spoon-fed', saying the research had made her more critical and alert to being "sucked in" (fieldnotes: Sam 24.07.18).

Carla was a far lighter user of social media and frequently drew on film to illustrate and support her arguments. Returning to her reading of *Camila Cabello: Havana* (2018), at one stage we see the female lead and a man in a physical and romantic altercation (I address the relationship between violence and romance in the following section). Carla offered what she called "classic love drama movie" narratives as a way to understand what was happening, saying

> normally they meet each other, they get to know each other, something is happening and then someone has to make a big gesture and they come together and they are happy […] this seems to be the happy ending, something went wrong, but they love each other so much they sorted it out (fieldnotes: Carla 24.07.18)

These examples empirically evidence the internalisation of the female acceptance of male bad behaviour script, deepening academic understandings of how scripts of heterosexuality that enduringly discriminate on gender are written into media and popular culture and internalised, contributing to the common-sense acceptance of the natural inevitability of male physical, sexual and emotional abuse of women (Rich, 1980). Carla and Sam's framing of the heterosexual relationship script both validate a 'happy ending' in the act of the woman forgiving the man for physical and/or emotional abuse and happily welcoming him into her arms/home. This resonates with the 'positive outcome' rape myth, a popular trope of pornography, which claims force is acceptable, and often required, in obtaining sex from women who appear not to want it initially but enjoy it *in the end* (Malamuth and Donnerstein, 1982; Scully, 1990). The following excerpt from Carla's reading of *Camila Cabello: Havana* (2018) illuminates this parallel:

> I ask Carla what she thinks about the way the couple on the car behave towards each other. She says they walk outside and they have a (audio difficult - I think she says

> romantic fight) she starts hitting him straight away […] the man grabs her hand and they get closer and even he doesn't seem really that surprised about it […] Carla laughs and says he seems to know how to handle her, he's not, it doesn't seem to be something unusual […] Carla says she is going away and he is pulling her back and sitting her on his car then they are super close. I say she's got her arms around his neck and ask what that means. Carla says that is really making the point for her, that if she really wanted to go (laugh) she wouldn't be that happy, hopefully, being so close to him, so it's like I've made my point now it's your turn […] this seems to be the happy ending, something went wrong, but they love each other so much they sorted it out (fieldnotes: Carla 24.07.18)

Jhally (2007: no page number) outlines the way this pornographic trope is used in music videos as part of "the pornographic imagination", illustrating how even when unexpectedly attacked, "women's arousal wins out over fear. In the dream world women never say no and passionately welcome masculine aggression". In the examples included here, male physical violence included throwing a lamp at a woman (*Ashanti: Foolish)* and holding a woman by the wrist to restrain her (*Camilla Cabello: Havana)*. In *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE* unequal nudity is used when the male lead sits fully clothed on a woman's bed while she sleeps fully exposed in revealing underwear (see appendix 3). Sam paid little attention to this scene interpreting it as fantasy, but this visual technique is recognised as symbolically signifying "unequal power that spells coercion" in visual representations of sex (Steinem, 1980: 37).

These examples demonstrate that the heterosexual relationship script is enduringly based on the notion that physical, sexual and emotional abuse of women by men is normal and that women willingly accept it. I address the potential implications of this for sexual politics shortly, but first expand on the relationship between pornography and music videos to make clear the intertextual

and interdiscursive dimensions between these two media which both foreground representations of sex and relationships.

Pornification, porno-chic and the use of pornographic tropes in music video have been widely addressed in the academy (see for example McNair, 2002; Nikunen, Saarenmaa, and Paasonen, 2007; Attwood, 2009; Attwood, 2012). It is not the focus of this study to analyse the relationship between pornography and music video representations, but to offer insight into my participants' interpretations of music videos. Chris and Alex both identified what they considered stylistic similarities between music videos and online pornography and claimed a 'link' between the prevalence and ease of access to online pornography and the increased sexualisation of music videos which they argued contain negative messages about sexuality and women. Significantly, while Alex raised this topic a few times in conversation throughout the fieldwork, in his exit interview he made a point of asking:

> […] if I have thought about the links between online pornography and how prevalent and widely available that is and its impact on music videos […] He says he had that thought rattling round in the back of his mind […] he says he assumed there might be a link between music videos becoming more extreme more graphic in order... in relation to the availability of online pornography. Becoming more titillating. I ask from his personal experience if he sees a correlation, he says quite possibly, yeah and says it would be hard to imagine for example *Miley Cyrus' Wrecking Ball* without the prevalence of online pornography. I summarise that he thinks because so many people (he clarifies everybody but mostly young people) watch online pornography music videos are not so shocking because they are used to these images, he says yes, and in response to that, that in some instances it has become more provocative and shocking - to keep up with or mimic I offer, he says yes (fieldnotes: Alex 30.07.18)

With Chris, online pornography was a recurrent and prominent them of conversation throughout our sessions. Perhaps significantly, it never came up with my female participants.

Alex and Chris' conceptualisation of the relationship between internet pornography and music videos reflected academic discourse which suggests advances in technology making online pornography freely and easily available have contributed to the proliferation of sexualised imagery replicating its look and style in mainstream media (McNair, 2002; Levy, 2005; Attwood, 2009). This has had a profound effect on sexuality as a pornographic style has become entrenched in media products through which people experience a mediated sexuality (Plummer, 2003; Levy, 2005). Significantly, it is this widespread dispersal of practices and representations connected to sex, normalising and mainstreaming them, that differentiates the contemporary moment from previous moments of interest in sex and pornography (Gill, 2012b).

Alex and Chris each identified specific practices involved in this 'mainstreaming'. Alex highlighted what he saw as the intertextuality of pornography and music videos by drawing direct parallels, as in the above excerpt where he says it would be hard to imagine *Miley Cyrus: Wrecking Ball* being made without online pornography, and asserted videos he watched and others he was more generally aware of were heavily influenced by pornography citing specific acts as drawn directly from a pornographic aesthetic. As in the above example, Alex believes music videos were becoming 'more extreme more graphic' in response to the availability of online pornography.

In his statement Alex makes several claims that reveal his assumptions. Firstly, Alex believes 'most' young people watch online pornography. Secondly, that all online pornography is 'graphic' in its representation of the female body and sexuality. Thirdly, that consequent to their repeated appropriation of online pornography young people have become habituated to this imagery. Fourthly and finally, that music videos actively seek to mimic this aesthetic. In a separate conversation (fieldnotes: 07.03.18) Alex was explicit in connecting growing up with online

pornography, which he felt differentiated his generation, and what he called "a toxic attitude to women and relationships and sex", claiming that exposure to pornography, specifically the "images, shots and stories", changes men's attitudes to women, warping their perspectives in a "damaging" way that leads them to see women as sex objects. Alex drew parallels with this type of pornographic content and what he called 'urban music', which, as detailed previously, operates as a shorthand for black and/or working-class cultures. In this statement Alex claims online pornography has contributed to a toxic attitude towards women and identifies this as distinctive to his generation through its intrinsic connection to digital media. This contradicts his previous claims that his generation has a greater level of awareness and sensitivity to the suffering of others, particularly women, through a distinctive WOKE sensibility.

I turn now to Chris and his complex relationship with pornography to illuminate its interdiscursivity with music videos and implications for his sexuality. Chris talked openly about his regular appropriation of pornography throughout the fieldwork period and sex was a regular theme of conversation in our sessions. Chris' regular appropriation of pornography was complicated by feelings of guilt and shame because it formed the substance of his sexual experience. Chris was in a process of navigating his unclear sexuality during the time I knew him and was adamant that watching pornography added to his confusion about his 'normalcy' leading to feelings of insecurity. Chris, like Alex, was adamant that music videos actively and intentionally mimicked pornography to sexually excite their audiences and that this process was exemplified in YouTube suggestion thumbnail images which he felt were a form of advertising he was unable to avoid or resist (YouTube was the primary platform for watching music videos for all my participants). Chris was almost angry about this practice which he found manipulative and compared sexualised music videos to pornography calling them "bad media" (fieldnotes: 07.03.18).

That music videos borrow interdiscursively from and reference pornography is no surprise when we consider the prevalence of directors, actors and distributors from pornography in contemporary music video production (Levy, 2005; Mugan, 2010; Garrison, 2014; Hooton, 2014; Slavik, 2014). These tropes were recognisable and contributed to complex and critical personal relationships to music video representations of sex and relationships. The trope that emerged as most prominent and significant in my data was the 'positive outcome' rape trope which was repeatedly used in music video representations of heterosexual relationships which rely on suggestion and metaphor to index sex.

Returning to my central argument, generation presented an interesting intersectional dimension in interpretations of relationship scripts. Alex argued above the level and type of exposure to pornography he experienced distinguished his generation because of its availability online. He reiterated this sentiment of differentiation in his conceptualisations of online dating, which he characterised as bringing out the worst in people and exposing the dark cruelty of human nature, actions and practices he again attributed to the technology (and by extension his generation) evidenced in a comparison of how his parents got together after an extended friendship in the 1990s. When I asked him to explain contemporary dating, he did it by explaining dating terminology, for example 'benching' (keeping someone around while actively looking for a 'better' partner) and 'ghosting' (ending contact with a person without notice). Alex argued these practices were evidence of the negative consequences of online dating because it removes the social cost involved in treating people you may already be acquainted with badly (fieldnotes: Alex 14.03.18).

In his explanation Alex implicitly assumed that because the terminology was new, the actions and practices they referred to were new revealing the significance of language in framing generational sexual experience and sexual meaning (Plummer, 2010). It is significant to note that Alex's

assumption that these practices were new was incorrect, none of the practices he shared were unfamiliar to me although some of the terminology describing them was. As Plummer (2010) notes, an important dimension of generationally informed analyses of sexuality is the identification of sexual habits and practices through language which is constantly shifting and evolving, shedding and appropriating meaning(s). By having a new lexicon to describe sex and relationships intrinsically linked to social media through online dating, Alex connects to what he perceives as the distinctiveness of his generation and takes meaning from that, contributing to his construction of self, seemingly unaware that these social phenomena were familiar to previous generations.

Alex's sentiments were reiterated by other participants who believed relationships for their generation were markedly distinct from those of previous generations. For example, Carla differentiated her generation, distancing herself from what she perceived as negative behaviours associated with older generations. Similarly Sam saw relationships almost exclusively through a generational lens, repeatedly justifying actions in music videos by saying this is what relationships are like 'right now' and outlining for me the terminology, categories and stages which she said "she feels she can say […] because of what she has observed, people she knows and things she reads on social media" (fieldnotes: Sam 17.07.18). These examples support my argument that generational identity, synonymous with technology, is fundamental to shaping interpretations and that social media is crucial in determining normative behaviours.

I now address the 'sexual initiation' script to underscore the heteronormative basis of representations of sex and relationships in music videos. I examine this script because it was in initiating sexual contact that explicit sexual contact was most frequently represented. This script reflected a postfeminist female sexuality where sexually assertive and confident female subjects regularly initiated sexual contact, embodying Gill's (2003) postfeminist sexual subject. For

example, a woman seductively pins a man against a wall in *Majid Jordan: Small Talk* (2016), another woman takes her top off at the dinner table and walks over to her male partner in *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE* (2017), and another woman walks over to a man who is euphemistically singing about fellatio and pats his beer bottle with her hand causing it to froth over in *Flo Rida: Whistle* (2012). However, in closer analyses participants interpreted these actions as singular acts of 'confidence' from the individual woman that frequently incited a negative judgement on her respectability with criticisms of girls and women (in videos and participants' social lives) who desire male attention and are sexual flirts and/or teases. This negative judgement on female sexual assertiveness again demonstrates the limitations of an active female sexuality to extend positively beyond media as a site of engagement.

Reiterating the role of social media in determining the rules, Sam told me that on Twitter the idea that men should take a leading role in initiating sexual or romantic contact is reinforced by women who, Sam argued, '*blame'* men for not taking the initiative (fieldnotes: Sam 08.06.18). Getting back to the script, while it was not considered out of the ordinary to see a woman initiate sexual contact in a music video, it was more 'normal' and 'expected' for the man to initiate contact (reflecting Sam's observations on Twitter), and if a woman had initiated sexual contact, if it was reciprocated, she instantly yielded power to the male who then took the lead. This deepening of understanding of postfeminist media representations of the female sexual subject offers a new lens through which to understand the hollowness of her sexual agency and the heteronormative sexual politics underpinning postfeminist representations of sex and relationships.

Gill (2009b: 101) cites Dee Amy-Chinn's article title *This is just for Me(n)* as eloquently articulating the postfeminist linking of women performing an active sexuality to please themselves in ways that coincidentally meet the desires of men. I empirically develop this argument by demonstrating

my participants' engagement with and interpretation of representations of sex and sexuality, highlighting the specific ways sexually assertive women in music videos were interpreted as meeting male sexual desires. In the following excerpt from Alex he demonstrates this point in his interpretation of the violent and aggressive actions of a female character in *Sundara Karma: She Said* (2016):

> "It's cheeky and playful, she's quite confident […] it's an "ideal type" (he uses the quotation gesture) to have a confident attractive woman behaving like that, a lot of men would like that, a certain type of man would like that". I pick up on this and ask what type of man. He says "a man who is confident in his own sexuality and gender and believes in equality, so he didn't have to be domineering over his female partner" […] I contrast this to traditional masculinity and he calls that a rap video style where women are objectified and not shown on an equal footing, saying they are more submissive (fieldnotes: Alex 18.07.18)

Alex's inferences of race and class are apparent in his alignment of female confidence and enlightened masculinity as outside the scope of rap, but what I am interested in is the way the woman is conceived as sexually desirable *because* of her 'confidence', the way her resistance and anger are interpreted as high sexual and cultural status. In this example, Alex makes clear that in asserting herself through acts of physical and symbolic violence against a man this woman is not only not threatening (a point I address in the following section), but is meeting a high-status 'dreamworld' of male sexual desire that raises questions about the meaning, value and significance of her sexual agency (Jhally, 2007; Gill, 2009b) and the role and prevalence of the positive outcome rape trope in music video representations of sex and relationships.

Before concluding this section, I address the function of sexual scripts for Chris and Alex because it illuminates the relationship that scripts share with understandings of traditionalism

fundamental to Hall's (1998) theory of cultural power. For Alex and Chris, as for my other participants, scripts were frequently understood as *traditions* reflecting the long-held link between popular culture and traditionalism that masks the struggle over cultural definition characterised by containment and resistance, recognition and refusal as signs 'transform' (Hall, 1998). Cultural meaning making is cultural power; those with the power to define and share those definitions are dominant, those without are subordinate. In the ongoing battle to define notions of acceptable and unacceptable sexuality, 'traditions' (e.g. sexual scripts grounded in notions of natural sexual difference) are reworked and re-signified to 'mean' different things. This is observed in Chris and Alex's appropriation of scripts of masculinity and sexuality signifying an alternative sexuality allowing them to construct high-cultural status sexual identities. Signs connected to masculinity, for example virility and physicality, are re-signified to 'mean' something different in an act of resistance as popular tradition is re-worked to accommodate new meanings; masculinity is reformed and persists. Scripts, then, offer a way to construct, or deconstruct, sexual identities framed by conceptions of what is 'normal' or 'valuable' and directly relate to how one feels about one's sexual subjectivity.

I focus on Alex and Chris because they expressed a desire to understand 'the rules' of sexual interaction and experienced this differently. Chris worried he wasn't 'normal' because he wasn't doing, or wanting to do, sex and relationships as he saw them represented in pornography and other media. He was unhappy with and preoccupied by his lack of sexual experience and spent lots of time questioning himself, comparing himself to representations, sometimes appropriating media to console himself. For example, he told me how after an unsuccessful attempt to speak to a girl he was sexually interested in, he bought a bottle of vodka, went home, and took solace in the song *Oasis: Cigarettes and Alcohol* (1994), saying he found it hopeful that even Noel Gallagher "on occasion had to go home alone and take solace in cigarettes and alcohol when he didn't get the girl" (fieldnotes: Chris 17.01.18).

Chris appropriated *Oasis: Cigarettes and Alcohol* to vicariously share this unhappy experience with Noel Gallagher, a well-known high-cultural status rock star embodying a traditional working-class masculinity, sexual desirability and material wealth, thereby conferring social acceptance on his experience. It is significant that Chris purposefully appropriated a music video as evidence of what was 'normal' and acceptable, as a means to frame his feelings and experiences as 'OK'. Chris identified his frame of reference for defining what is and is not normal as coming primarily from media representations, demonstrating the significance of media for identity creation and defining and communicating social norms (Hall, 1998; Pink, 2001; Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Bennett, 2015). When I asked Chris what he thought 'normal' looked like in relation to sex he said he had an idea in his head of "what girls want" (fieldnotes: Chris 17.01.18). In this exchange, Chris equated 'normal' with what the object of his desire wanted and made no reference to his own desire(s). For Chris, scripts were the framework of 'normal' even when they did not agree with his own inner state, and the 'struggle' of this caused him genuine existential anguish. This example illuminates the significance of interpersonal scripts in determining expectations in sexual interactions and the struggle of accommodating it within one's sexual identity (Brickell, 2006; Beres, 2013).

Alex actively researched what women want, or as he described it, "what the other side is thinking", using a range of self-help sources, or what he referred to as 'dipping into the literature' (fieldnotes Alex: 07.06.18), including Cosmopolitan's sex advice online[12], men's advice websites [13] and Reddit to try and make himself more attractive to women on- and off-line. Alex drew on his generational identity to explain the normalcy of this behaviour, saying his generation go to the internet first for any advice. Alex, who also expressed dissatisfaction with his sex life, sought out

[12] *Cosmopolitan.com* is an online women's magazine for fashion, beauty and sex advice that Alex valued for what he called their expert female opinion.

[13] *artofmanliness.com* and *uk.askmen.com* are websites for the "modern man, [explicating] what sort of values are important and behaviours are attractive or good" as well as health and grooming advice (fieldnotes: Alex 07.06.18).

sex and dating advice in a bid to try and understand 'the rules' and learn how to behave in interactions with women. In this example, like Chris, Alex actively wanted to identify interpersonal scripts for sexual interactions, indicating he was unclear what they were. Two things are significant here. Firstly, both Alex and Chris conceived of women as a homogenous group with definable and knowable wants, needs and desires based exclusively on their gender. This implicit assumption underpins their words and actions and reinforces my argument that gender is enduringly constructed in discourses of biological determinism (Richardson, 1997; Jackson, 1999). Secondly, their active and conscious search for and identification of interpersonal scripts of sexual behaviour in media texts supports the social constructionist and symbolic interactionist arguments that we learn how to be sexual beings and what that means through media and interaction, that sexuality is a mediated social construction (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Gagnon, 1990; Rubin, 1992; Plummer, 2001; Jackson and Scott, 2010). This example illuminates the complexity of understanding how gender and sexuality are socially constructed and intersect, and the uncertainty with which my participants constructed their sexual identities (Plummer, 1995).

It is also important to stress here the significance of my methodological approach for gaining access to this level and type of data. That Alex and Chris were happy to share this deeply personal information with me and that I was able to ask the questions that elicited it was directly attributable to my research approach that foregrounded them, gave them the space to direct the conversation and was built up over weeks and months of repeated contact.

The scripts I have examined were significant in framing participant interpretations of sex and relationships in music videos and on social media. What is their significance for navigating contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics? I have demonstrated the prevalence of cultural dissonance in notions of female sexual objectification, female sexuality and masculinity throughout my findings chapters; could this dissonance be the

result of the contradictions inherent in the scripts of gendered sexuality, outlined above, which promise fluidity and diversity and deliver heteronormativity? It is beyond the scope of this thesis to make causal connections, but I ask these questions and illuminate the power-based structures within which social and sexual interaction takes place. I argue sexuality and gender are socially constructed identities, dynamically lived out and continually influenced by engagement with and appropriation of popular culture, continuously experienced, adapted, adopted and negotiated in interaction with others, with media and with institutions.

This section has set out the scripts of sexual attraction, initiating sexual contact and heterosexual relationships that emerged in my data and shown how they were interpreted, illustrating the internalisation of hegemonic postfeminist heteronormative norms. It has set out the terms in which sexual acts and identities were interpreted as acceptable, drawing attention to the turning points for those meanings and interpretations and spotlighting the interdiscursive and intertextual relationship between music video representations of sex and relationships and those from pornography, drawing specific attention to the positive outcome rape trope. Following on from this, this section has considered the significance of this finding for contemporary sexual identities (in particular notions of a progressive postfeminist female sexuality) and sexual politics and shed new light on the cultural and sexual meaning making process. The following section focuses on the overwhelming presence and prevalence of violence in these scripts and highlights the potential implications of heteronormative heterosexuality in postfeminist media culture for sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics.

7.2 The features and role of violence

The previous section identified and interrogated scripts of sexual attraction and interaction in music videos. Within those scripts violence emerged as a prevalent and accepted feature of heterosexuality. This section sets out the significance and meaning of violence in representations

of heterosexuality in music videos. There were many examples of violence, female to male and male to female, and I address each in turn, drawing on participant interpretations and concluding with a summary of its significance and meaning for sexual politics[14].

Female to male violence was widespread and frequent throughout all genres of music videos I watched as part of this research. When women were violent or physically aggressive it was typically interpreted as an emotional (over)reaction to the man's actions, an act of exasperation or desperation that was always either futile or playfully flirtatious, conceptualised as a theatrical act (Carla), comical (Sam), pantomime (Alex), not intending, or indeed able, to cause bodily harm, a view seemingly unchanged since 1970 (Millett, 1977: 44). Female characters acting aggressively or violently in music videos were criticised and mocked for their irrational outbursts of emotion, and parallels were drawn with real life examples of this type of behaviour with Sam surmising that in her lived experience these women would be called "psycho" girlfriends (fieldnotes: 14.06.18). Female violence was always ineffectual, never hurting the man, even if he bled as a result of the assault, as in *Sundara Karma: She Said* (2016) when a woman headbutts a man and his nose bleeds and he shows no sign of pain and instead laughs about it, leading Alex to the conclusion that it was a "playful act" (reinforcing his notion that this type of romantic partner is an ideal-type).

Carla (fieldnotes: 24.07.18) interpreted female violence as representing 'passion' saying "it is violent but more passionate violent than painful aggressive violent", adding she was familiar with representations of female violence as symbolic of emotion, whereas male violence carries different meaning because of male strength. The interpretation of female violence as passionate, a

[14] Male on male violence, not represented in any music videos in this research but hypothesised in interviews, was considered to exclusively represent violence with no overtures of the erotic. Female to female violence was considered as purely erotic with no threat of violence.

flirtatious act or erotic foreplay preceding sex or sexual contact was linked to notions of 'angry sex'. As Sam explained in a conversation about relationship themes in music videos:

> In music videos on relationship stages you often see sex linked with violence and arguments, not necessarily at the same time, but at progressive stages. For example [in *Kendrick Lamar: LOVE*] the stages are she smashes the plates then they have sex on the table and stuff (fieldnotes: Sam 17.07.18)

Carla (fieldnotes: 16.04.18) regarded this type of 'angry sex' (explained as "sex after an argument is […] the best sex ever") as a normal feature of heterosexual relationships as demonstrated through its presence in language, movies and stories, if not her personal experience, asking "Why would you have a word like anger sex if it doesn't seem to be that unusual?" (fieldnotes: Carla 16.04.18).

This understanding of female aggression as preceding sex fits the 'token resistance script' which is based on ideas of female sexual modesty and submission and asserts that women (should) offer 'token' resistance to men's sexual advances even when interested in sex. This script supports the idea that when a woman says 'no' to sex she really means 'yes', undermining women's ability to express sexual needs and desires, calling doubt on their refusals of male sexual advances, and supporting social acceptance of male sexual coercion (Byers, 1996; Edwards et al, 2011; van Oosten, Jochen and Valkenburg, 2015). This script supports the positive outcome rape myth detailed above in its suggestion that women reject men's sexual advances as part of a 'cat and mouse game' but secretly want to be dominated and has been linked to Sexual Miscommunication Theory which argues biological and psychological differences between men and women result in a lack of understanding where "men may misinterpret or over-perceive a woman's willingness to engage in sexual relations" (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012: 820). Discourses of natural sexual difference reinforce and legitimise this script and the postfeminist sensibility has

been highlighted as reframing "coercive sex" as resulting from "a woman's lack of assertiveness", thereby placing responsibility on effective (sexual) communication with women (Burkett and Hamilton, 2012: 821).

Above I have empirically demonstrated how this script was visible as an internalised discourse for my participants in their interpretations of female violence and aggression, thereby highlighting its enduring hegemonic cultural power. Its commonplace materialisation and acculturation in the heterosexual relationship script legitimises the notion that 'men behave badly' underscoring the biological essentialism that discriminates against women I draw attention to in this thesis.

My participants understood the inclusion of violence in sexual scripts as reflective of relationships of real-life. For Carla, while 'angry sex' was thought of as common to heterosexual relationships in general, more explicit representations of violence were interpreted through the lens of class. In her reading of *Bastille: Laura Palmer* (2013) Carla (fieldnotes: 27.04.18 and 02.05.18) linked the prevalence of violence to "lower social class problem areas", drawing parallels between gang culture and acts of violence, which she characterised as distinct from her social world. In complicating this reading, Carla also offered age as a determining factor in acts of violence, saying that violence represents a disruption of social norms, breaking of rules, which she associates with youth culture, and which consequently makes the story relevant to her. Carla reconciled her oppositional readings through her personal knowledge of the band as artistically creative and explained the inclusion of violence as an 'artistic' way to symbolically represent rule breaking. Interpreting the video this way meant Carla was able to disassociate with the actions of the characters (unlawful violence) and find resonance in the symbolic appropriation of violence as representing youthful resistance.

Violence was linked with youth culture and class in other participants' readings in particular by Sam who said she thinks the reason she finds violence in music videos 'normal' is because as a

working-class person she was 'familiar with the format' which makes her "desensitised" (fieldnotes: Sam 16.02.18). In this way, violence was appropriated as part of a generational identity, again differentiating and marking out the significance of generation for meaning making.

In discussions of the dynamics of female violence my participants conceived the male characters as *allowing* it to take place, either as a result of sexual enjoyment (as in *Father John Misty: Nancy from Now On*) or because of the lack of threat (as in *Camilla Cabello: Havana*). This context is significant for understanding the meaning of female to male violence.

As discussed, notions of masculinity are closely associated with physical strength. By framing female to male violence as erotic or non-threatening this masculine characteristic was maintained and the implicit underpinning (biological) assumption that the man could take (physical) control of the situation (woman) at any moment was not disrupted. In this semiotic communication, the viewer is reminded of the weakness and vulnerability of women, their subordinate role in the proceedings, and male dominance. It is male physical power signifying dominance that overshadows the interaction and frames it as erotic or non-threatening underscoring male control, the powerlessness of the female, the futility of resistance. This finding is supported by my participants' reactions when asked how the violence would be perceived if the roles were reversed, which elicited concern and disapproval at the very idea and universal agreement that the message would be dramatically changed.

Goffman (1977) argues representations of gendered interaction do not *express* natural differences so much as *produce* them. Their continued (re)presentation in popular culture serves as justification and legitimisation of the existing order of social arrangements (Goffman, 1977; Connell, 1995; Hall, 1998; Jackson, 2006). Applied to representations of female to male violence, one implication of this representation is that it underscores the power of male to female violence, reminding women of their place in the sexual hierarchy and social order through referencing the

natural order of biological determination (Millett, 1977). This understanding of female violence as reinforcing and legitimising male dominance supports understandings of male violence which, while complex, ultimately, and unsurprisingly, signified the potential men have for inflicting physical harm on women.

I turn to Sam's reading of *Joji: Will He* (2017) to examine representations of male violence because her oppositional reading illustrates many of the complexities in my data. In the video we see a woman slumped, not moving, on a bathroom floor with an arrow through her head. The floor is splattered with bright red splotches, and in the bath with more red splotches around the rim and red coloured water is the male lead singing. The lyrics are him questioning if his ex-girlfriend will remember things about him and things they shared, will her new boyfriend do the things he did, and saying he wants to make sure she is safe. The dominant reading of this music video is that the male lead and the woman were in a relationship which ended, she began a relationship with another man and the male lead killed her because of his 'obsession' with her. Sam's reading presented an interesting alternative.

Sam (fieldnotes: 09.03.18 and 15.03.18) called the video "smart because it depicts the violence non-explicitly" adding "there's nothing that suggests that he did that to her" (emphasis on *her*), but that it can be implied. Sam inferred the male lead was bitter about the break-up which he did not want and, contradictory to her previous assertion that there was no direct suggestion he killed her, says "it looks like he's done it out of love or out of his own self-development rather than directly against her but that doesn't necessarily make it any better" (fieldnotes: Sam 09.03.18). When asked if motivation makes a difference, Sam suggested that as there had been a relationship breakdown there "were grounds for hurt", suggesting that yes, motivation was a differential factor for her.

Sam emphasised what she perceived as the unreality of the scene (represented through the obvious fakeness of the blood, the use of a "cupid's arrow" representing romantic obsession instead of the violence of a knife, and the absence of visible violence), as casting doubt on violence being the intended message. Sam believed the male lead had no intentions of hurt towards the woman and was 'artistically' representing his own hurt and depth of feelings, his "vulnerability" which is symbolic of a contemporary high-cultural status masculinity and reflects an emotional double standard as discussed. For Sam, the male lead had obsessive feelings towards a woman that he was unable to communicate in words, or which she was unwilling to listen to, so "he has to take action in his own hands". Sam called on existing knowledge of the singer to deepen her reading, telling me about his career move from YouTuber to singer/songwriter and suggested that if this relationship breakdown had occurred at that difficult time for him it would have compounded his feelings of hurt and loss of control, implying the song and video were drawn from his life experiences, and offering a justification for his actions in the video.

Sam balanced the violence in the video with her own concerns about violence against women by conceptualising it as 'artistic representation' (a conceptual device also used by Carla to allow her to engage with music and videos which were oppositional to her feminist values), saying if she thought it was really about violence against women she would not watch it. The cultural dissonance revealed in the complexity and contradictions of Sam's interpretation of the violence stem from her sympathy for and personal feelings about the male lead. Sam was a fan of JoJi, liked him and the song, and by appropriating this 'artistic interpretation' discourse allowed herself to positively engage with the video and simultaneously conceptualise him as displaying an emotional high-cultural status vulnerable masculine identity (I discuss audience relationship to musicians in the next section). When questioned about the normalcy of male violence in music videos, Sam called it "dangerous" saying "it reflects how we know relationships are", thereby

recognising violence as a trope of music videos *and* reflective of her social reality. By conceptualising violence as simultaneously dangerous and artistic dependent on its semiotic composition, Sam (and Carla as I discuss shortly) demonstrated how discourses of 'art' have the potential to depoliticise acts of violence. This has significant implications for high-status music videos and musicians as I discuss in the next section.

Also significant in Sam's reading is her familiarity with representations of male violence against women. In the viewings I undertook for this research, explicit visual representations of male violence against women were less frequent than those of female violence against men. This is perhaps because of the negative reaction male violence generated, as outlined above. Male violence was, however, frequently referenced through subtle and symbolic visual cues, for example weaponry, displays of physical bodily strength and dominance, ownership and control of space, shouting and aggressive behaviours, or, as Sam put it "using their masculinity" (fieldnotes: Sam 17.07.18).

Male violence against women was frequently discussed in terms that made it seem mundane, for example "This image of a woman being pushed to the floor or something is nothing new" (fieldnotes: Carla 16.04.18) reflecting Millett's (1977: 44 - 45) assertion that violence against women is met with a "curiously ambivalent" emotional response in patriarchy. For Sam and Indy, it was met with a weary sense of resignation and an acknowledgment that physical violence was a reality in heterosexual relationships. Claims from female participants that male violence was a fact of life were almost always followed up with a reluctance to blame men and assertions that 'not all men are like that', and/or justified with claims that women were at least as bad as men (at committing violence), if not worse, as exemplified in the following extract:

> Indy expressed a sense of resignation to the reality of violence in relationships saying "arguments sometimes get physical" but seemed reluctant to blame men, following up

> this statement with "it's both sides, it's not just one person beating the other, and more often than not it's the girl that starts it so... yeah... like in the video she hit him" (fieldnotes: Indy 20.03.18).

Patricia Hill Collins (1991) outlines black women's complex history of 'love and trouble', antagonised and exasperated through Eurocentric gender ideology. Hill Collins gives historical context to the evolution of black sexual politics which she argues places black women who are subject to domestic violence and abuse into a position where they must choose between a race-based 'unity' (defending/supporting black men ahead of themselves) or risk becoming a 'race traitor' by foregrounding their gendered position. It is possible that in recognising but refusing to blame men for their violence, Sam and Indy were living out this tradition.

There were clear intersections of race and class in the way male violence was interpreted; I have already shown how Carla linked violence with 'lower class' and 'non-white' social groups, and that music video representations of male violence were almost exclusively attributed to Rap and Hip-Hop, which indexes black culture. No participants showed any recognition of the deep-seated and explicit violence towards women expressed in rock, metal, punk, pop and other genres (Brownmiller, 1975; Andsager and Roe, 2003; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Council on Communications and Media, 2009; Coyne and Padilla-Walker, 2015).

Eminem: Stan (2000) was singularly cited as an example of explicit male violence in a music video. One of the most successful and critically acclaimed rappers of all time, *Eminem* is simultaneously known for his deeply misogynistic lyrics which frequently reference his tumultuous and abusive relationship with his ex-wife. In her analysis of *Eminem* as part of her reading of *River* (which featured explicit male physical violence and emotional abuse against a woman), Carla (fieldnotes: 16.04.18) did not acknowledge this side of his persona saying she didn't know much about his private life but based on YouTube interviews and behind the scenes footage she has seen with

him in, she conceives of him as something of a gentle intellectual. Carla talked about his talent, proficiency, perfectionism and multi-layered persona which she interpreted as representing his staged (aggressive and angry) and private (smart and "pretty nice guy") identities. That *Eminem* is white gives him the privilege of being able to occupy these two opposing identities simultaneously; to be able to act violently and aggressively and have this conceived of as an 'act' performed to conform to the tropes of a musical genre rather than characteristics attributed to his race (McIntosh, 1998). Carla's differentiation between acceptable and non-acceptable male violence was deeply rooted in her belief in artistic freedom, as she explained when I asked how her feminist beliefs influenced her musical choices:

> [Carla] says she knows it is a bit hypocritical but there are levels, for example she talks about Chris Brown's violence against Rihanna, saying she won't listen to him because he's actually done violence, whereas if someone just sings about it, it's a different level, it's a form of art, of expression, against reality, and there is a line, that's where she draws the line, making music is creating a piece of art versus doing something in reality (fieldnotes: Carla 11.04.18)

Carla here explains the complicated way she differentiates male violence as 'real' (e.g. Chris Brown) or 'artistic' and how this distinction dictates whether she feels able to accommodate it within her musical taste. The cultural dissonance in Carla's reasoning is evident when we consider her relationship to Eminem and German rap band Trailerpark. Carla (fieldnotes: 30.07.18) told me Trailerpark hired women to perform sex acts with audience members on stage at their live concerts, which along with other actions she found problematic, was something she found so shocking in its symbolic meaning (violence) she said would not attend their live music events. In this example Trailerpark can be argued to have crossed Carla's line of blurring art with reality, as can Eminem through his well-documented marriage, yet both were integral to her musical taste

demonstrating the complexity for her of distinguishing between acceptable and not acceptable violence and making clear the existence of another determining factor.

It is perhaps important that race, ethnicity and class were significant differentiating categories for Carla used repeatedly in interpretations throughout the time I knew her to explain difference. Chris Brown is a black American mainstream rapper. Eminem and Trailerpark (which features one of her favourite musicians 'Alligatoah') are both white, one American and one German (as is Carla), and are perceived by Carla to have high cultural value through what she perceives as intellectual and 'smart' lyrics. It is perhaps this cultural value that occludes their connections to 'real' violence and allows Carla to continue to enjoy them.

These examples demonstrate how representations of violence in music videos were appropriated as part of a generational identity and conferred differential interpretations of intent and meaning based on their intersections with gender, class and race. For example, representations of female violence underscored the vulnerability of women by semiotically referencing dominant male physical strength which (re)asserts unequal gender relations. These notions of gender rely on biological arguments of natural sexual differences and emphasise force as an "ever-present instrument of intimidation" in patriarchal society, reiterating that we do not need to see male physical power to understand its effect (Millett, 1977: 43). Male violence is rationalised through discourses of 'art' and 'artistic integrity' attached to individual musicians facilitating a cultural dissonance that allows engagement with it without disrupting one's social identity e.g. feminist. The common-sense acceptance of the inevitability of male violence and futility of female resistance underscores the power of discourses of natural and biological gender order and raises serious questions for contemporary sexual politics (Scully, 1990: 49 - 50).

Discourses of natural difference have become integrated into a postfeminist sensibility which works to "(re-)eroticise power relations between men and women …[freezing] in place existing

inequalities by representing them as inevitable" (Gill, 2007c: 159). I argue postfeminist media culture supports a 'conducive context' for a 'grey area' of sexual interaction characterised by representations of sex and relationships that have less to do with female sexual agency than male entitlement (Coy and Garner, 2012).

Burkett and Hamilton (2012) argue sexual choices are represented as unproblematic and 'freely chosen', framed in discourses of empowerment and agency in the postfeminist sensibility. I argue with Gill (2012a) that the postfeminist sensibility of female sexual agency has become a requirement which simultaneously empowers, depoliticises and isolates women. Women are 'empowered' to eschew the old codes and adopt an active and visual sexuality, epitomised in the postfeminist sexual subject, but in return, adopt a burden of personal responsibility that leaves no recourse to social, institutional, political or personal forces (Gill, 2017).

It has alternately been argued that this new sexual freedom is liberating for female sexual agency, for example that advances in digital media have produced 'altporn' and diverse spaces for female sexual expression (Attwood, 2011). I argue these spaces and the alternative pornosphere remain a niche part of the online world that have not challenged the dominant sphere which is enduringly characterised by representations of sex, sexuality and women that discriminate based on sexuality, gender, race and class as evidenced above and in Alex and Chris' experiences of pornography. I argue the notions of gendered power exposed in representations of violence, scripted in hegemonic heterosexuality outlined above, are grounded in biological claims to a 'natural order' that prioritises, reinforces and maintains male dominance. This power relationship is central to social interaction and the very fabric of social life and frames expectations and beliefs for all areas of social and sexual life (Scully, 1990; Jackson, 1999).

This section has set out the features and role of violence in scripts of heterosexuality in music videos. It has identified and discussed the implications of this as the enduring (re)assertion of

arguments of natural biological difference between women and men and demonstrated the way sex and violence are linked in the heterosexual sexual script at multiple levels and read as common-sense. I have highlighted the way that representations of assertive female sexuality have been re-signified to mean sexually desirable to men and expressions of female violence are used to underscore male physical dominance. I have demonstrated how these scripts are internalised as part of heteronormative discourses of sexuality that form the basis of sexual identities and sexual politics, reinforcing dominant and discriminatory ideas of gender and sexuality. The following section examines the most significant ways these scripts were communicated to maintain hegemonic notions of sex and gender.

7.3 The production and consumption of scripts

Chapter five detailed how music videos found a space of resonance with my participants through generation, taste based cultural signifiers and emphasising difference. Chapter six demonstrated how music videos signified appropriate and inappropriate sexualities and sexual identities through raced and classed discourses of art and how music videos interact with social media to (re)enforce dominant definitions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. In the introduction to this chapter I detailed Plummer's (1995) argument that sex has become so meaningful that sexual stories are used to construct people's social-biographical identities; that without a sexual story, one's biography is incomplete. In the preceding sections I revealed how these sexual stories as cultural scripts (Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Gagnon, 1990) in music videos have been consumed (interpreted) by my participants.

Here I address the relationship between the production and consumption of these scripts, detailing how sexual scripts are semiotically referenced and represented in music videos using a range of devices that influence their ability to communicate a valid and reliable 'truth'. I first address semiotic representations of sex, relationships and violence reflecting the emergent scripts

in my data, and secondly the significance of musicians for communicating 'truth', illuminating the dynamic relationship music videos share with social media.

This is important to study because it extends our understanding of the processes involved in the telling and consuming of sexual stories. Music videos blur the line between fantasy and reality conferring a high truth-value which means they may be read as authentic, achievable or desirable dependent on the values and beliefs (or taste) of the audience (Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996). By including signs that generate a space of recognition in the audience, for example generation as extensively demonstrated, music videos have the potential to represent valid and reliable versions of truth, a consequence that extends to their scripts and has the potential to become integrated into the audience's historical body of gender and sexuality as internalised discourses, or common-sense (Hall, 1998; Chandler, 2002; van Leeuwen, 2005).

The transmission of hegemonic sexual scripts in music videos may be understood as one of cultural struggle (Hall, 1998) or of discourse becoming internalised as practice (Scollon and Wong Scollon, 2004). This process is evident in my participants' readings, in their feelings of resonance, belief in the authenticity of what they were watching, and the role music videos and social media played in their day-to-day lives. Culture is paramount in interpretation; taste, culture or historical body frames interpretations and determines what is accepted and what is rejected.

As outlined above and in earlier chapters, visual techniques, devices and imagery function semiotically to signify high or low reality in participant readings. Generation, referenced variously including by representations of violence and culture specific signifiers e.g. genre, all influenced the modal value, that is the credibility, of music videos. Representations of sex, relationships and violence were consistently thought of as authentic and 'real' by my participants, regardless of genre. An artistically inauthentic representation, for example the blood and weaponry in *JoJi: Will He,* signified low reality but retained high cultural status. This was in opposition to commercially

driven products which had low cultural status but the potential to be interpreted as believable and authentic when their representations intersected with corresponding internalised discourses of class, race and sexuality as low brow, for example in representations of an overt and crass sexuality in poor and/or black women .

It is important to recognise that it is the *thematic representation* (cultural scripts) and not the *specific* representation that was thought reflective of reality. In this way, the sexual scripts in music videos were conceived of as representing an intensified but authentic version of reality, as typified in the following comments:

> [Carla] says she thinks there are relationships where this happens, you might have a relationship which focuses a lot on sex and then aggression […] this is an extreme case, but the underlying theme is not completely unusual (fieldnotes: Carla 16.04.18)

> I ask Sam if she thinks there is any relationship between the representations shown in music videos and real life. She thinks and says "Yes, not clip by clip, but the premise of videos, you can only really draw on real life experience". She says she has never watched a video and thought 'I do not possibly know where this person got that idea from' (fieldnotes: Sam 17.07.18)

This finding is evidenced in the parallels my participants repeatedly drew between their own life stories and those in music videos to illustrate their readings and interpretations and contributes to academic knowledge on how sexual scripts are learnt and internalised. It is complexified in consideration of *how* my participants appropriated music videos.

Contrary to the versions of themselves my participants portrayed in our early sessions, my in-depth approach revealed them to pay inconsistent attention to music videos, drawing on top level signification and not watching in detail, frequently not watching the videos in full. They regularly watched while undertaking other actions, for example using social media, completing household

chores or working. The implication of this for their readings offers a new dimension through which to understand how meaning was communicated; signification was happening at a deep level that preceded the act of watching the music video, it emanated from a complex and dynamic process of intertextuality and interdiscursivity with other media and internalised discourses.

This finding speaks to the limitations of audience studies outlined in chapter three and the importance of audience-analysis for understanding meaning making addressed by my methodological approach. Only through extended contact with the audience are patterns of appropriation and their significance for interpretation revealed, highlighting the difference between a deeper researcher-led analysis and surface-level audience reading. This supports my argument that taste culture significantly shapes and influences the interpretive process.

The high modality, or truth value, achieved by music videos detailed above raises questions for contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics when considered in relation to the surface level readings of my participants. That my participants believed the scripts in music videos, which I have shown to be deeply enmeshed with scripts related to (sexual) violence against women, were reflective of sex and relationships in their social worlds is evident. Music videos are significant carriers of cultural meaning. Sexual stories are the currency of music videos and power sits with those who tell the stories (Hall, 1998; Bowman, 2014). Recognising one's sexual story or subjectivity represented and legitimated in such a high-status format is an exercise in power (Plummer, 1995; Bowman, 2014). By operating at this level music videos are implicated in the shaping of sexual politics by (re)producing and legitimising dominant descriptions of sexual interactions.

> visual media is steeped in power relations…power that cajoles and coerces us to identify with this and to disidentify with that, and to "perform" ourselves according to the dictates of dominant cultural discourses about gender and ethnicity (Bowman, 2014: 171)

This thesis depicts the beliefs, attitudes, opinions and experiences of young adults operating in the contemporary sexual landscape which is characterised by a predominance of interest in questions of sex and power. My findings suggest music videos, which I have demonstrated to be a highly influential form of popular culture, are reproducing sexual scripts that legitimise and maintain power relations based on heteronormative discourses of male sexual dominance and female submission and discriminate based on race, class and sexuality.

I argue a substantial part of the reason music videos from within one's taste culture represented such an authentic version of truth for my participants was because they were conceived of as 'art', with all the connotations identified and discussed, and that this categorisation resulted directly from their relationship to the artist. Musicians occupy a privileged space in their ability to 'speak' to and communicate with audiences in a distinctively personal and emotive way, penetrating the audience's consciousness through repetition strengthening associations (Lull, 1987: 14). They epitomise Plummer's (1995) 'socially organised biographical objects', discussed above, by signifying cultural success through wealth, attractiveness and fashionable sexual stories, embodying contemporary neoliberal aspirational ideals (Mendick et al., 2019).

Musicians' symbolic power takes on a new dynamic in the visual dimension of music videos which are repeatedly called to mind when the song is received aurally, and even sometimes when it is not (Lull, 1987). My participants believed watching music videos gave them an unparalleled insight into their favoured artists' intellectual, emotional and creative selves, thereby facilitating a singular 'authentic' connection to them. I empirically evidence this point below, strengthening my

argument that social media has highly significant implications in informing contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics (Jhally, 2007; Durham, 2012).

Participants' feelings about musicians were highly significant in their interpretations of their actions, as demonstrated with Sam and *Joji*, Carla and *Eminem*, Chris and *Oasis,* and Alex and *Father John Misty* and *Miley Cyrus*, suggesting meaning originated for them in the person, not the action. To understand how and where my participants got their information about musicians, I return to Alex and his statement that his generation goes to the internet first. This sentiment was reiterated universally by my participants who cited Google, Reddit and Twitter as among their primary sources of news and information[15]. All participants engaged with social media and had favourite platforms depending on what they wanted to access. Each platform was perceived to convey a different level of reality, or authenticity, which was reflected in how it was appropriated. For example, Twitter was widely regarded as the most reliable and Instagram as the least. Nevertheless, even Instagram was cited as a source of insight into the lives, personalities, and characters of musicians. Sam offered an insightful explanation of this paradox in her justification of 'catfishing' (what she described as creating an alternate online persona), saying "Creating an alternate reality for yourself still shows who the person wants to be, so it is a reality in a sense" (fieldnotes: Sam 30.01.18). This finding supports empirical academic research that argues social media has changed the way people relate to celebrities and that celebrities actively use social media to create and manage a "sense of intimacy and closeness between participant and follower" by strategically revealing apparently 'personal' information (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Kerrigan and Hart, 2016: 1714).

[15] Other media mentioned in interpretations, including sitcoms, films and TV shows, also functioned interdiscursively to add depth of meaning to discourses referenced in music videos, for example, semiotically referencing the 1990s through clothing carried a wealth of symbolic meaning on cultural values that was immediately understood.

Participants engaged with musicians on social media including through ‘personal’ posts, behind the scenes music video production footage, and publicity material e.g. tour date announcements. What was noteworthy to my participants was the authenticity, or lack thereof, of the posts. Those they thought were from the PR team or management lacked authenticity, those they thought were personally crafted were most authentic, and a third category of those they thought were professionally generated but which did not ‘filter’ reality and therefore still gave insight into the life of the artist sat somewhere in the middle. The more ‘authentic’ the content was thought to be, the more value was accorded to the artist and the text. The more insight into the artist’s creative process and life my participants’ felt they had, the more ‘accessible’ the artist was thought to be, and this dynamic was self-reinforcing; the more accessible someone was, the more authentic their content was thought to be. That my participants believed they could distinguish between personal and professional social media posts and placed a value on that distinction which significantly influenced its credibility and believed ‘truth-value’ is important for understanding their relationship to social media, musicians and music videos.

Music videos circulate on social media, on YouTube and Twitter for example, and a central theme of the comments accompanying them is trying to identify the meaning of the lyrics and or video. All my participants believed their preferred musicians wrote their own music and, if relevant, played instruments too. This belief sometimes came from reading about the musician(s), engaging with their online activity or watching or reading interviews with them. However, it was often revealed as assumed. Writing lyrics and music conferred a high-cultural status and authenticity to an artist, their music and significantly their videos, which my participants believed shed light on the creative process and sensibilities of the musician, increasing its credibility.

This is significant when we consider that high modality representations, i.e., those understood as credible and communicating a more reliable truth, are likely to be interpreted as more ‘real’

(Ravelli and van Leeuwen, 2018) and the frequency of sex and relationships as a theme in songs and/or videos. Social media shapes the identities of musicians who signify meaningful connotations in a process of semiosis, intertextually and interdiscursively, through their music videos. The sexual stories within those videos function as scripts which are "integrated into larger social scripts and social arrangements where meaning and sexual behaviour come together to create sexual conduct" (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 5). In this theorisation I argue musicians communicate dominant discourses of sex and relationships through music videos that inform notions of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. High-cultural status musicians have the potential to communicate sexual scripts interpreted as both high-cultural status and 'authentic'; the relationship between audience and musician increases the modal value of the text.

Musicians within one's taste culture were culturally significant and high-status, readily accessible on social media and richly coded, semiotically signifying notions of (un)acceptable sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. I argue their unparalleled ability to 'speak to' audiences on a personal and emotional level, invoking deep-seated emotional responses as demonstrated throughout this thesis, meant they functioned as a 'hegemonic elite'. In their unique way, musicians create a space of emotional resonance fundamental to the communication of hegemonic sexual scripts (Bocock, 1986), exerting cultural power (Hall, 1998) leading to the successful internalisation of dominant discourses (scripts) of gender and sexuality. By revealing how sexual meaning comes from identity rather than actions, reflecting the underpinning principles of sexual scripting theory, I have illuminated the relationship between representation and reality that informs sexual politics.

The semiotic potential of musicians, then, increases the likelihood of a representation to "find or clear a space of recognition" when aligned to their taste culture, which as I have demonstrated is coded to age, class and race (Hall, 1998: 447). As indicated, musicians' impact on the ability of

music videos to communicate a reliable or authentic truth presents significant implications in consideration of how sexual stories are produced and consumed in popular culture and reinforces the need for their inclusion in analyses of music videos.

Patterns of appropriation are also significant in consideration of how readings can be applied theoretically. That my participants read music videos in ways that produced top-line readings with little depth or nuanced appreciation of the processes of signification taking place within them means typically interpretations were informed by dominant definition(s). Therefore, their readings provide valid and credible evidence of the audience's interpretive process and bring new insight to the complexities and contradictions in contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. Further, their readings and the understandings informing them contrast with researcher- analyses, for example my own, that would interrogate denotation and processes of production and as such would not shed light on cultural meaning making for the intended audience. In this way my methodological approach speaks to existing research into cultural meaning making and audience studies.

That scripts of sex, relationships and violence in music videos were interpreted as authentic and credible is important for contemporary sexual politics, as discussed earlier in this chapter. My symbolic interactionist approach holds that meaning arises through (social) interaction (Blumer, 1969). From this theoretical position the significance of my participants' interpretations of representations of sex, relationships and violence in music videos as evidenced in this thesis is highly significant. The scripts of sexual attraction, sexual interaction and heterosexual relationships that emerged in my data encompassing the 'men behave badly' and 'women forgive' scripts' highlight the discriminatory patriarchal heteronormative bases on which they rest.

In this section I have set out the terms in which sexual scripts were understood as reflecting reality, drawing out the relationship between production and consumption which strengthens the

meaning and truth value they hold for their audience. I have demonstrated the significance of social media and the role of the musician in adding to this and argued that scripts of hegemonic heterosexuality are enduringly coded in ways that discriminate on gender, sexuality, race and class, and that social media strengthens their modal value. In this theorisation I have contributed to academic understandings of how sexual meaning is made and experienced and the relationship between representation and reality. I have also set out the terms in which my methodology enhances and builds on existing empirical and purely theoretical research into studies of sexuality, subjectivity and culture.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter builds on and develops my argument that enduring discourses of biological natural difference underpin notions of gender and sexuality: in the ineffectual use of female to male violence contrasted with the unquestionable efficacy of male violence; in the male sexual drive and female sexual submission scripts which characterise sexual interaction; in the sexual double standard that celebrates men for a sexual prowess that it shames and condemns women for; in the 'men behaving badly' and 'women forgive' scripts that underpin scripts of heterosexual relationships. I have empirically demonstrated cultural domination by illuminating how discourses of female sexuality are semiotically referenced through neoliberal and postfeminist notions of biological sexual difference to legitimise and maintain a gender hierarchy that enduringly (re)frames (hetero)sexual interactions grounded in male violence towards women as normalised, romanticised and depoliticised, reinforcing the 'natural order'. I argue that through their continued acceptance and reassertion by members of society as common-sense, these discourses of (hetero)sexuality contribute to the maintenance of an unequal and discriminatory sexual politics (Fine, 1990: 130).

This chapter demonstrates how the interpretation of sexual scripts is informed intertextually and interdiscursively in a dynamic process with social media. In this chapter I have argued the sexual scripts in music videos possess a modal value other mainstream media do not and are therefore all the more potent; I have highlighted how music videos and musicians signify an authenticity that means they are interpreted as reflective of social life and thereby find a place of resonance in the audience and demonstrated how these scripts reinforce and maintain a hegemonic heterosexuality that neutralises resistance and ensures the sexual status quo endures through re-signification. This insight extends academic understandings of the process by which scripts are learnt and reinforced, the relationship between representation and reality, and enhances our knowledge on the limitations of the postfeminist female sexual subject's sexuality and sexual agency.

Sexual scripts communicate power. In this chapter I have demonstrated the patriarchal heteronormative foundations of sexual scripts in music video representations and set out how social media interacts with the interpretive process, highlighting their power as dominant discourses in popular culture. I have demonstrated the potential music videos have for being accepted as authentic and valid versions of truth. I have shown the hollowness of contemporary 'alternative' notions of female sexuality and gender, drawing parallels between contemporary sexual scripts and academic work that argues they resonate with scripts of coercive and pressurised sex. Locating my findings in the context of public discourses of sexual harassment, for example the Everyday Sexism Project and #MeToo Movement, highlights the power popular culture has to neutralise resistance by appropriating and re-signifying representations to maintain hegemonic definitions.

I do not claim music videos make sexual violence happen, but suggest they contribute to a 'conducive context' for a sexual politics that facilitates a 'grey area' of sexual practice. I argue this

happens through the prioritisation of male (sexual) dominance and enduring linking of female submission with notions of an appropriate femininity and female sexuality. Further, that this dominant description negates the potential for a female sexuality that is emancipated from the male sexual dreamworld.

This chapter moves on from the binary dualisms of the feminist 'sex wars' of the second wave and more contemporary debates on the sexualisation of culture in a critical and productive way to offer new insights that allow for a revitalisation of work in the field of female sexuality by problematising representations of sex and relationships in music videos. I argue discourses of a liberal contemporary sexual politics that challenge the dominant order are hollow, that the sexual scripts underpinning contemporary manifestations of hegemonic heterosexuality in postfeminist media have not changed in any significant way since they were criticised by second wave feminists and endure to discriminate on the basis of gender, sexuality, race and class.

Chapter 8:
Conclusion

Throughout the fieldwork and analytic process, I thought repeatedly of the children's fairy tale 'The Emperor's New Clothes'. This fairy tale tells the story of an Emperor who pays a vast amount of money for a fine suit he is told only clever people can see but which does not exist. The Emperor, his court and the people all go along with the pretence for fear of being thought stupid. While parading the streets one day in his new fine suit a young child calls out 'The Emperor is naked!' and he and everyone else realises they have been fooled. This 19th century tale exposes the cultural dissonance required of the Emperor, his court and his people who all go along with the pretence of the 'fine clothes' to fit in, to be successful in their social and professional lives, and to locate themselves as knowing subjects. It resonated deeply with me as my participants revealed examples of cultural dissonance in their navigation of contemporary notions of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics.

This thesis has uncovered the complexities and contradictions involved in navigating contemporary understandings of sex and relationships through an innovative in-depth empirical approach which uniquely engaged with the complex process of constructing identity and notions of self. Explicitly, it has identified and interrogated how my young adult participants understood themselves as a distinct and distinctive generation and unpacked how this understanding informed their interpretations of representations of sexuality, sex and relationships in music videos. By locating these understandings in the academic literature on sexual scripts, female sexuality and sexualised postfeminist media culture, I theorised how they relate to contemporary debates on female sexual agency and understandings of sexual violence against women as a

manifestation of sexism in social life (Bart, 1979), highlighting the very real implications of gendered inequality in heterosexuality.

In this final chapter I consolidate my findings, drawing out the conclusions this thesis makes to academic knowledge, highlight how my research has enhanced existing research paradigms, and importantly, identify its broader implications.

8.1 Addressing the research questions

I began this thesis with an anecdote from my life that identified its central concern as the enduring gendered inequality of heterosexuality. In that anecdote I outlined my own and a participant's youthful resignation to 'unsatisfactory' romantic relationships and their normalisation in music videos. Locating the phenomenon of 'unsatisfactory' heterosexual relationships in the power imbalance integral to hegemonic heterosexuality, this thesis has demonstrated with real-life examples that common-sense notions of heterosexual relationships, mediated through a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017) in music videos, maintain and reinforce sexual scripts that are grounded in essentialist discourses of natural biological difference that sustain male dominance and female submission (Millett, 1977; Scully, 1990; Jackson, 1999; Gill, 2007c; Burkett and Hamilton, 2012).

I also stated in the introduction that this thesis grew out of my own anger and frustration at the double entanglement of postfeminism (McRobbie, 2004). Through the multiple examples of hegemony in action, of resistance being incorporated into postfeminist neoliberal ideals of consumption and individualism illuminated in this thesis, I have demonstrated the enduring applicability and power of McRobbie's (2004) double entanglement. Further, I have shed new light on how a postfeminist sensibility (Gill, 2007c; Gill, 2017) functions to limit and situate sexual identities, illuminating this contemporary paradox through my novel methodological and analytical approach.

The introduction chapter detailed the aims, frames and objectives of this research. In short, the aims were to identify, interrogate and consider the intersectional implications of contemporary sexual scripts within hegemonic heterosexuality through audience readings of music videos, considering the role of social media in that process. From this foundation my research questions identified the specific empirical territory my research would cover. Below I address how each research question has been answered in turn:

1) **What happens when audiences interact with representations of sex and relationships in music videos?**

My participants drew on personal experience and pre-existing beliefs about sex and relationships to inform their interpretations. Adopting an MDA analytical lens allowed me to engage in-depth with the historical body of those experiences and beliefs to understand where and how they originated, what shaped them, what their edges were and how they fitted in with my participants' lives at that time. I found that heteronormative concepts circulating on social media acted to mediate the ability of music video representations to resonate with lived experiences. This was exemplified through my participants' interpretations of female sexuality which altered depending on their site of engagement. Embodying McRobbie's (2009: 12) 'double entanglement' of neo-conservative values with processes of liberalisation, music videos (re)presented liberal sexual relations while my participants' lived experiences were governed by more conservative values. Social media worked dynamically to continuously (re)construct notions of (un)acceptable sex, gender, sexuality and sexual identity through representation and dialogue. The (re)presentation of a liberal (postfeminist) female sexuality in music videos was interpreted positively as reflective of a shift in sexual attitudes yet took on negative connotations when observed in social life. This finding parallels McRobbie's (2009) argument that the double entanglement of postfeminism has

'undone' feminism and underpins my argument that female sexuality is at once accommodated and repudiated, being available *in exchange* for a respectable femininity (Skeggs, 2002; Gill and Donaghue, 2013).

By empirically evidencing the ways my participants constructed their own and others' gendered and sexual identities, this thesis demonstrates how their appropriation and interpretation of music videos was mediated by social media discourse, highlighting moments of dissonance and evidencing how this was socially and cognitively managed. Through my analysis of their incongruous assertions and actions, revealed over time, I exposed gaps in the ability of the 'alternative' discursive identity, closely associated with their generational identity, to challenge dominant definitions of sexuality and gender and reach beyond the symbolic to produce genuine resistance in the dialectic of cultural struggle (Hall, 1998).

2) How does social media interact with the interpretive process?

Social media played a significant role in determining the truth-value, and consequently the status, of music videos and their meaning for my participants. This emerged in two distinct but connected ways. Firstly, my participants asserted social media was integral to their generation and it was universally considered *the* defining and distinctive characteristic, setting them apart from all previous generations. Social media operated as a site of engagement where notions of (un)acceptable sex, gender and sexuality were continuously re-worked and re-constructed in dynamic dialogue with the norms and expectations of the dominant culture (Jones, 2005). Resultingly, social media offered a space for high-level discourses to circulate (for example, 'go shoot your shot', gender and sexual fluidity, alternative masculinities) while simultaneously determining the potential to experience these discourses as lived identities.

By offering access to musicians in an unparalleled way, social media affected the truth-value, cultural status and credibility of music videos and consequently their scripts. Those musicians

whose online personas were read as 'authentic' and communicated their creative and intellectual processes were accorded higher cultural status, as were those who were believed to 'create' the music. In contributing to the creation of an authentic truth-value for musicians, social media was significantly implicated in the ability of music videos to communicate sexual stories (scripts) that were accepted as truthful and authentic and carried high cultural status (Plummer, 1995; Kress and van Leeuwen, 1996; Hall, 1998; van Leeuwen, 2005; Bowman, 2014; Ravelli and van Leeuwen, 2018).

3) **How do audiences rationalise/integrate their readings with existing social and sexual schema?**

This thesis demonstrates that my participants' existing sexual scripts drew on discourses of natural biological difference and heteronormative definitions of sex and sexuality, for example identifying heterosexuality as 'normal', the women forgive script and male bad behaviour script. When they watched sex and relationships in music videos the scripts those videos contained resonated with and reinforced the dominant descriptions already held (Hall, 1998).

By locating desire as socially constructed (Millett, 1977; Gagnon and Simon, 1974; Gagnon, 1990; Plummer, 1995; Brickell, 2006) I assert representations must be grounded in social significance to resonate. That is, the people, motives and actions represented must be recognisable as erotic to the audience to activate a sexual response (Gagnon and Simon, 1974: 8). Music videos are culturally constructed, (re)present definitions from the dominant culture (Hall, 1998) and are significant in the telling of sexual scripts and stories to young adults (Lull, 1987; Plummer, 1995; Bretthauer, Schindler Zimmerman and Banning, 2007; Jhally, 2007). From this powerful social and cultural location, music videos found a space of recognition through cultural identification (social significance), for example generation, race and/or class, and had the cultural power to resonate deeply. My participants' interpretations of gendered and sexual scripts in music videos

were nuanced and (self-)reflective, as evidenced in the way they repeatedly drew on and made comparisons with their lived experience to justify their interpretations, illuminating the dynamic process between text and experience that is cultural meaning making.

Exemplifying the process of hegemonic cultural domination and revealing gaps in the 'alternative' generational identity, music video representations of female sexuality were interpreted positively as representing a distinctively contemporary active and desiring female sexual agency consistent with postfeminist discourses of choice, empowerment and individuality. Paradoxically this representation of female sexual agency signified a desperate, undesirable and ultimately unattractive femininity when located outside music videos as the site of engagement. In this cultural and conceptual framework resistance to hegemonic heteronormative notions of (hetero)sexuality (e.g. active and assertive female sexual agency) were neutralised and dominant definitions of acceptable and appropriate sexualit(ies) (e.g. female sexual modesty) were maintained.

4) What might the implications of this be for real-life sexual encounters?

By applying my findings to feminist theory and sexuality studies, I have drawn out the implications unequal gender relations in hegemonic heterosexuality may have for contemporary sexual politics highlighting the features and role of violence within its scripts and illuminating parallels with sexual violence against women. My theoretically informed analysis of the sexual scripts identified by my participants in music videos revealed the essentialist discourses of natural sexual difference that underpin them and their enduring resonance with a gender hierarchy that prioritises men and subordinates women (Jackson, 1999). Heterosexuality's hegemonic dominance means this finding effects gender interactions regardless of sexual orientation.

By locating the sexual scripts in music videos in this theoretical framework (for example the token resistance script and pornographic happy ending trope) and underscoring the semiotic

referencing of male violence, this thesis empirically identifies how postfeminist media culture contributes to and maintains essentialising notions of natural biological difference between women and men (Gill, 2007c). Applying this argument to the literature on female sexual agency I have empirically demonstrated how contemporary sexual scripts limit and determine notions of (un)acceptable female sexuality and sexual identity.

Intersectionality

Making space for and interrogating my participants' individual intersectional dimensions as emerged in the fieldwork was a central concern of this thesis. I addressed this methodologically through a rigorous and in-depth engagement with the lived experiences of my participants that minimised barriers to disclosure (for example embarrassment or fear of judgement) and created the space for complex subject positions to emerge. Analytically, my intercultural MDA perspective allowed space for individual notions of gender, race, class and sexuality to emerge as significant in informing understandings of (in)appropriate sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. Employing an intersectional lens revealed the limitations of generation to function as a meaningful identity position, highlighted the enduring discriminatory foundations of hegemonic heterosexuality, and demonstrated how practices of re-signification work to continually re-assert cultural dominance, marginalising and 'othering' subordinate identities.

My intersectional and intercultural perspective removed barriers on my findings and allowed the significant social and personal discriminatory dimensions in my data (race, class and sexuality) to emerge and shape my argument. This thesis avoids Bilge's (2013) ornamental intersectionality to extend understandings of complex cultural meaning making processes by shedding light on the intersecting axes of discrimination that informed my participants' understandings and experiences of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics, exemplified in their interpretations of female sexuality.

I have been rigorous in not speaking *for* my participants in this thesis, including extended excerpts to avoid speaking over them and locating their actions and words in theoretical frameworks and social structures. By respecting the diversity and integrity of my participants' voices I have empirically demonstrated the inextricable intersectional connectedness of race, gender and class to contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics.

8.2 Contributions

Rich (1980: 659 - 660) calls for the interrogation of heterosexuality, its politics, economics and cultural propaganda to reveal sexism and sexist exploitation. In this thesis I have empirically interrogated the sexual scripts in music videos as a tool of communicating dominant definitions of (hetero)sexuality and gender. I have demonstrated how an in-depth empirical engagement with the interpretive processes of young adults can enrich our understandings of contemporary notions of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics. In my interrogation of my participants' constructions of self and identity I drew from feminist theory, cultural studies and sexuality studies to argue that postfeminist media representations of sex and relationships enduringly discriminate based on class, race, gender and sexuality to maintain an unequal gender hierarchy that informs everyday gendered interactions.

My findings and argument contribute to and move forward academic work on the relationship between representation and reality, postfeminist media culture, female sexuality, the sexualisation of culture and gender politics. Additionally, my research offers a methodological contribution to audience studies, enhancing the empirical research paradigm with MDA. Below I set out my theoretical and methodological contributions individually, but first want to reiterate the paradigmatic context of this thesis to clarify the nature of the claims it makes.

As a piece of qualitative social science research this thesis is contextually specific and has been 'constructed' by me, the author (Stanley and Wise, 2002). However, this does not preclude it from making significant contributions to knowledge as a "structural analysis of power" (Kincaid, 1996; Sayer, 2000; Coy and Garner, 2012: 289; Archer et al., 2016). My (critical) realist ontological philosophy asserts that through my empirical observation of the (actual) interpretive process the emergent causal powers of hegemonic heterosexuality are visible. Further, that my explanation of this complex social phenomenon as I observed it in my fieldwork is valid and meaningful, derived as it is from the rigorous methodological and theoretical foundations outlined throughout this thesis (Archer et al., 2016). On these bases, while I acknowledge that any knowledge can only ever be partial at best (Wolcott, 1999), this thesis makes the following original claims to knowledge:

Theoretical

1. Through my unique and innovative analytical lens, I have drawn out the interplay between representation and reality demonstrating the significant role representations of gender and sexuality play in informing contemporary understandings of sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics. This is exemplified in my finding that interpretations of female sexual agency shift depending on site of engagement and that sexual scripts enduringly demonstrate hegemonic heteronormative male dominance through essentialist discourses of biological sexual difference. These findings enhance understandings of the processes by which feminism continues to be 'undone' (McRobbie, 2009) and how popular culture (re)presentations of women, girls, men and boys reinforce male entitlement creating a 'conducive context' for men to abuse women and girls (Coy and Garner, 2012).

2. This thesis provides empirical evidence on the processes involved in the production of subjectivity. It extends knowledge on how sexuality, sexual identity and sexual politics are shaped and understood through an in-depth illumination of the meso-structural interpretive process. It does this by identifying and drawing out the turning points on which social and sexual scripts are accepted or rejected, enriching understandings and highlighting the role of class, race, gender and sexuality in (self and other) identity construction.
3. This thesis contributes to and moves forward academic debate on female sexual agency and female sexuality through its theorisation of them as mediated by site of engagement. My in-depth empirical interrogation of the cultural meaning attached to each provides evidence of their intersectional and complex patterns of signification, extending insight into the "systems of power" in which their negotiation takes place, and extending understandings of the relationship between representation and reality (Walby, 2011, in Coy and Garner, 2012: 294). By revealing the cultural dissonance involved in navigating representations of female sexuality, this thesis highlights the gaps in postfeminist discourses of liberal female sexual agency and reaffirms the dominance of hegemonic heteronormative heterosexuality and male dominance, moving forward debate on the sexualisation of culture from a sex-positive and anti-sexism position (Gill and Orgad, 2018).
4. This thesis provides insight into the complex and contradictory ways men read sexualised popular culture and construct masculinit(ies) contributing to understandings of contemporary masculinity. This thesis found that the contemporary alternative masculinity still requires men to conform to heterosexual tropes of masculinity, for example heterosexual desire, and that by creating a discursive 'alternative' masculinity, oppositional and resistant masculinities were accommodated and neutralised. This finding

was empirically evidenced in the re-signification of characteristics of 'traditional' masculinity in my male participants' 'alternative' masculine identities, embedded in neoliberal discourses of consumption and individualism. For example, the high-cultural status of beer drinking is accommodated in the alternative craft ale market, and male virility is accommodated in the beard.

5. This thesis provides new understanding of contemporary gender politics through its detailed and critical empirical examination of the interactive construction of gendered and sexual identities as 'alternative'. This discursive identity position was shown to emerge through engagement with neoliberal ideals of consumption, choice and empowerment and offered limited capacity for resistance, enhancing understandings of late modern identity construction (Bauman, 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Further, exposing the contradictions inherent in this identity position revealed its heteronormative foundations contributing to an enhanced insight into the ways heterosexuality intersects with gender through essentialist discourses of natural sexual difference to sustain a gender hierarchy with material consequences for sexual politics (Jackson, 1999; Brickell, 2006). This thesis contributes to media studies, feminist theory and sexuality studies in its exposition of hegemonic scripts in music videos, drawing attention to their sexist foundations and enhancing our understandings of their significance for sexual politics.
6. This thesis critically engages with and enhances the theoretical applicability of sexual scripting theory by meeting its lack of a concept for power with the Gramscian concept of hegemony. Hegemony's identification of power in culture winning 'hearts and minds' to influence (inter)action enhances scripting theory by providing a lens to understand how scripts are communicated and received and the power relations in that process. By demonstrating hegemony in action this thesis provides empirical evidence in support of Gill's (2017: 609) assertion that postfeminism has become so embedded in contemporary

life it is hegemonic and extends understandings of how hegemonic heterosexuality absorbs and neutralises resistance to maintain dominance.

Methodological

1. My original and innovative analytical framework offers a new and rigorous perspective for empirical analysis in audience studies and broader studies of subjectivity. Specifically:
    a. My intersectional perspective and intercultural MDA framework created space for contradictory and fragmented subjectivities to emerge. By recognising that people don't always (intentionally or otherwise) communicate fully or accurately through what they say, my novel approach included data from multiple sources surrounding the mediated social action of watching music videos.
    b. My MDA informed ethnographic method uncovered the complexities and contradictions in my participants' words and actions, extending evidence on the message and reception of sexualisation (Coy and Garner, 2012: 297). It also provides a practical methodological contribution to the field of audience reception studies by revealing patterns of appropriation and their significance, significant discourses informing interpretations, and instances of cultural dissonance.
2. By working exclusively with participant-identified texts and readings, this thesis offers an unparalleled insight into the interpretive process of contemporary young adults and speaks to the relevance of researcher-analyst readings for understanding the role of media texts in the creation of cultural meaning. Further study would reveal contradictions and correlations between participants' readings and academically informed readings to highlight the full significance of this finding but is outside the scope of this thesis.

3. By illuminating the complex role social media plays in the interpretive process and in cultural domination, this thesis enhances our understanding of digital and visual culture which is currently under researched and under theorised (Pauwels, 2010; Ravelli and van Leeuwen, 2018; Widdows, 2018). This thesis provides a novel methodological framework from which the intertextual and interdiscursive properties of social and digital media can be explored and their semiotic potential analysed.

8.3 Limitations and future research

The findings in this thesis are drawn from an in-depth qualitative engagement with six young adults in Birmingham, England, between January and October 2018. My participants occupied multiple social locations and varied intersectional characteristics, engaged with and were informed by the same cultural concepts and lived in the same socio-political environment. The scope of this research, as detailed, was determined largely by it being conducted by myself as a solo full-time PhD research student with the time and resource limitations that implies, for example the number of participants I was able to recruit and the amount of time I was able to spend with each of them. Through my innovative ethnographic methodological approach, I overcame inhibitions and insecurities and was able to probe into my participants' personal thoughts and lives, discussing sensitive topics and gaining an insight that would not have been possible with other methodological approaches.

A significant contribution of this thesis has been methodological, drawing out the importance of participant-identified textual analysis for inquiries into meaning making and the construction of subjectivities. This is an important area of inquiry and contributes to the development of existing research paradigms. The next step could be future research identifying differences in researcher-

analysis and participant-analysis of texts, and questioning the significance of this, to reveal further insights into the interpretive process and significance of conceptual tools in this process. Further research would also be helpful in determining whether the same conceptual tools and interpretive processes resonate in different locations, times and spaces.

This study was limited to analyses of music videos and addressed the significance of social media in the audiences' interpretations of them. Each of my participants referenced other media in our time together (for example adverts, public health announcement, films, and online news stories) highlighting the complex interdiscursive and intertextual dimensions of the contemporary media environment. My participants expressed a profound belief in the significance of their digitally mediated cultural environment, and this raises important questions for future research. It was outside the scope of this research to consider broader media references, or the implications of living in an environment that is so profoundly mediated by the cultural industries, but future research addressing the implications and significance of the deeply interwoven connections between contemporary media and cultural meanings for sex and relationships would address this gap in knowledge.

Several findings emerged in data that I was unable to address fully in this thesis, but which are important for future research. These were:

- **The role and significance of (internet) pornography for interpreting mainstream media.** This thesis focused on mainstream media products and did not address pornography. However, two participants felt strongly that there were significant connections and implications between the two media. More research is required to investigate this and uncover potential associations.

- **The significance and depth of intersections of race, sexuality, gender and class for notions of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics.** This research has illuminated the significance of these intersectional characteristics for determining notions of sexuality, sexual identities and sexual politics. Future research is required to better understand the implications of this.
- **'Feminist' disidentification.** My female participants had complex attitudes towards feminism, either rejecting it or modifying it to avoid perceived female-supremacist connotations. Future research would be interesting to investigate this phenomenon.
- **Emotional abuse obscuring physical and sexual abuse as the dominant form of abuse in romantic relationships.** My participants displayed a high level of awareness of what they believed to be a widespread and distinctly contemporary problem of emotional abuse in romantic heterosexual relationships. This finding was not explored in-depth, but its discussion suggested a high awareness of emotional abuse which simultaneously located physical and/or sexual abuse as outside the scope of concern and connected to previous generations. This finding throws up many questions which require further investigation.
- **Double emotional standard**. The common-sense belief that women are emotionally competent and literate, and men are not, that men face a social cost for expressing emotion and women do not, underpinned and supported the high-cultural status of male emotional 'vulnerability'. The cultural dissonance implicit in this double standard (ignoring the role 'emotionality' has played in subordinating and excluding women from public life and the gendered emotional binary that determines notions of (un)acceptable emotions for both genders)

would be worthwhile researching further to enhance our understanding of the social construction of gender.

8.4 Final thoughts and personal reflections

This thesis addresses personal relationships, the core of social existence. Creating it has been a challenging, stimulating and entirely absorbing process that has given me an increased insight into systematic social inequalities that have at times left me breathless, emotionally exhausted and demoralised. I began this thesis with an anecdote from my life and have remained in it throughout, as researcher but also as subject. As a woman producing feminist research I am inextricably located within the research as the 'underdog' (Kelly, 1988); when I write about the inequality of heterosexuality, I am not a disinterested party but a member of the subordinated group.

It is important to me that this work resonates with people's lived experiences because work on sexuality must relate to the material if we are to make sense of it and make it useful (Attwood, 2006). I have been comforted by reactions of resonance when I have discussed my work in public, in particular at the University of Birmingham Research Poster Conference (2018) with young adult students who expressed a profound identification with my then emerging findings.

Throughout the research process I continually asked myself, *what does this mean for the real world?* Throughout the thesis I have identified the implications of my findings for sexual politics and located them within the contemporary socio-political context which frames how this thesis will be interpreted. On a personal level, this research has generated a significant change in me. Gloria Steinem (2019) said, 'The truth will set you free, but first it will piss you off' and I find myself still pissed off as I conclude this thesis, perhaps more so than when I began. Kelly (1988) gives an insightful account of the impact researching sexual violence had on her personal wellbeing and I

empathise with this. This research evolved to address questions of inequality emerging from identities of gender, race, class and sexuality and my in-depth immersion in this spanning over four years has shifted my perception and understanding of the inequalities of social life. It has made me acutely alert to expressions of power and inequality and their omnipresence in daily life. Once alert to this, I could not switch it off and have taken it with me into every interaction, personal and professional. Simultaneously illuminating and casting shade, this altered perspective has brought a new dimension to my life that has not always been welcome(d).

Another personal challenge in this process has been confronting my own complicity with gender and hetero-patriarchal norms and the cultural dissonance of my own contradictory identity positions. I felt this most acutely when navigating my class position and anti-racist, anti-sexist, anti-homophobic identities, which were challenged and disrupted by my reading and participants. I came to realise that how I see myself is not necessarily how others see me, and that being 'anti-prejudice' isn't enough, that a more active and knowing position is needed to challenge inequality. In short, that I did not inhabit the progressive or resistant social identity I believed I did. I have learnt so much through this process, not only about my topic(s) and participants, but about myself, my assumptions, my naively held beliefs, biases, and (at times) delusional view of myself. My participants and supervisors repeatedly challenged me to question myself, to ask why I thought what I did, what beliefs underpinned my thoughts and assumptions. In revealing those assumptions, I began the process of uncovering my own 'common sense' beliefs and evolving a critical position. This experience was closely connected to my complex position as both insider (English citizen living in the same socio-political environment and geographical location) and outsider (age, class, race, sexuality, culture) in the research which resulted in challenges for me in observing what was at once mundane and commonplace, yet also alien and unfamiliar.

Returning to the question, *what does this mean for the real world?* I genuinely believe that the conversations and exchanges I had with my participants were transformative for some of them at least and came at a time when they were open to and welcoming of new ideas, of alternative ways of seeing the world. In exit interviews, several participants identified a changed, more critical, perception of social media, and said that taking part in this research had changed the way they interpreted music videos irreversibly. On this basis, this thesis has contributed to a positive social change for those participants in the tradition of feminist consciousness raising (DeVault, 1996).

It is in this spirit of contributing to positive social change that I conclude this thesis which has argued for a politics of resistance, of radical transformation. This research has uncovered and challenged dominant discourses and exposed the gendered inequality of hegemonic heterosexuality. In doing this it has not lost sight of the complex reality that is human sexual interaction or argued that all heterosexual relations(hips) are flawed. That the lived reality of human sexuality is messy, and makes it challenging to study, does not mean we should not attempt to make sense of it.

Appendix 1: Participant information

Alex

Alex is a 25-year-old cis-gendered white male. He shares a flat with a friend and works as a Communications Manager on a contract basis. Alex is heterosexual and recently broke up from an approx. 3 month relationship.

Alex is resistant to commit himself to a social class position but says lower-middle class, or precariat (living in uncertainty). He grew up in a privately-owned semi-detached house and went to a state school. Both his parents work or did before retirement. Alex considers his background 'normal' with regards material wealth. While Alex considers himself to be living precariously now, he thinks he may move a more traditional form of middle-class material security within the next few years.

Alex's family are Church of England but he now considers himself "more spiritual than religious" and has problems with some Church teachings in relation to gender and sexuality, finding them in conflict with his own "liberal views".

Alex is an active member of the Labour Party and is involved in various social action activities and groups. He likes people and things he considers alternative and associates with 'hipsters'.

Videos shared in the research: Kevin Morby – The Dead They Don't Come Back; Big Thief – Mythological Beauty; Robbie Williams – Rock DJ; Green Day – American Idiot; The Crookes – Backstreet Lovers; Dua Lipa – New Rules; Christine and the Queens – Tilted; Leonard Cohen – Hallelujah; Courtney Barnett & Kurt Vile – Over Everything; Otis Redding – Security; Conor Oberst – A Little Uncanny; Savage Garden – Truly Madly Deeply; Blossoms – I Can't Stand It; Sundara Karma – She Said; Father John Misty – Nancy From Now On; Bon Iver – Towers; Bon Iver – Holocene; Modest Mouse – Float On; Goldspot – Float On; Suede – Trash; Lil Dicky – Freaky Friday feat Chris Brown; Dua Lipa – IDGAF; Head over Heels – Donnie Darko Scene; Green Day – Wake Me Up When September Ends; blink-182 – Feeling This; Christina Aguilera – Can't Hold Us Down; Robin Thicke – Blurred Lines ft. T.I., Pharrell; Roll Deep – Green Light; Queen – I Want To Break Free; Miley Cyrus – Wrecking Ball; Eminem – Stan.

Carla

Carla is a 22-year-old white European cis-gendered heterosexual female. She is an international student. Carla lives in a flat with her boyfriend and has been in a monogamous relationship with him since she was 18 years old.

Carla is vegetarian and drinks alcohol but does not smoke or take any kind of drugs, nor has she ever. Carla identifies as middle-class and says this shapes her values which are founded on what she calls a 'classic' middle-class background, heterosexual, monogamous, small family size, which values education and employment. Carla expresses her professional white middle-class European culture in her appearance, manners, values, and speech.

Carla has lived abroad and travelled and has friends in countries around the world. She expresses what she considers alternative views on ecology, politics and social issues and says this may align her with a more hipster culture, although in ideas only, that her style is not 'hipster'. Carla's middle-class cultural environment plays a significant role in her values and differentiates her from other social class groups.

Videos shared in the research: Eminem – River ft. Ed Sheeran; Taylor Swift – Delicate; The Lumineers – Ophelia, Bastille – World Gone Mad; Alligatoah – Wilst Du; Die Fantastischen Vier – Zusammen feat Clueso; Alligatoah – Mien Gott hat den Längsten; Bebe Rexha – Meant to Be feat. Florida Georgia Line; Alligatoah – Du bist schön; Alligatoah – Amnesie; Bastille – Blame; Bastille – Laura Palmer; Ed Sheerdan – Perfect; Camila Cabello – Havana; L Devine – Growing Pains; Beyoncé – Single Ladies; Trailerpark – Bleib in der Schule; Flo Rida – Whistle; The Power of MAKEUP!; Namika – Je ne parle pas Français; Bastille – Glory; The Chainsmokers – Sick Boy; The Chainsmokers – Closer; Nico Santos – Rooftop; BAUSA – Was du Liebe nennst; Calvin Harris, Dua Lipa – One Kiss; Maroon 5 – Girls Like You ft. Cardi B; Vanessa Carlton – A Thousand Miles; Dua Lipa – IDGAF; Alligatoah – Alli-Alligatoah; Rudimental – These Days feat. Jess Glynne, Macklemore & Dan Caplen; Alligatoah – Wie Zuhause; Timi Hendrix – We are Family feat. Trailerpark; 257ers – Holz; SDP – Deine Freudin; Casper – Im Ascheregen; Mike WiLL Made-It – 23 ft. Miley Cyrus, Wiz Khalifa, Juicy J; GEBURTSTAG IN PERU, ÜBERRASCHUNG & MACHU PICCHU; Only keeping 20 lipsticks!!!; Tote Review: Saint Lauren, Louis Vuitton Neverfull MM & Tory Burch; Janelle Monáe – PYNK; Tyga – Taste ft. Offset.

Chris

Chris is a 19-year-old white cis-gendered male. He identifies as heterosexual but is also questioning his sexual attraction orientation(s). Chris is currently single, having split up from a girlfriend last year. Chris is a virgin and spends a lot of time thinking about this and wondering if his sexual desires are 'normal', 'heterosexual' or something else. Chris describes himself as 'alternative', unconventional, androgynous and is into skateboarder culture.

Chris is unsure if he is working or middle-class but says his dad has not worked for his lifetime and his mum is currently unemployed. He lives with mum, dad, and older brother.

Videos shared in the research: Blondie – Heart of Glass; Crystal Castles – 'Baptism'; Tyler The Creator – Yonkers; Lily Allen – Smile; Gorillaz – El Mañana; Fall Out Boy – Thnks fr th Mmrs; Linkin Park – Numb; blink-182 – Adam's Song; Oasis – Cigarettes & Alcohol; Kate Tempest – Live Glastonbury Festival 2017; Post Malone – Congratulations ft. Quavo; Dua Lipa – New Rules.

Indy

Indy is a 20-year-old cis-gendered black woman. She splits her time between living with her mum and younger brother and a friend's place. She is in a romantic relationship with a woman. Indy says she doesn't understand social class and is unsure how to identify her own class position. She left university after one year and has worked as a manager for music acts; she has close ties to the grass roots music community.

Indy associates with 'hood' culture which to her means living in an environment where people engage with guns, gangs and drugs. Indy's musical taste changed during the research. Initially she was more into hood music and rap, but later got into neo-soul and 'chill vibes'.

Indy believes in God (or Jah) but says she doesn't know about religion anymore. She has explored Rastafarianism.

Videos shared in the research: Mahalia – Sober; IAMDDB – Pause; Raveena – If Only; Biig Piig – Vice City; SL – Tropical; SL – Gentleman; Lost Boyz – Renee; Dizzie Rascal – Fix Up, Look Sharp; Dizzie Rascal – I Luv U; Missy Elliott – Get Ur Freak On; Christina Aguilera – Dirrty; Gwen Stefani – Luxurious ft. Slim Thug; Ramz – Barking; IAMDDB – Shade; Khalid – Location; Goldcrew – Crew ft. Brent Faiyaz, Shy Glizzy; Krept and Konan – Chicken Shop Date; P110 – Ash Trillest; Ash Trillest - #Krown1Million; Sonder – Too Fast; Steve Lacy – Ryd/Dark Red; Kali Uchis – Tyrant; Danial Caesar – Best Part; Daniel Caesar – Get You ft. Kali Uchis; Kali Uchis – After The Storm ft. Tyler the Creator, Bootsy Collins; Buddy – Find Me; Rex Orange County – Sunflower; Ashanti – Foolish; Keith Ape – It G Ma; Beyoncé – Me, Myself and I; Keyshia Cole – I Should Have Cheated; RK – Brum Town Baby; Potter Payper – Behind Barz; Migos – Stir Fry; Willow Smith – Female Energy; Crop Circle – A Film by Nines; NSG ft. Not3s – Pushing Up; Lil Dicky – Freaky Friday feat. Chris Brown; Nines – I see You Shining; Krept & Kronan – Crepes and Cones ft. MoStack; J. Cole – Kevin's Heart; J. Cole – ATM; Skrapz – Mission Impossible; Fredo – Change; Solange – Cranes in the Sky; 1 Day Part 1; 1 Day Part 2; M Huncho – Elevation; Jorja Smith X Preditah – On My Mind; Abra – Pull Up; Denzel Himself – Melty ft. Keyah/Blu; Travis Scott – Nightcrawler ft. Swae Lee & Chief Keef; Jhené Aiko – Spotless Mind; Jhené Aiko – Comfort Inn Ending; Gewn Stefani – Cool; Lion Babe – Rockets ft. Moe Moks; Kali Uchis – Dead To Me; Ama Lou – DDD; Dapz on the Map – Distant; Abuse in Relationships: Would you Stop Yourself?; Mobb Deep – Shook Ones, Pt. 11; Eyedea ode to hiphop lyrics; Not3s ft Maleek Berry – Sit Back Down; 23 – Ain't Bothered; The Internet – Girl ft. Kaytranada; The Internet – Come Over.

John

John is a 24-year-old cis-gendered white man. He talked about a previous relationship with a woman but was single in the research process. He works in music production and talks about music primarily from this perspective, offering intellectual and professional insights.

John did not express a social class identity. He likes DIY and outdoor activities when he isn't working. John was very private and less willing to share details about his personal and inner life. He lives in a flat with 2 friends. He is into 'style' and enjoys the creative aspect of social life.

Videos shared in the research: Jamie xx – Gosh; Bonobo – Kerela; Jamie xx – Sleep Sound; Mr Jukes – Grant Green ft. Charles Bradley; Bombay Bicycle Club – Luna; Benga & Coki – Night; Mahlia – Sober; Bicep – Glue; Jamie xx – Girl; Ace Tee – Bist du Down? Ft. Kwam.E.

Sam

Sam is a 19-year-old black cis-gendered female. Sam lives on her own in a rented flat. Sam is not in a romantic relationship and says she "does not date", that "it does not appeal" to her and she

finds the peer pressure to do so stressful. Sam is still working out if she has a gender preference for romantic or sexual relationships.

Sam is vegan. She identifies as working class and says she will always be working class because of her "mindset". This is a significant part of her identity. Sam says she has no male friends and does not relate to men, saying that she is drawn more to females.

Videos shared in the research: Tyler the Creator – Yonkers; Jaden – Batman; The Neighbourhood – R.I.P. 2 My Youth; N Dubz – I Swear; Majid Jordan – Gave Your Love Away; Little Simz – Poison Ivy ft. Tilla; Young Fathers – In My View; Justin Timberlake – Supplies; Dounia – Shyne; Jorja Smith – X Preditah; Kendrick Lamar – LOVE ft. Zachari; Joji – Demons; Joji – Will He; Kali Uchis – After The Storm ft. Tyler The Creator, Bootsy Collins; Isiah Rashad – 4r Da Squaw; Boogie – Nigga Needs; Rejjie Snow – Egyptian Luvr feat. Aminé & Dana Williams; Rejjie Snow – Blakkst Skn; H.E.R. – Focus; Syd – All About Me; The Internet – Girl; Little Simz – Morning w/Swooping Duck; Téo – Palm Trees; J. Cole – ATM; Aminé – Campfire ft. Injury Reserve; Heavy in Your Arms – Florence and the Machine; Majid Jordan – Small Talk; Majid Jordan – Make It Work; Majid Jordan – A Place Like This; The Weeknd – Wicked Games; Mac Miller – Best Day Ever; Mac Miller – Senior Skip Day; Mac Miller – Nikes On My Feet; Etta Bond ft. A2 – Surface; Eminem – Stan; Flatbush Zombies – Vacation ft. Joey Badass; Mac Miller – Missed Calls; Air – Moon Safari; B.o.B. – Airplanes; Post Malone – Coongratualtions; Lil Uzi Vert – XO Tour LIif3; Drake – In My Feelings; The Internet – Come Over; The Internet – Roll; Russ – Cherry Hill; Kiana Ledé – Fairplay; FKA Twigs – Pendulum; Rich Brian – History; Loyle Carner – Sun of Jean ft. Mum, Dad; Cosmo Pyke – Great Dane; Cosmo Pyke – Chronic Sunshine; Willow Smith – Female Energy; SZA – Babylon; Banks – Gemini Feed; Mac Miller – Objects in the Mirror; Cool History – Why Do We Jump Out Of Cakes.

Appendix 2: Analytic codes

Cultural Tools

- Appropriation of technology
  - How P accesses the media (MV)
  - How P accesses the media (SM)
  - How tech reaches the P (MV)
  - How tech reaches the P (SM)
  - MV-SM working together
  - SM-MV working together
  - Any other significant media
- P identified MV encoding
  - High-Low status
  - Modality
- Femininity
  - Beauty
  - Scripts - Characteristics
  - Sexuality
  - Timescales
- Masculinity
  - Masculinities
  - Physical
  - Scripts - Characteristics
  - Sexuality
  - Timescales
- Sexuality
  - Heterosexuality
  - Non-binary (gender)
  - Non-heterosexuality
- Race
- Age
- Social-Class

Discourses (internalised as practice)

- Female subjectivity
  - Feminine character traits
  - Femininity as beauty
  - Relationship to own sexuality
  - Sexual attention - violence
  - Social expectations
- Male subjectivity
  - Male character traits
  - Masculine position
  - Relationship to own sexuality
  - Social expectations

- Music (Video) Practices
    - High Status MV
    - Low status MV
- Social Media Practice
    - Consuming
    - Emanations
    - Posting
    - Social media self
- Sexual Scripts (inc. dating)
    - Sexual Attraction
    - Initiation
    - Dating
    - Sex
    - Violence
- Individual Culture Practices
    - Alex
    - Carla
    - Chris
    - Indy
    - John
    - Sam
- Race
- Social-Class
- Age
- Depoliticisation

InVivo Codes (stage 1 coding)

- 'Confidence'
- 'Emotional support'
- 'Empowered'
- 'Feminism'
- 'Guilty Pleasure'
- 'hipsters'
- 'MeToo'
- 'Toxic'
- 'Vulnerable'
- 'WOKE'

Person

- Alex
    - Individual Characteristics
    - Gender and sexuality characteristics
    - Historical trajectory of musical taste
    - What's important to him
    - What is he against

- Contradictions
- Reaction to the research process

- Carla
  - Individual Characteristics
  - Gender and sexuality characteristics
  - Historical trajectory of musical taste
  - What's important to him
  - What is he against
  - Contradictions
  - Reaction to the research process
- Chris
  - Individual Characteristics
  - Gender and sexuality characteristics
  - Historical trajectory of musical taste
  - What's important to him
  - What is he against
  - Contradictions
  - Reaction to the research process
- Indy
  - Individual Characteristics
  - Gender and sexuality characteristics
  - Historical trajectory of musical taste
  - What's important to him
  - What is he against
  - Contradictions
  - Reaction to the research process
- John
  - Individual Characteristics
  - Gender and sexuality characteristics
  - Historical trajectory of musical taste
  - What's important to him
  - What is he against
  - Contradictions
  - Reaction to the research process
- Sam
  - Individual Characteristics
  - Gender and sexuality characteristics
  - Historical trajectory of musical taste
  - What's important to him
  - What is he against
  - Contradictions
  - Reaction to the research process

Place (overt discourses in place)

- Social Media Discourse

- Expressed attitude-belief
    - Platforms
- Music Video Discourse
    - Attitude toward Music (Video)
    - Genre-based distinctions
    - Media Representation discourse
- Sexism
    - Sexism
    - Sexual violence – harassment
- Feminism
- Real-life
- Mainstream culture
- Art

Reflections

Timescales (NOT IN USE IN STAGE 2)

Appendix 3: Interview materials

Sample transcript: Alex - 21.03.18/ 12.15 - 1.15 (session 9: media time)

When Alex arrived today, a bit late, he was quite flustered and announced in a proud and self-important way that he had had a phone call from […] and had had to “deal with her”. When we were finishing up and getting ready to leave, I said would he have to speak to her again this afternoon and he smiled and said no but that he had also spoken to […] for the same thing […] and that […] had given him a talking down to and said that he thought when people get to those levels of power they feel they can talk down to people, I asked was […] rude to him and he said, no blunt, but that it was unnecessarily so.

I noticed that Alex has a new bag (his previous a brown leather messenger style bag). This one I recognise instantly; it is quite popular with the cool kids - is it hipster? It is available for £80 on the website.

Alex has brought his personal laptop and sets it up. He has 2 videos he wants to show me. They are both from a Spotify playlist (recommended). He pays for Spotify because he didn't like the adverts. Firstly he shows me Blossoms: I can't stand it. I ask does he like it and he umms and arrrs and says it's not bad. Very non committal. I ask what it's about, is it about a relationship break up and he says possibly yeah, he doens't seem to know, he says it's about over thinking things. He says he likes the song but finds the video a bit bizarre, he doesn't understand the point of it, saying it's too abstract. Alex tells me his flatmate declared it pop in a derisory way but says he still likes it. He tells me this is a running joke, they insult each other’s musical taste. His flat mate derides him for liking pop which Alex thinks it possibly is but says that's no bad thing. He calls his flatmate's music noise, not music. I point out a visual technique (speech bubbles/text bubbles) which he said he hadn't noticed but laughs at and says he likes, calling it "a little bit of realism". I question this, he says they may be real text messages that he has sent or received. He talks about another MV by the same artist and says it's a bit similar. I ask what Alex thinks of the artists look given our recent conversations on masculinity. He says it's quite boyish and struggles to explain it, pointing out details like his long hair and smooth skin as indicators of his youth. He says the singer appeals to a younger audience. He also says the masculinity on display is a vulnerable one, which I say appeals to him and he agrees. I say that I think the singer has an androgynous style (all the characteristics Alex pointed out indicate femininity to me) and he at first agrees and then says possibly but runs through the characteristics that meet that identity. He seems a tad defensive and says "not overly, not overtly, he's not...wearing make up or anything like that" but probably a little bit. From this statement and the conversation that follows, I get the impression that Alex thinks androgyny means transvestism. Because of how the conversation unfolds and his general manner I don't have this conversation with him, I don't want to make him feel in a less knowledgeable position or challenge his position. Instead I ask if that's how he defines androgynous and he says it's about blurred gender lines, not being able to tell if it's a man or a woman, but he seems to equate this with making a conscious effort and goes on to say "he's not deliberately dressing as a women for instance or wearing red lipstick or whatever. I say I thought it was a woman and he is surprised and says it's interesting. I say for me there were no obvious signs either way. He says it's an interesting point (blurred gender lines) and shows me the video for another song he's been listening to (really likes it) and watched the last night and says it really surprised him.

He shows me Sundara Karma: She Said. I ask what was surprising and he says the way the signer looks, saying it's a really overt androgyny. To me, the singer (see 1:56 for example) is more transvestite that androgyny. Alex likes the video, saying it's fun. I say it's very sexy and he says "i'd say so" but more fun and energetic, it fits the song. He talks about how there is a young woman in the video who looks like him and how Alex was really surprised to see the singer look like that after listening to him. He chooses 1:56 to "analyse" his look, his make-up, clothing, hair, and calling him androgynous, playing around with gender lines "but that he didn't mind it at all". Alex says he was expecting more traditional rock and roll. I ask why he thinks they've done that and he pauses for a long time, finally saying the song is from the perspective of a woman so maybe that's why. He brings up the lyrics which he says are about the woman wanting to go out dancing or something. He says the bloke in the song sounds a bit obnoxious and laughs. He says the song champions her perspective, struggles to explain the song, but about a man being obnoxious in a relationship and ignoring the woman's issues. I say the singer reminds me of Iggy Pop and Alex says there is a 70s revival.

I ask if Alex feels any connection to this look and he points out their different body shapes and lack of potential for affinity. He also says he noticed they all have shaved chests. I ask how this relates to his favoured masculinity in music videos e.g. Kurt Vine. He says it's in a similar vein, it's a rejection of traditional masculinity, it is provocative, making a statement. He links this to what he considers to be a raising of awareness of issues in the past 12 months of trans and gender questioning and suggests musicians are trying to become part of that conversation. He says he is aware of this through political debates and issues raised there. He talks about the debate in the Labour Party around trans women on all woman shortlists for seats and links this to a wider debate he says is "raging" in feminism itself. I ask if he has a view, he says he is pro-trans rights and says he has 2 trans women friends who have made him aware of issues they face. He says trans issues are also on Tumblr and calls it a hotbed for those types of discussions. I clarify that he feels this video is tapping into those discussions and ask does he feel artists are freer to explore what he called blurred gender lines, he says yes, they have a position to do that, to raise questions, that in this video, although the song isn't about that, the singer is deliberately questioning his own gender. I ask if this pushing of boundaries and raising of gender issues crosses over to sexual diversity, and he says yes and that the 2 are linked. I ask does he see it in new music coming out, he says there are definitely more artists who are trans or coming out as trans and cites Ezra Furman, saying he is gender non-binary and raises these issues. He thinks this normalises it for fans. I ask if there is space for non-heterosexual relationships in MV and he says in the music he listens to is mainly hetero although there is some room for movement, some "playing around with the roles, but it's still heterosexual relationships on display".

I ask about the playing around if we can watch something and he shows me Father John Misty: Nancy from now on. Alex talks about the transition M2F and the dominatrix element. He is visibly uncomfortable watching the video and looks around the cafe, laughing nervously and says it's a strange video to watch in a cafe in the middle of the day, saying it is embarrassing and he is aware of the people around him. He would ordinarily watch it at home in the evening and this gives me more of an insight into viewing habits - that perhaps he is watching more sexual stuff than he lets on, but within this more 'high-brow' genre. He sees the woman's role as gratifying the singers desires. He says he has shared the song but not the video with friends. The video is really interesting to me, very complex messages. I ask what Alex thinks, he says dualism in people's sexuality that he is trying to highlight. Alex laughs again and says it's slightly ridiculous watching

the singer jump up and down on the bed drinking alcohol, but he is becoming visibly more uncomfortable, twiddling his beard, blushing slightly and fidgeting as we talk about the video. Alex sees the video as the singers inner most desires suppressed, maybe fantasied or real - in the video, not necessarily in his life. He says the lyrics relate very strongly to the video. Alex thinks of the video primarily as kinky.

I ask if it's fair to say there's more heterosexuality in MV and he says yes but also seems to interpret this question on a personal level, saying that's not a conscious decision on his part but just what's available. I hadn't meant it in that way.

I ask what sort of thumbnails draw Alex's attention; he says if it's by the same artist that would draw him. I try to elicit do sexy images get a click but don't want to ask directly instead giving him the space to offer it, he doesn't.

I ask does he follow any of these on social media, he says no, the info he has on them comes from their music and maybe a Wikipedia page.

Today has been illuminating. I feel like I'm getting into Alex's position and he's sharing info with me much more freely. I also feel I am becoming aware of his more hidden activities though unrelated disclosures e.g. FJM video.

Themes: sexuality; gender; gender roles

Final session interview schedule:

- How have you found the process?
- Have you noticed any changes in your wider life (social, work etc) that you feel are connected to your experiences of doing this research?
- Were there any sessions you found difficult or particularly enjoyable?
- Do you think taking part in this study has led to any changes in the way you:
    - Watch MV
    - Read / interpret MV/SM
    - Engage with MV/SM
    - Think about MV/SM
- Have there been any conversations that you feel were significant to you, that made you question yourself or led to a change in the way you see or do things

GIVE DEBRIEF SHEET

- Thoughts on debrief sheet?
    - Does this knowledge change the way you view our conversations
    - Is there anything you would like to say in light of this knowledge i.e. do you have any thoughts on MV/SM and their relationship to sexual violence against women
    - Are you still happy to be included in the study and for me to use your data
- Do you think this knowledge will change the way you:
    - Watch MV
    - Read / interpret MV/SM
    - Engage with MV/SM
    - Think about MV/SM

- Any questions for me?
- Is there anything else you would like to add or say with regards the research
- Would it be OK if I contact you later in the year if I need some further clarification or information?

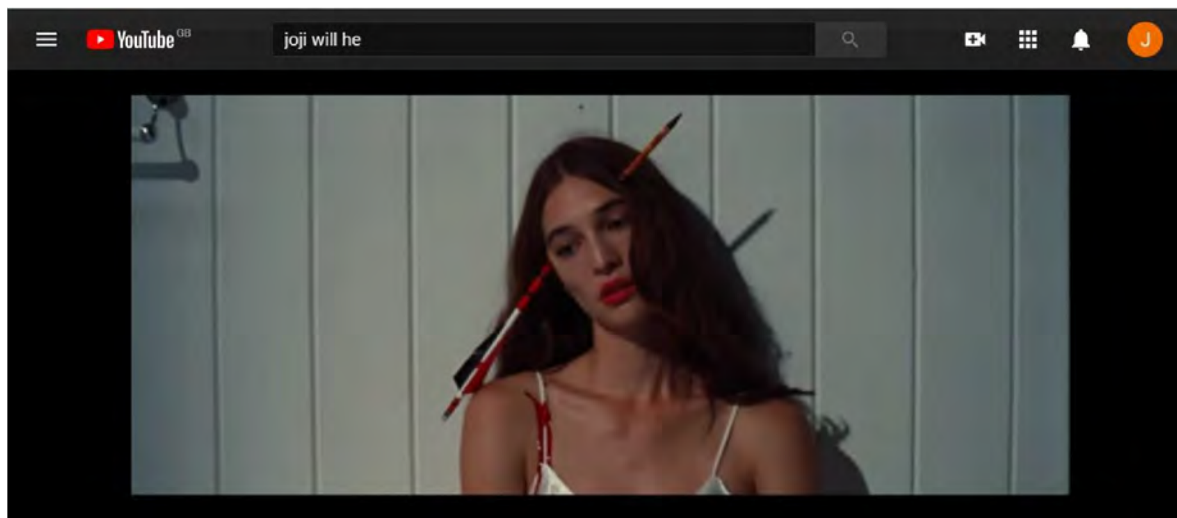
I am aiming to submit my thesis next autumn. Once the thesis has been accepted and my award granted you will able to read a copy if you would like. Would you like me to contact you at that point to see if you would be interested in reading it?

You have until October this year to tell me if you would like to withdraw from the study. After that time, I will be including your data in my thesis.

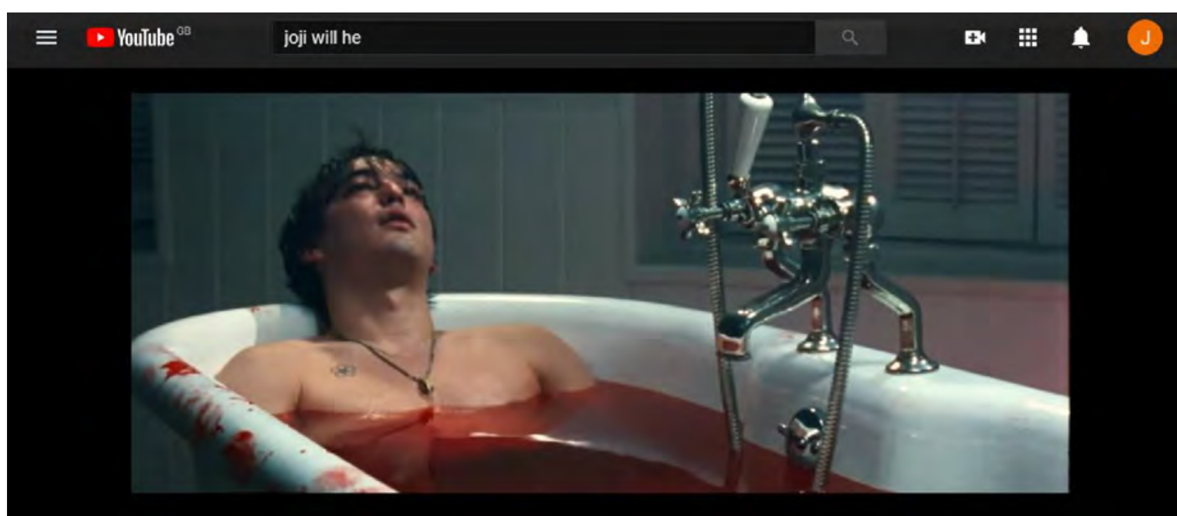
THANK PARTICIPANT AND GIVE MONEY IF RECEIVING

Images:

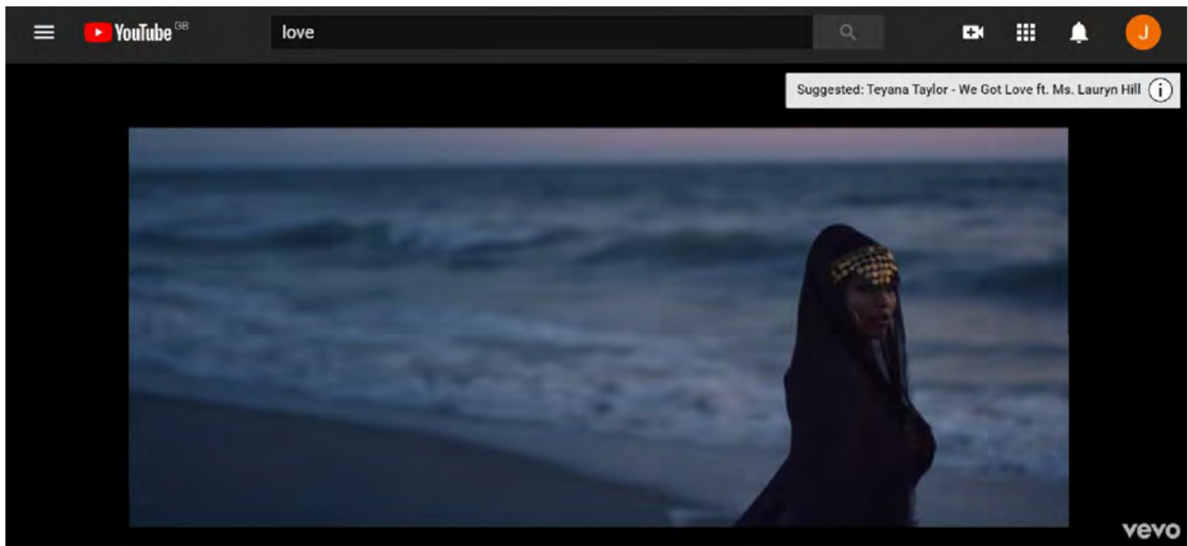
Joji - Will He (2m 46sec)



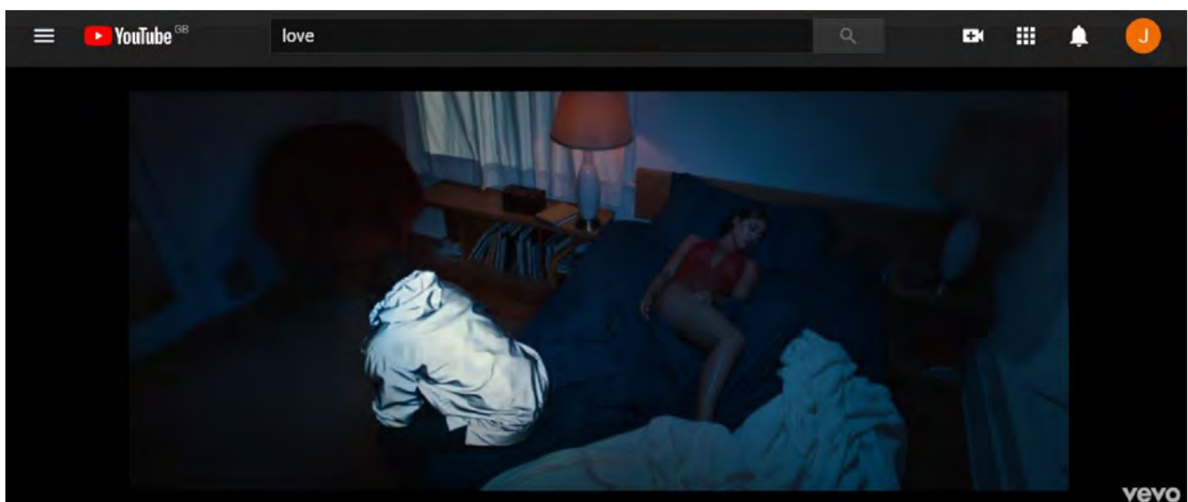
Joji - Will He (0m 43sec)



Kendrick Lamar - LOVEft. Zachari (0m 35sec)



Kendrick Lamar - LOVEft. Zachari (2m 41sec)



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