'Mmm … I love it, bro!': Performances of masculinity in YouTube gaming

Maloney, M., Roberts, S. & Caruso, A.

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ABSRACT:

Despite being ubiquitous and embedded in everyday life, 'the centrality of the Internet is still under-theorized in much masculinities research'. Contributing to the knowledge base in this area, here we place under the microscope the performance of hetero-masculinities undertaken by the three most popular YouTube gaming vloggers in 2015-2016: PewDiePie, VanossGaming and Sky Does Minecraft. The focus of this paper thus sits at the intersection of YouTube vlogging and gaming cultures, a site that is of particular sociological interest given the latter's associations with the (re)production and function of hegemonic masculinity. In examining the performances and constructions of gender by male gamers on YouTube, our research adds to the growing body of work highlighting the emergence of increasing levels of complexity in the construction of contemporary masculine identities.

Key words: masculinity; social media; internet; gender; YouTube; gaming

Introduction

Despite being ubiquitous and embedded in everyday life, 'the centrality of the Internet is still under-theorized in much masculinities research, as are the effects of […] shifting patterns of […] leisure' (Anderson and McCormack, 2016: 11). Indeed, Light (2013) has lamented this curious relative absence of theorising of men's engagements with digital sociality in particular, while Morris and Anderson (2015) assert that 'few researchers have empirically investigated heterosexual masculinities on social networking sites'. One exception is the latter's recent study of Britain's most popular YouTube vloggers, which found that 'inclusive masculinities are a *central* component of popularity for male youth on YouTube' (Morris and

Anderson, 2015: 1201; our emphasis), with the softer and 'attenuated form' (Roberts, 2013) of masculinity, characterised by eschewing homophobia, misogyny and aggression, presented as being most prevalent. Such a finding chimes with documented shifts in performances of masculinities in various realms, such as schools (McCormack, 2012), work (Roberts, 2013) and leisure spaces (Anderson, 2009, 2011).

Contributing to the knowledge base in this area, here we place under the microscope the performance of hetero-masculinities undertaken by the three most popular YouTube gaming vloggers during 2015-2016: PewDiePie[1], VanossGaming and Sky Does Minecraft (in that order). This specific digital realm represents a space that is occupied by culturally exalted young men. Indeed, gaming has become an increasingly popular YouTube video category – at the time of writing, PewDiePie is both the most subscribed YouTube gaming vlogger and the most subscribed YouTube channel across *all* categories – and the views/subscriber figures of all three vloggers make clear that they fulfil the criteria of popularity to the point of being culturally exalted.

The focus of this paper thus sits at the intersection of YouTube vlogging and gaming cultures, a site that is of particular sociological interest given the latter's associations with the (re)production and function of hegemonic masculinity. Such associations were seen to emerge with particularly virulent force in 2015's #GamerGate incident, where a 'swarm' of male gamers used social media to engage in 'outbursts of hypermasculine aggression' against prominent female gaming figures and their supporters (Mortensen, 2016). In terms of both the event and the debates surrounding it, #GamerGate is best viewed as a crystallising

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[1] At the time of submission, PewDiePie was embroiled in an anti-Semitism scandal, which ultimately saw him dropped from lucrative contracts with Disney and YouTube. We (Maloney and Roberts, 2017) have critiqued this indictment elsewhere to add nuance to the press coverage. However, as this present paper is focused upon performances of masculinity, we view the scandal as a deviation, and do not address it in this analysis.

moment in which longstanding concerns over the antisociality of male gamers collided with the sense of persecution that members of this social group have long felt in response (Mortensen, 2016). The extent to which male gamers can make claims of persecution remains questionable, but the gendered inequalities underpinning video games and their surrounding communities have been widely documented (Ratan et al., 2015). Indeed, while female gamers represent an increasingly sizeable proportion of consumers (ESA, 2015: 3-4), this ostensible bridging of the gender gap appears 'incongruous when compared to the ongoing stories about a digital gaming culture that [is] an unpleasant or openly hostile space for females' (Ratan et al., 2015: 440). While 'still something in the making' (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012: 3) in comparison to discussions of gender and gaming culture, research into attitudes towards sexuality have similarly confirmed the 'taken-for-granted' normativity of hetero-masculinity in both games and their communities (Sundén and Sveningsson, 2012).

In this paper, using contemporary literature on masculinity, we provide a theoretical and conceptual framework for understanding the ways in which hetero-masculinity is constructed and performed in the gaming vlogs of PewDiePie, VanossGaming and Sky Does Minecraft. The central question here is two-fold: what forms of hetero-masculinity emerge in the performative work of these three gaming vloggers; and, given the increasingly mainstream status of this digital-cultural space, what might this illuminate about contemporary masculinity more broadly? We begin by outlining the relevant theoretical territory, from Connell's foundational hegemonic masculinity theory (HMT) to more recent work on inclusive masculinities by Anderson and others. We then outline our methodology, before briefly introducing the three gaming vloggers, their culturally exalted status and the nature of their work. The first empirical section considers the vloggers' gendered performances. The second empirical section examines the vloggers' expressions of, and attitudes towards,

sexuality. Our analyses suggest a complex picture in which the vloggers' performances of hetero-masculinity often defy simple interpretation along established theoretical lines, while also confirming a broader attenuation of traditionally orthodox forms.

Masculinities theory

Hegemonic masculinity theory

Connell's (1987) pioneering work in this field originally shed light on the *plurality* of masculinities and the internal power relations between them. Central to Connell's writing is the concept of 'hegemonic masculinity' (Connell, 1987; 2000), favourably viewed as 'the single most influential, recognized and utilized contribution to masculinity research' (Christensen and Jensen, 2014: 60). Hegemonic masculinity was conceptualised as a configuration of gender practice that ideologically legitimates (or is taken to legitimate) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women. Similarly integral to the legitimization of hegemonic masculinity is the subordination and marginalisation of other masculinities, on the basis of ethnicity, sexuality and/or class position (Connell, 1987). Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity has deeply influenced great swathes of theoretical and empirical sociological work on men, gender and social hierarchy, and also informed practical efforts towards justice and equality, such as in anti-violence activism (Jewkes et al., 2015).

Connell's foundational ideas have attracted critical engagement, with some scholars highlighting perceived limitations or misgivings, and/or proposing adaptations or reformulations. For example, Howson (2006) has been critical of Connell's apparent promotion of a de-gendered world, because this does not allow for gender difference to be seen as anything other than unequal. Howson further renders problematic Connell's reduction

of social justice to the elimination of hegemony by insisting that this betrays key productive possibilities of hegemony as originally laid out by Gramsci. Moeller (2007: 265) similarly contends that gendered power 'should not be equated with or reduced solely to a logic of domination', lamenting HMT's tendency to inhibit empirical nuance by reducing men's practices and motivations solely to forms of domination. Focusing on *what it is* that men do, Christensen and Jensen (2014: 64) caution against assuming 'that the most normative and legitimate form of masculinity in any society and at any historical point in time is also one that legitimates patriarchy.' Others, too, have raised concerns about hegemonic masculinity's reductionist outlook. Arguing the virtues of post-modernist perspectives, Beasley (2012: 759), for example, posits that Connell's adherence to modernist starting points, such as gender identities, encourages development of unhelpfully homogenizing typologies, leaving 'the political logic of hegemonic positioning to be characterized in terms of a specific homogenized group of actual dominant men, transnational businessmen.'

Addressing some of these critiques, Connell and Messerschmidt (2005: 883) concede that it is 'perhaps possible that a more humane, less oppressive, means of being a man might become hegemonic, as part of a process leading toward an abolition of gender hierarchies'. Meanwhile, Messerchmidt (2012) has provided some important clarifications, reminding us that, beyond the hegemonic ideal, which contributes to patriarchal domination, there exists 'dominant', 'dominating' and other forms of non-hegemonic masculinities. Understanding and distinguishing between these forms is critical if we are to identify what Messerschmidt (2012: 73) calls 'equality masculinities'. Connell (2016) has most recently critically considered her own theoretical apparatus, highlighting a need to decolonise 'knowledge' and re-think hegemonic masculinity in light of a thorough understanding of the experiences of the global south.

Inclusive masculinities theory

Connell has sidestepped a recently emerging critique that advocates a new theoretical

position: inclusive masculinity theory (IMT) (Anderson, 2009). While it is true to say that 'a

closer look at the masculinities of the main power-holding elites in the contemporary world

shows the huge task still ahead for the project of gender equality' (Connell, 2016: 312),

proponents of IMT contend that close inspection lower down the social order reveals

changing patterns of gender behaviour, particularly among boys and young men. Changing

behaviours among ordinary boys and young men in the West have important theoretical

implications. According to Anderson (2011: 731), one function of hegemonic masculinity is

that:

> one archetype of masculinity is esteemed above all others, so that boys and men
>
> who most closely embody this standard are accorded the most social capital.
>
> Conversely, those who behave in ways that conflict with this valorised
>
> masculinity are normally marginalised, while those at the bottom of the hierarchy
>
> are often publicly homosexualised for failing to adhere to rigid heteromasculine
>
> boundaries. Accordingly, in this model homophobia is used as a weapon to
>
> stratify men in deference to a hegemonic mode of heteromasculine dominance.

In light of contemporary social changes within North American and Western European

cultures, Anderson (2009) has recently theorised that hegemonic, or orthodox, forms of

masculinity – often characterised by heterosexuality, misogynistic attitudes, disembodied

rationality and emotional restraint – are becoming less prominent within particular male

cohorts of such societies. Anderson (2009) attributes this to the declining rates of

homophobia and homohysteria (the fear of being *seen as* homosexual) within most Western cultures over recent years.

Anderson (2009) argues that the concept of hegemonic masculinity is now unable to accurately theorise masculinity in Western cultures as they are characterised by decreasing or low (but not entirely diminished) levels of cultural homophobia. To account for this historical and cultural shift of declining homophobia within certain cultures, Anderson (2009) proposes a theory of *inclusive masculinity*. Men who espouse inclusive masculinity are more likely to hold attitudes and practice gendered behaviour that undermines the values of orthodox, or hegemonic, masculinity, particularly in relation to homosexuality and women (Anderson, 2009). This opening up of behaviours is, as stated, made possible by the declining significance of homophobia in the construction of a masculine self (McCormack, 2012). The outcome is that, where Connell (2005: 77) observed that 'at any given time, one form of masculinity rather than others is culturally exalted', Anderson (2009: 8) contends that 'in cultures of diminished homohysteria, two dominant (but not dominating) forms of masculinity will exist: One conservative and one inclusive.' Within the inclusive form, Anderson sees the coexistence of multiple masculinities, and gendered behaviours of boys and men that are less differentiated from girls and women (Anderson, 2011: 733).

Anderson's writing over the last decade has enjoyed prolific uptake and support in empirical research (e.g. Cashmore and Cleland, 2012; Channon and Matthews, 2015; Dashper, 2012; Roberts, 2013; Roberts et al., 2016; Michael, 2013; Adams, 2011; Jarvis, 2015; Haltom and Worthen, 2014; Drummond et al., 2015; Murray and White, 2015). This body of research leads McCormack and Anderson (2014) to reasonably assert that significant numbers of young heterosexual males are engaging in homosocial relationships characterised by a series

of important traits: 1) social inclusion of gay male peers; 2) embrace of once-feminized artifacts; 3) increased emotional intimacy; 4) increased physical tactility; 5) erosion of the one-time rule of homosexuality; 6) eschewing violence. Moving beyond the experience and behaviours of heterosexual young men, IMT has also been used as a framework for understanding the experience of bisexual young men (Anderson and McCormack, 2016), men with non-exclusive sexual orientations (Savin-Williams, 2017) and openly gay men (McCormack et al., 2016).

McCormack, studying men of various sexual orientations, has investigated and theorised the use of 'gay discourse' (cf Pascoe (2007) on 'fag discourse'). He notes that diminishing homohysteria leads to different forms and changing meanings of 'homosexually themed language' (McCormack, 2011). Most notable here is the phrase 'that's so gay' (McCormack, 2012) which has evolved from one with ostensibly and irrevocably homophobic connotations to a commonly used and sexuality-neutral expression of frustration/annoyance. Accepting post-structuralist cautions about how language can remain inflected by older, more negative meanings (Rasmussen, 2004), and building upon Pascoe's (2007) work on boys' use of such discourses to police other boys' gender behaviour (rather than sexuality), McCormack et al. (2016) note that usage of this phrase amongst liberally minded heterosexual males with gay friends, as well as amongst gay men themselves, often complicates theoretical assumptions about the phrase's enduring homophobic underpinnings.

In their appeal for a more nuanced evaluation, McCormack et al. draw on two means. First, they pay heed to Plummer's (2010) assertion that there is a marked generational divide in understandings of this kind of language. Second, McCormack (2011: 672) identifies 'the use of homosexually themed language that is used to bond people together in socio-positive ways

or to demonstrate pro-gay attitudes'. In order to avoid positioning particular types of language simplistically as 'definitely homophobic', McCormack et al. (2016) offer a more sophisticated understanding of the complexity of language through the concept of an intent-context-effect matrix. Here, McCormack et al. argue that:

> The interdependency of intent and context with effect [is] so strong that we reject using them as distinct variables, instead conceptualizing an intent-context-effect matrix. Highlighting the situated nature of this matrix, [our] participants emphasized the importance of the existence of shared norms between those saying and hearing the phrase when interpreting such language.

In his research in secondary schools, McCormack (2012) documents that one role these shared norms play is the facilitation of ironic humour about same sex desire and gay stereotypes that act simultaneously as a means through which they espouse pro-gay attitudes, a bonding mechanism between gay and straight students, and as an ironic 'recuperation' of straight students' heterosexual identity (McCormack, 2012).

Ironic heterosexual recuperation is perhaps the most intriguing phenomenon identified by McCormack and Anderson (2010). For groups of boys and young men in which homohysteria no longer holds sway as a policing strategy, ironic heterosexual recuperation appears to have taken its place as a less marginalising way of ensuring 'heterosexual boundaries are maintained' (McCormack and Anderson, 2010: 846). Here, McCormack and Anderson (2010: 846) distinguish between the traditional mode of heterosexual affirmation and its emerging ironic counterpart: '*Conquestial recuperation* conceptualizes the ways boys boast of their heterosexual desires or conquests, while *ironic recuperation* describes the

satirical proclamation of same-sex desire, or a gay identity, to maintain a heterosexual identity'. Importantly, according to McCormack and Anderson (2010: 846), the two recuperative techniques often coexist as alternative strategies 'when boys fear their heterosexuality is under question'. However, the newer ironic mode enables 'boys to expand (or even break) the tightly policed gendered boundaries described by the masculinities literature' (McCormack and Anderson, 2010: 847).

Although Connell has not engaged with the theory, IMT has been subject to critique along lines established by her work. Some striking examples appear in the edited collection *Debating Modern Masculinities* (Roberts, 2014), which provides a number of empirical projects seeking to both use and critically engage with IMT. Notable counter positions include Simpson's (2014) argument that 'inclusive' attitudes represent nothing more than civil indifference. In the same volume, Ingram and Waller (2014: 40) consider that IMT may offer too 'optimistic' an assessment, insisting that Anderson is guilty of presenting a 'postmodern co-existence of multiple male cultures that entail no relationship of power' (2014: 39). They also contend that, while changes in masculinity are notable and research worthy, they are better understood as a 'repackaging of forms of domination'. This concern regarding unaltered power relations, as well as the implications for transformed or hybridised forms of masculinity, is taken up further in the wider recent literature (see De Boise, 2014; O'Neill, 2015; Bridges, 2014), in ways that bear a striking resemblance to earlier observations about the capacity, scope and value of hybrid performances of masculinity (e.g. Demetriou, 2001).

In response, Anderson suggests that his critics are constrained by HMT, which 'invites readers to look "out there" for particularly nefarious instances of masculinist abuses of

power' (Moller, 2007: 265). By overlooking more mundane, ordinary gender expressions in favour of their spectacular counterparts, indispensible aspects of the story of contemporary masculinity are overlooked (Roberts, 2012). As such, Anderson and McCormack argue that, because empirical research has been incapable of dismissing the *overall* positive trends that have been documented, writers who insist upon an all but exclusive focus on the negative and/or horrific (which Anderson and McCormack acknowledge still exist) will lean towards pre-judgement and reductively 'assume men to be homophobic, stoic or emotionally or physically alienated from other men' (Anderson and McCormack, 2014: 140). We find these points agreeable, but also believe it prudent to proceed by remaining sensitive to whether, as Bridges and Pascoe (2014: 246) contend, new performances of masculinity 'symbolically distance men from hegemonic masculinity […] and fortify existing social and symbolic boundaries in ways that often work to conceal systems of power and inequality in historically new ways'.

Methodology

As stated, here we focus on the three most popular YouTube vlogger's in the gaming category during 2015-2016: PewDiePie, VanossGaming (Vanoss hereafter) and Sky Does Minecraft (Sky hereafter). We decided to focus on three vloggers, rather than on more or fewer, in order to examine patterns and differences between multiple vloggers' work, while ensuring depth in our analysis of each. Popularity was measured through subscriber figures: for PewDiePie, Vanoss and Sky, during the period in focus, these were 35 million, 11.3 million and 10.8 million, respectively. Readers should note that there has since been a great deal of fluidity in these numbers, and also in the gaming vloggers occupying the second and third positions. In the name of manageability, and in order to draw in-depth meaning from their most resonant work, we narrowed our focus to the ten most viewed videos from each

vlogger as recorded by YouTube at the beginning of our data collection (24 February 2016). Our selection was also limited to videos posted by each vlogger in the two-year period preceding data collection (2014 and 2015), a period in which the cultural significance of this YouTube genre was reaching an apex, as demonstrated by rising audience figures across the genre as a whole and the increasing focus of new media journalists on this emergent sphere of online activity (e.g. Ramdurai, 2014; Walker, 2014). With respect to each of the vloggers' top ten videos, we examined only new gaming videos, removing from our selections 'greatest hits'-style montages of earlier work, channel updates and any other atypical non-gaming-related vlogs. In terms of how much content was analysed, the top ten videos from PewDiePie, Vanoss and Sky represent 4 hours and 1 minute, 2 hours and 1 minute, and 2 hours and 43 minutes, respectively. With each video, we also surveyed the comments section in order to glean a sense of audience response. However, these forums appear to be mostly comprised of brief and inconsequential expressions of praise and enjoyment from fans and we did not find enough meaningful data to warrant inclusion of this territory.

The method of data collection and interpretation adhered first and foremost to Rose's (2001) suggestion that, before committing to a formal codifying process, researchers should immerse themselves in visual texts through repeated viewing. In codifying data, we identified every instance of discourse relating to gender and sexuality and then placed each instance within thematic categories. The quotes and behaviours we highlight and discuss in the empirical sections are representative examples of what was placed in these categories and we omitted no discursive evidence to the contrary, nor any instances of gender/sexuality discourse that might have suggested something altogether different. While we admit to the limits of our qualitative approach in terms of providing a fully representative overview of the vloggers' enormous bodies of work – PewDiePie, for example, has posted over 3000 videos to his

YouTube channel – the complex discursive nature of these videos warrants closer analysis of smaller and influential samples. Importantly, in our initial broader survey of between 20 and 30 other videos from each vlogger, we found many others that not only confirmed the dominance of the themes we identify in their most popular work but, in many instances, would have provided even more overt examples of these themes. In the interests of prudence, a similarly broader survey was also conducted towards the end of the project and, seeing nothing that might contradict what we outline in relation to the smaller sample, we feel confident in presenting these findings as a meaningful distillation of the vloggers' work.

YouTube gaming and the three vloggers

PewDiePie, Vanoss and Sky have been at the forefront of a remarkable increase in popularity of YouTube gaming content in recent years. Indeed, gaming is now YouTube's fourth most popular category – behind product reviews, how-to videos and 'everyday life' vlogs (DeSimone, 2016a) – with boys and young men the key drivers (Blattberg, 2015). While female viewers are also increasingly drawn towards gaming content (DeSimone, 2016b), the gender gap remains stark, with males still accounting for over 80% of viewers (Blattberg, 2015). Moreover, to quote Henry (cited in Blattberg, 2015), 'as soon as you omit gaming as a macro category, [gender difference in category preferences] goes to almost 50-50'. Central to this increasing gendered popularity has been the rise of the 'let's play' video, a format shared by the three gaming vloggers discussed here. The 'let's play' video involves watching gamers as they make their way through a given videogame while narrating their experiences. Most commonly, videos will focus solely on gameplay via screen-capture technology that is then overlaid with off-screen voice-overs from the content creator(s). For more established channels, videos will sometimes include a small window embedded into the gameplay footage featuring gamer reactions and the like. Increasingly – and applicable to the vloggers

studied here – the most popular style of 'let's play' has become improvisational-comedic, with vloggers more interested in entertaining viewers through anarchic virtual antics than in demonstrating their gameplay skills and achievements.

As stated, PewDiePie, Vanoss and Sky all share in this madcap approach to the 'let's play' format and, as Wallenstein (2013) notes, there is a generational divide at the heart of its appeal. There are, however, some key differences to note in the content produced by the three vloggers before we proceed to the empirical sections. PewDiePie's videos are distinguishable from Vanoss' and Sky's videos in that they most commonly feature footage of him playing the games via the previously mentioned small embedded windows. Also unlike the others, PewDiePie plays a wide array of video games, usually of the 'indie' variety, and his work is thus not associated with one specific game or another. He is also the most prolific producer of videos by a significant margin. PewDiePie is the only non-American in the group and he often draws on his Swedish cultural traits and occasional struggles with speaking/understanding English for comedic effect. Finally, with relatively few exceptions, PewDiePie's videos feature himself alone. Vanoss and Sky share much more in common in terms of cultural background and their approach to the 'let's play' format. Both vloggers are American, and their videos nearly always feature their respective online friendship groups. Also unlike PewDiePie, both vloggers are associated with one particular video game. While his gaming preferences are more diverse than Sky's, most of Vanoss' videos involve he and his friends playing *Garry's Mod* (*Gmod*): a 'sandbox' physics-based game that enables players to construct and play in virtual spaces made up of props and characters either provided by the designers or generated by the player community. Sky's videos almost exclusively centre on the hugely popular *Minecraft*: a similarly open gaming experience in which players craft items and buildings from various combinations of virtual resources. In a

similar fashion to *Gmod*, only to a much greater extent, the inherent openness of *Minecraft's* design has attracted a flourishing gamer community to its ever-increasing range of mostly user-generated content.

'Let's play' gender

Unsurprisingly, gendered expression pervades the work of all three vloggers. In this section we identify two overarching themes: affectionate homosociality (notably absent in Vanoss' videos) and satirising hypermasculine aggression (present in the videos of all three). As discussed in our theoretical framework, increased emotional intimacy between young men is a key tenet of IMT and this mode of expression emerges as the most significant point of differentiation between the videos of Sky and PewDiePie, on the one hand, and those of Vanoss, on the other. Seven of Sky's ten videos contain notable instances in which the vlogger and his friends engage in affectionate homosociality. For example, Sky's interactions with his friends are commonly punctuated by light-hearted expressions of affection such as 'I love you!' or, even more effusively, 'I love you so much right now!' – sentiments often visually reinforced by the coming together of the players' pixelated avatars. In one instance, Sky quietens the usual chaotic mood with his request to perform a loving musical tribute to one of his friends: 'I want to sing you a song.' In another, Sky feigns distress when he is separated from his friend, Joey, following the latter's mishap in the gaming environment: 'I want my Joey back!' PewDiePie also often uses amorous language aimed equally towards male and female fans. His signature ending is indicative of this inclusivity: in the final moments of most gaming videos, PewDiePie will turn to camera and, in a decided shift away from his usual cavalier demeanour, gently fist bump the screen while thanking his audience with a soft and heartfelt 'I love you guys'. As stated, Vanoss' videos stand apart here: social

interactions between members of his friendship group are marked by an emotionally-detached joviality that is clearly representative of a more traditional homosociality.

All three vloggers satirise traditional forms of masculinity across their respective top ten videos, with 5/10 of Sky's and PewDiePie's videos and 7/10 of Vanoss' containing key moments of such discourse. Indeed, if any one figure emerges as the principal focus of ridicule for these young male digital celebrities, it is the 'dominant muscular masculinity' (Ricciardelli et al., 2010: 65) exemplified by contact sporting heroes and action film stars such as Arnold Schwarzenegger (Holmlund, 1993). While it represents only one dimension of a more general satirising of popular culture, Sky and Vanoss both make references to various 'macho' celebrities in a manner that positions hypermasculinity as laughably inauthentic. For example, in Sky's 'Minecraft mini-Game: MODDED COPS N ROBBERS! SLENDER!' the vlogger and his friends are chased around the game environment by a band of faceless men modelled after the eponymous antagonist from indie horror game, *Slender Man*. As Sky evades their pursuit, he remarks, 'they're so angry!', to which his friend responds, 'How do you know they're angry if they don't have facial expressions?' Sky's flippant explanation that 'you can feel' the anger is immediately lampooned by his friend who adopts a comically husky voice and repeats the phrase as if it were a celebration of masculine aggression: 'You can *feel* the anger, *man*!' Sky then takes the joke one step further by associating their improvised catchphrase with the famous American wrestler, Hulk Hogan: 'Hulkamania! You can *feel* the *anger*!'

As stated, Vanoss' videos contain similarly absurdist references to hypermasculine popular culture. For example, there are numerous moments in which he and his friends impersonate Schwarzenegger, replicating the actor's deep and authoritarian Austrian speech patterns for

comedic effect. Indeed, in one video, a friend chooses Schwarzenegger's *Terminator* character as his avatar, and the group find a great deal of amusement in debasing the avatar by having him suffer violent bouts of diarrhoea while on the toilet. Unique to Vanoss' satirising is the way in which he and his friends draw links between hypermasculinity and homosexuality. To give one example, in 'Gmod Minecraft!: Tutorials, Pictionary, Ender Dragon', they lampoon the often presumed Western heteromasculine fixation on 'naked women and beer' as 'so fucking gay!': although ostensibly incongruous, this is an association that vividly supports McCormack's (2012) argument about the increasing contemporary fluidity of the latter phrase. It also draws attention to the ways that traditional behaviours and formerly valorised expressions of masculinity are unstable, with the terrain of esteem markers contestable and being actively resisted in ways that negotiate masculine hierarchies.

Through his engagements with various games across his top ten videos, PewDiePie expresses a similarly playful outlook on masculinity, and video game violence often provides the catalyst for PewDiePie's ironic views here. For example, in 'A LOVE STORY OR A PORNO? – GANG BEASTS', PewDiePie plays indie fighting game, *Gang Beasts*, with his girlfriend and fellow YouTube vlogger, Marzia Bisognin. The simple and light-hearted multiplayer game involves hand-to-hand combat between colourful gelatinous avatars, with players having to defend themselves against attacks from fellow players, along with various hazards in the game's environments. *Gang Beasts* is a deliberately unstructured experience and PewDiePie and Marzia spend more time wandering aimlessly through the game as they chat to each other than they do engaged in the game's intended virtual combat. However, when the pair does engage in this core activity, PewDiePie wryly frames masculine combat instincts as a form of cathartic homoeroticism. During one fight, his avatar falls to the ground and Marzia finds herself positioned over her boyfriend in a manner resembling rear-entry

sexual intercourse. Echoing Vanoss' hypermasculine/homosexual discursive association, PewDiePie immediately adopts a deep masculine voice and expresses sexually-suggestive approval at this unexpected 'combat' predicament: 'I'm ready for you, bro. Mmm, yeah, keep "fighting" me, bro. I love it, bro!' In this instance, while this behaviour might also be seen as a form of expanded behaviour that becomes acceptable when more inclusive forms of masculinity come to dominate, the presence of the gamer's girlfriend ensures that engaging in this sort of gay-based humour is even less of a threat to his publically perceived heterosexual identity, and in doing so further enables an ironic recuperation of heterosexual identity.

'Let's play' sexuality

There are comedic references to sexuality in the work of all three vloggers and, importantly, the instances of such humour mostly centre on homosexuality. For example, in Sky's 'MODDED COPS N ROBBERS' series of videos (seven of which are in his top ten) play occurs in a virtual prison environment, with members of the friendship group taking turns as prisoners behind bars. For Sky's friendship group, the mock prison set up appears to naturally elicit references to the homosexual interactions (both same-sex attraction and issues of power/dominance) commonly associated with real-world incarceration which, in turn, leads to context-enabling moments of sexuality boundary-crossing. In one of these videos, Sky is propositioned by his incarcerated friend, who pleads, 'I'll do you favours to get out!' Elsewhere in the same video, a satirical reference to prison rape is made which, within broader context of Sky's affectionate homosociality examined in the previous section, presents as less incendiary than it otherwise might. In another prison-themed video, Sky suggestively compliments his friend on his digital prison attire: 'You look good in orange.' In such moments (found in all seven of Sky's prison-themed videos), Sky and friends confirm McCormack's (2012) suggestion of homosexual role-play as 'ironic heterosexual

recuperation', where in each case the proclamation or subtle indication of same-sex desire is a means to maintain a heterosexual identity.

In Vanoss' videos, lines are often blurred between ironic homosexual role-play and the more straightforward expressions of homophobia associated with Connell's hegemonic masculinity. Overt references to homosexuality are generally less common in Vanoss' work but an ambivalence towards same-sex attraction is clearly established in Vanoss' most popular video in which he and his friends cause havoc in the *Gmod* recreation of another popular indie video game, *Five Nights at Freddy's*. In brief, the horror-themed *Five Nights at Freddy's* sees players adopt the role of a children's restaurant night manager in which a group of animatronic robots murderously come to life after dark. In playing the *Gmod* version of *Five Nights at Freddy's*, one which carefully recreates the original's eerily dilapidated night-time restaurant environment, Vanoss reframes the setting as the outcome of 'gay orgies', with the hapless heterosexual warning of 'airborne' STD's lingering from the previous day's recreational group 'butt sex'.

This moment of horror-themed satire represents a clear instance of the marginalisation and specific othering of gay identities that is the hallmark of HMT, with homosexuality framed here as hypersexual and contaminating. However, in what essentially amounts to a moment of self-reflexive pullback, Vanoss concludes his 'gay orgies' monologue with an expression of heterosexual affinity with the imagined party's voracious sexual appetites: 'Now that might sound bad, I know, but there really is nothing to worry about... I get horny and quirky all the time.' Importantly, in this brief, about-face effort to express common ground with gay men, Vanoss invokes essentialist notions in which male sexuality, regardless of orientation, is driven by uncontrollable instincts. Within this paper's theoretical framework, and its interest

in the 'grey areas' between hegemonic and inclusive understandings, this moment of homosexually-themed comedy from Vanoss presents as multilayered and difficult to codify.

There is a temptation here to cast this as evidence of hybridised masculinity. However, we would argue that these grey areas do not represent an 'incorporation of elements of identity typically associated with various marginalized and subordinated masculinities and—at times—femininities into privileged men's gender performances and identities' (Bridges and Pascoe, 2014: 246). Most fundamentally, Vanoss' marginalisation of gay men and suggestion of voracious male sexuality locates the discourse squarely within the territory established by Connell. However, Vanoss' closing act of ideological self-correction, while reinforcing notions of male sexual dominance, clearly represents the vlogger's empathetic attempt to normalise non-heterosexual orientations, however clumsy and/or problematic. Indeed, even if interpreted as little more than a cynical apology for his preceding marginalisation of gay men, Vanoss' self-correction at the very least suggests a relationship between the content producer and his predominately male gaming audience in which such prejudiced discourses might find censure among members of the latter. This moment also speaks to McCormack's intent-content-effect matrix: while we cannot establish effect beyond the indifference conveyed in the video's comments section, Vanoss' about-turn speaks to an awareness of potential consequences and an intentional effort to reframe his marginalising humour in non-othering terms. To be clear, we do not wish to imply that this after-the-fact apologetic statement in any way removes the potential for harm in the preceding discourse. However, Vanoss' pullback nonetheless speaks to an acute awareness of the intent-content-effect dynamic, with his efforts *aimed* at minimising harm *because* of his awareness of the need to explicate intent and minimise the negative effects of his content.

In five of Vanoss' top ten videos, the vlogger and his friendship group engage in moments of proverbial 'dick joke' comedy that veer into the sort of homosexual role-play found in Sky's videos. For example, a sequence in one video sees Vanoss carefully add genitals to his friend's avatar while the latter stands frozen in suspended animation. Constructed from a digital banana and two Kinder Surprise chocolate eggs, Vanoss invites the group to marvel at his 'modern art' as another member rushes forward to consume the banana, proclaiming, 'I ate his dick!' In response, Vanoss adopts the role of concerned adult, quietly admonishing his friends to 'clean up this act, guys', before proceeding to consume the remaining chocolate testicles: 'I just ate your balls'. In mock shame at the group's plunge into homosexual role-play, one group member awkwardly suggests, 'let's never talk about this again', to which Vanoss responds with deadpan matter-of-factness, 'agreed'. Vanoss' homosexual role-play is distinguished from Sky's more nonchalant discourse by the centrality in the former of a sort of homophobic unease 'played for laughs'. Indeed, Vanoss' impromptu normative boundary-crossings are often accompanied by satirically apprehensive framings, such as the call to 'let's never talk about this again' or, to give two other examples, his satirical legal query, 'did everybody sign the waiver?', and his encapsulation of such moments as opportunities to 'do the unthinkable... think the undoable'.

Such behaviours exhibit a change in acceptable behaviours, with previous research often showing that even mild gender-appropriate deviation is be significantly punished, through, for example, punitive expressions of 'fag discourse' (Pascoe, 2007). However, these behaviours can also be interpreted as a product of hybridisation (Bridges, 2014), where an expanded set of behaviours is permitted to privileged groups – in this case culturally exalted heterosexual young men. In her research in schools, Pascoe (2007) argues that this is often the case for the most popular, most athletic boys, who benefit from 'jock insurance' such that

their gender transgressions can be forgiven or that such behaviour would even enhance their masculine status. Celebrity status might act in such a way for these vloggers, but their celebrity was built on the approaches they now evidence. Equally, the presumed authenticity of vloggers such as the ones examined here is a crucial part of their appeal (Morris and Anderson, 2015).

PewDiePie's top ten videos contain fewer instances of sexuality-based comedy but the instances themselves again focus on homosexuality. For example, in the '12 Year Old Simulator' video, PewDiePie samples a very simple text-based indie game that satirises online chat between the user and an offensive 12 year-old boy. The 12 year-old's abusive responses to the user's text input are automatically generated and the game represents a form of interactive commentary on expressions of misogyny and homophobia in anonymous online settings. On beginning the game, PewDiePie is presented with an empty text box accompanied by a prompt to 'say hello'. Before he can respond, a second text box appears with the grammatically-dubious query, 'so how many dicks do you suck a day'. PewDiePie vainly attempts to admonish the fictional character for impoliteness but is further admonished with further homophobic insults such as 'fgt' (faggot) and 'ure gay'. In mock despair, and before swiftly losing interest in the deliberately frustrating one-note experience, the vlogger responds, 'I'll have you know, I dont suck dick. But, theres nothing wrong with sucking cock' and, finally, 'I feel like you are calling me fgt because youre hiding your own insecurity'. Later in this video, PewDiePie plays *Sortie En Mer*, a short French-language full motion video (FMV) game which simulates the experience of drowning. The game begins on a small yacht as the player is greeted by an attractive male actor in the role of the player's sailing companion. The picturesque ocean setting, and affectionate camaraderie expressed between the actor and the player's off-camera persona, leads the vlogger to briefly wonder,

'what kind of gay sex are we having on this boat?' Much like Sky and friends' sexual role-play, PewDiePie's casually incongruous homo-sexualisation of this sequence can be seen as form of ironic heterosexual recuperation. This is a subtle yet distinct shift away from explicit marginalisation tactics of in which homophobia *is* masculinity (Kimmel, 2008).

Discussion and conclusion

The literature considering men's engagement with digital realms is relatively slim; yet, such locations are ripe for theoretical and empirical research aimed at advancing knowledge of how the construction and performance of masculinities is changing, or, indeed, remains fixed. Beyond the embedded, everyday nature of social networking sites, the intersection of video games here is particularly important for such theorising. As Cremin (2015) argues, videogames are not just virtual affairs: the actions, behaviours and performances they elicit from gamers have significant resonance beyond their digital origins. In discussing the most popular and celebrated gaming vloggers it is therefore important not to write off their behaviours – whether seemingly positive, negative or somewhere in between – as part of a simple, relativising discussion of varieties of masculinity traits and how they appear and occur in different contexts.

To make sense of the ways in which YouTube's three most popular gaming vloggers expressed and performed their gender, we have found it necessary to move beyond the longstanding concepts of HMT and to use, in tandem, IMT. Close observation of the vloggers' top ten videos show that they present, perform and engage with masculinity in ways that are frequently inconsistent with the tactics of subordination and marginalisation that are key characteristics of Connell's foundational work. Given the dominant themes of ironic heterosexual recuperation and changing gay discourse, affectionate homosociality, and

the satirical rejection of hypermasculinity, we lean towards an understanding that culturally exalted masculinities are in transition, becoming more inclusive (Anderson, 2009) and more attenuated (Roberts, 2013). Paying close attention to young men's performances and constructions of gender at the micro level is important for theorising the structuring logic of masculinities, and for understanding how hegemonic norms come to operate and produce culturally exalted forms of expression. In this sense, our findings add to the work that problematises the explanatory potential of HMT. Such problematisation is particularly relevant to the specific environment of virtual gaming, which has largely (almost exclusively) been associated with the (re)production of hegemonic masculine norms. In other words, even in this digital space, one commonly associated with the tenets of HMT, we observe shifts in the performances of masculinities that cannot be adequately captured, or completely explained, through its framework. Similar to other spaces associated with traditional/orthodox masculinity, such as male sporting teams or schooling institutions, different and more attenuated forms of masculinity appear to be emerging (e.g. Roberts et al., 2016; McCormack et al., 2016; McCormack, 2012). In the case of the vloggers in this study, the tens of millions of viewers/subscribers suggest that these types of masculine identities are culturally exalted among the predominately young male audience, and this, in turn, reflects broader shifts in youth culture among the contemporary generation (Morris and Anderson, 2015). We would posit that this in part stems from the positive impacts of having more women associated with, and involved in, this type of gaming community, given the YouTube platform allows for diversity of audience and of opinion. Of note here, PewDiePie sometimes includes in his videos his girlfriend, a vlogger in her own right, as co-narrator and co-gamer.

While our findings show evidence of progress, this is not to suggest that contemporary masculinities can solely be understood through the framework of IMT. Indeed, Anderson

(2009) himself has clearly stated that two types of masculinity – one conservative and one more inclusive – tend to co-exist. Correspondingly, we find some more complex 'shades of grey' whereby instances of masculine performance associated with HMT also assert themselves. Vanoss, for example, presented more straightforward expressions of homophobia than PewDiePie or Sky but, importantly, the vlogger still attempted to minimise the harm of his comments. One reading of such reflexive behaviours might be that, as major and usually sole sources of income, hetero-male gaming vloggers are merely cognisant of the reputational damage and related financial implications that might occur if they publicly espouse homophobic sentiments. Given the other aforementioned themes of inclusive/unorthodox masculine expression found across all three vloggers' work, we think this more cynical reading is unsatisfactory; however, even if the gaming vloggers' presentation of tolerance *is* nothing more than a veneer, this would still show that such behaviour is deemed (at least partially) unacceptable at a cultural level.

Our research, then, adds to the growing body of work highlighting the emergence of increasing levels of complexity in the construction of contemporary masculine identities. Scholars should take seriously the possibility of more egalitarian uses of digital media and virtual gaming by heterosexual young men, rather than viewing these spaces as solely reproducing hegemonic notions of masculinity. Indeed, in noting these productive possibilities, we might be better placed to further perpetuate more fully inclusive masculinities. To this end, future studies in this emerging area of research might include in-depth interviews with the audience-consumers of such work, as well as more intensive examination of gaming vloggers below the level of celebrity examined here.

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