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## **“Swagger”: urban youth culture, consumption and social positioning**

Sociological studies of youth culture have often focused on processes of social identification. Though some of this work has explored the importance of consumption within young people’s identity practices, much has foregrounded the effects of economic marginality and neglected the importance of ‘race’. This article explores the role of clothing and embodied dispositions, popularly referred to as “swagger”, within the ways that young people position themselves in relation to each other.

Drawing on field notes and focus group data with a predominantly Somali sample of teenage boys, in a Northern English city, this article elucidates the centrality of these seemingly mundane cultural signifiers within everyday processes of ‘racial’ and classed positioning. In doing so, the article seeks to extend contemporary studies of youth culture, consumption and identification by evidencing how marginalised young people simultaneously challenge and reaffirm their positioning, through the performance of stylized masculinity and swagger.

Keywords: consumption, identification, everyday, positioning, ‘race’, Somali, swagger, youth culture

### **Corresponding author**

Will Mason, The University of Sheffield, Department of Sociological Studies, Elmfield, Northumberland Road, Sheffield S10 2TU, UK.

Email: [w.j.mason@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:w.j.mason@sheffield.ac.uk)

### **Introduction**

Investments in style play an important role in the everyday lives of young people. Sociological studies have suggested that increasingly, it is assemblages of goods, clothing and bodily dispositions that constitute the medium through which young people accrue social value and perform their production of similarity and difference (Dolby, 2010; Featherstone, 2007; Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013). In England, much recent sociological writing about young people and consumer culture has focused on the looting that took place during the 2011 summer riots (Bauman, 2011; Casey,

2013; Miles, 2014; Moxon, 2011; Treadwell et al., 2013; Winlow and Hall, 2012). Approximately 2,500 shops were looted in England between the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 10<sup>th</sup> of August 2011, costing up to an estimated £300m in insurance claims (Lewis et al., 2011). London, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and Nottingham were the areas most affected and looting behaviour was disproportionately focused on stores containing high value electrical goods and sports fashion retailers like Footlocker and JD Sports (Briggs, 2012). The targeted nature of this looting provoked a number of critical sociological reflections about the allure of consumerism for young people (Bauman, 2011; Miles, 2014; Treadwell et al., 2013). Indeed, the looting of sports fashion retailers during this period of unrest demonstrated, in a profound way, the importance of consumer items such as clothing and footwear for many. However, in their focus on riotous behaviours these sociological reflections have largely neglected the salience of consumption in the mundane and everyday practices of young people. In fact, with some notable exceptions (Archer et al., 2007; Bennett, 1999a; 1999b; Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Hockey et al., 2015; Nayak and Kehily, 2014) little empirical research has focused on the *everyday* identity practices of young people in relation to cultural signifiers such as clothing and embodied dispositions. Those that do have largely failed to examine the ways that young people negotiate their sartorial identity '*in relation to one another* [and] in terms of *everyday* practices and processes' (Robinson, 2014: 152 emphasis added).

This article explores the role of clothing and embodied dispositions, popularly referred to as "swagger" within the ways that young people position themselves in relation to each other. Swagger is a popular term used within contemporary youth culture that refers to the performance of style, involving knowledge of what to wear and how to wear it (Harvey et al., 2013). Swagger is also closely associated with urban grime music and hip hop culture. Branded sportswear items such as hooded sweatshirts and trainers are staple features of this aesthetic. These garments are also often deemed to be signifiers of criminality and threat, through their associations with "ungovernable" working

class and minority ethnic male youth (Archer et al., 2007). Swagger, therefore, is a performance and an aesthetic that can be seen to signify classed, gendered and racialized positions.

Though much sociological research has considered the symbolic value of clothing within young people's identity practices (Archer et al., 2007; Bennett, 1999a; 1999b; Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Hebdige, 1979; Hockey et al., 2015; Nayak and Kehily, 2014; Robinson, 2014; Treadwell et al., 2013), less has done so in relation to social positioning along the lines of 'race' and class (Bhachu, 2005; Miller, 2010; Nayak, 2005). Exceptions to this rule have tended to focus on the cultural significance of traditional racialized aesthetics such as the salwaar-kameez (Bhachu, 2005) or the sari (Miller, 2010) but these accounts do little to capture the role of contemporary aesthetics within the identity practices of minority ethnic and male youth. Using data from ethnographic research with a predominantly Somali sample of teenage boys, this article seeks to extend contemporary sociological writing on style, youth culture and identification (Archer, 2007; Bennett, 1999a; 1999b; Bhachu, 2005; Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Miles, Cliff and Burr, 1998; Nayak, 2005) paying explicit attention to the ways that material and embodied signifiers factor in the construction of 'racial' and classed distinctions. This article also adds to a limited body of sociological research exploring the experiences of British Somali youth (Abdi, 2015; Phoenix, 2011; Valentine and Sporton; 2009). Though, it should be noted that existing studies have reported on similar identity based consumption practices amongst adolescent males and females from other ethnic backgrounds (Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Nayak and Kehily, 2014).

Despite the established nature of the UK Somali population, Somalis remain a minority group about which little is known. Though it is difficult to accurately calculate the size of immigrant populations, it has been estimated that to date over 100,000 Somalis live in the UK (ONS, 2013). In fact, the numbers are likely to be much larger because this estimate does not include those who identify as Somali but were born inside the UK. Patterns of Somali migration into the UK have existed since the

late 19<sup>th</sup> century. However the UK Somali population increased substantially in the 1990s, following the outbreak of the Somali civil war (ONS, 2013).

The recent migration history of many UK Somalis has implications for their economic status. The New Policy Institute reported that, in 2011, 56% of Somali born men and over 75% of Somali born women living in London lacked paid work (Aldridge et al., 2013). These unusually high figures are indicative of the fact that the majority of Somalis in the UK will have arrived fleeing violence and persecution rather than through labour migration channels. Research in London and Manchester has also found that recently arrived Somalis tend to have fewer social connections than other ethnic groups alongside fearing racial and Islamophobic harassment, whereas younger Somalis, raised in the UK, are more likely than their parents to mix with people from different ethnic backgrounds (Hudson et al., 2007). These data suggests that though the experiences of first and second generation Somalis differ, Somalis largely inhabit a socially and economically marginalised position within UK society.

This article begins with an outline of the conceptual framework, detailing some of the key sociological literature on ‘positioning’ (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999; Phoenix, 2005) and ‘racialization’ (Alexander and Knowles, 2005; Jenkins, 2008; Nayak, 2005). This is followed by an overview of relevant sociological writing on style, similarity and difference in contemporary youth culture. The article then details the study, illustrating the research sites and methods. The main part of the article reports on the empirical data, collected from focus groups and field notes. Finally, the article concludes with recommendations to extend sociological studies of youth culture in order to better understand the processes by which marginalised young people actively manage their social positioning, acknowledging the centrality of consumption within these practices.

## Theorising positioning and racialization

Positioning is an increasingly popular theoretical approach within sociological studies of identification (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999; Phoenix, 2005). It also departs from conventional notions of ‘Othering’ employed within sociological studies of poverty to explain the positioning of ‘the poor’ by the ‘non-poor’ as passive and stigmatised objects (Chase and Walker, 2012; Lister, 2004). Rather, positioning is a way of understanding identification which focuses on the role of discursive practices in the production of similarity and difference, acknowledging the simultaneity of identification *and* categorisation within these processes (Jenkins, 2008). As Goffman (1969) has pointed out, when individuals enter each other’s presence they commonly seek to acquire information about each other, or bring into play information already possessed. That is, they simultaneously position themselves in relation to one another by drawing on and interpreting information given and information given off (Goffman, 1969; van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). The clues that we rely on to do this include ‘embodiment, clothing, language, answers to questions, incidental or accidental disclosures of information, and information from third parties’ (Jenkins, 2008: 26).

According to Phoenix (2005: 107) ‘racialization and positioning are complimentary and mutually reinforcing theoretical concepts in that racialization can be seen as positioning in relation to race’. This article understands ‘race’ as a contested and shifting ‘system of social meanings and cultural classifications’ (Alexander and Knowles, 2005: 11). This stance challenges outdated notions of ‘race’ as an objective condition by focusing on the ‘processual and relational character of racial identity’ (Winant, 2000: 185). Racialization, therefore, relates to the ways in which ideas about ‘race’ are attributed, recognising that what becomes known as ‘race’ is constructed out of the ‘particular ways in which people are classified and seen’ (Murji and Solomos, 2005: 8). Indeed, whilst there is no way to objectively classify groups according to ‘racial’ characteristics, the positioning narratives that this article goes on to explore have clearly ‘racial’ and classed components. ‘Race’, hereby, can be

understood as socially constructed and reproduced through narrative and interpretive processes of social positioning, or ‘racialization’.

Studies of racialization have usefully captured the processes by which cultural attributes, like music and clothing, can come to signify ‘racial’ identities. Nayak’s (2005) ethnographic work with racialized masculine subcultures involved interviewing mixed heritage members of a racist ‘Skinhead’ group who spoke at length about having to ‘whiten’ their dress style, language and bodily comportment in order to fit in with their white peers. As part of the same study Nayak also interviewed white members of a ‘B-Boy’ peer group who were heavily influenced by basketball and hip-hop culture. These respondents dressed in loose fitting streetwear in order to position themselves alongside their black sporting heroes. Ethnographic work has also demonstrated the contested nature of racialized identity performance. In a study of white hip hop enthusiasts Bennett (1999b: 12) observed how his respondents, who ‘dressed in typical African-American hip hop style’, were subject to various taunts like ‘wigger’ as they made their way through central Newcastle. In both studies, the subjects used clothing and embodied practices to present themselves according to racialized narratives about the appearance and behaviours of ‘racial’ groups. Drawing on the work of relevant identity theorists (Goffman; 1969; Jenkins, 2008; Nayak, 2005; Phoenix, 2005) this article adopts a conceptual framework that incorporates the language of positioning in order to explain the centrality of clothing and embodied dispositions within the construction and interpretation of ‘racial’ and classed identities.

### **Style, similarity and difference**

Sociological studies have detailed the intersection of ‘race’, class and gender in the formation and performance of youth identities (Bennett, 1999; 2005; Hollingworth, 2015). However, attempts to theorise the operation of style within young people’s everyday lives have largely foregrounded the effects of economic marginality. Archer et al’s (2007: 223) research explores how working class

youth actively construct ‘collective (classed) identities (creating distinctions between ‘us’ and ‘them’) through their consumption of particular (sportswear) brands’ like Nike. Hamilton’s (2011) research with low-income families has since demonstrated the paradoxical effects of working-class consumption. In this research young people emphasised the importance of designer sports clothing for ‘fitting in’ at school despite the fact that wearing this clothing reproduced classed ‘chav’ stereotypes. Reporting on the role of consumption in the lives of British teenagers Isaksen and Roper (2012) found that young people from low income households were particularly effected by the stigmatising consequences of failing to ‘keep up’ with consumption trends. More recently, in their research with young men and teenage mothers from lower working-class backgrounds Nayak and Kehily (2014) explored the management of social class stigma, elucidating the ways that markers of class disparagement, like clothing, can be re-evaluated and coded as positive within local youth circuits. Though these studies offer useful contributions to the sociology of youth culture, gender and class, they are conspicuous in their failure to engage with other salient markers of similarity and difference, like ‘race’.

Hollingworth (2015) has explored the intersection of social class, gender and ‘race’ within contemporary youth formations. Analysing her study of youth friendships in London schools Hollingworth (2015: 1237) argued that ‘not only do structures of class, race and gender still constrain young people’s affiliations and identifications, but subcultures play a role in re-enforcing these very structures’, through the performance and reading of various capitals. Indeed, Dolby (2010) has suggested that for young people tastes are frequently part of a larger pattern of often racialized youth culture. In fact, the performance of racialized masculinity has longstanding associations with signifiers of taste, like clothing. This is illustrated by Alexander’s (1996: 56) examination of ‘black masculinity’ which demonstrates the processes by which racialized identities are ‘both maintained and made more flexible through the use of symbolic boundary markers, such as dress’ (*see also* Lamont and Molinár, 2001).

This article seeks to extend this existing work, by empirically demonstrating the ways in which a group of mostly Somali teens positioned themselves in relation to ‘Others’, along the lines of ‘race’ and class. Acknowledging the centrality of consumption within these practices the article also seeks to show how, from an otherwise marginalised position, these respondents actively generated as much value as possible through the construction and performance racialized masculinity, or swagger.

The next section outlines the research setting and the methods used to generate the data used in the analysis.

### **The study**

The data presented in this article are taken from a broader ethnographic study that sought to investigate the everyday experiences of marginalised young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. Fieldwork took place between 2010 and 2013 and was located in and around two youth clubs and a homework club in Maple and Meadow, two areas of Forgefield, a post-industrial northern city<sup>i</sup>. Maple and Meadow are ranked amongst the 20% most deprived neighbourhoods in England (ONS, 2011). Both were perceived locally as ‘risky’ places to walk through at night and Maple, in particular, was known for its Somali community and the presence of ‘Somali gangs’<sup>ii</sup>. At the time of the research Maple was subject to Home Office visits that aimed to develop discourses between youth workers, local residents and policymakers, with aim of tackling this perceived problem.

The youth clubs and the homework club took place in community centres situated centrally in both Maple and Meadow. The homework club ran twice weekly, on Monday and Thursday nights, offering free homework support with IT facilities. The Maple and Meadow youth clubs held weekly sessions (on Friday and Wednesday nights, respectively) delivering a basic youth offer with table tennis, pool, table football and IT facilities. Despite being open-access, these youth services were principally attended by Somali teenagers (aged 13 – 19) from the adjacent housing blocks.

Fieldwork amounted to a minimum of four evenings of voluntary youth work per week, until 2012, when funding cuts forced the Meadow youth club to close and the Maple Homework club to cancel its Monday night sessions. This reduced the fieldwork to two evenings per week. Data were collected overtly using a range of methods including informal group discussions (about topics such as clothing, music, sport, education and friendships), participant observation and focus groups, with fieldnotes compiled daily as 'a running log' (Jackson, 1990: 6). Participating as a youth worker throughout this fieldwork enabled both the development of rapport and the arrival at a detailed understanding of the everyday concerns and practices of the subjects (Alder and Alder, 1987). However, this is not to deny the presence of methodological drawbacks and complexities. For example, there were topics, such as drug dealing, that some respondents avoided discussing with youth workers due to the workers' association with members of the local community, like parents<sup>iii</sup>.

Following six months of participant observation a convenience sample of young people from the youth clubs (Maple [n=6] and Meadow [n=4]) were approached by the researcher and invited to participate in focus groups (see table 1). Focus groups took place during youth club sessions, in quiet rooms, and aimed to capture respondents' experiences of growing up in Maple and Meadow. Conversations were loosely structured and opened with the question "tell me about your area". Follow up questions were then derived from responses and respondents were encouraged by the researcher to comment on each other's opinions and ideas. Recognising that this design raises questions in terms of transparency and precision for focus group research (Cry, 2015) it is also important to state that the approach served several purposes, not least in terms of prioritising the respondents' 'hierarchy of importance', using *their* language, concepts and frameworks for understanding the world (Kitzinger, 1994). Both groups reflected with consistency on their frustrations about the reputations associated with the areas they lived, before going on to discuss the ways in which being from Maple or Meadow influenced their identity practices, including a sense

of feeling criminalised by ‘Others’ alongside their expression of a particular performance of self, achieved through dress, bodily comportment and swagger. These data were later augmented by a follow up focus group, convened with the same Maple respondents. This time the discussion was opened with the question “talk me through what you are wearing”. A parallel follow up could not take place in Meadow due to the closure of the youth club.

*Insert table 1*

Conversations were recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Those transcripts were reviewed line for line and coded using an open coding technique. Coded data were then organised thematically, alongside fieldnotes and relevant fieldwork ‘episodes’ (Emerson et al., 2011). This generated three areas of analytical interest: designer brands and boundary making; swagger and authenticity; and, popularity. I now discuss these findings in turn.

### **Designer brands and boundary making**

The symbolic value of designer brands for adolescent group affiliation and the achievement of social status is well documented (Harvey et al., 2013; Hamilton, 2011; Isaksen & Roper, 2012). Anderson’s (2000: 73) ethnographic work with Philadelphia youth has suggested that for young people, ‘to be respected, it is vital to have the right look’. Hamilton’s (2011) work with low-income families in Northern Ireland has also shown that access to the ‘right brands’ can function as a coping mechanism for otherwise socially excluded young people. Nike, Adidas, Ralph Lauren Polo, Stone Island, Luke, Armani, Gucci and Giuseppe were all popular brands, worn by many of the teenage boys who frequented the youth clubs. For the young people in this study having ‘the right look’ was a matter of importance upon which great resource and effort was placed. Designer goods were acquired by a variety of means including hand downs from older siblings or peers and gifts from

family members at religious celebrations, like Eid. Respondents also raised money to purchase clothing independently, either by “hustling” (bulk buying and then selling) chocolate and sweets at school, working part time jobs, or “working on the roads” (delivering or selling drugs like cannabis, crack cocaine and heroin). Though “working on the roads” was by far the most financially lucrative occupation available to these young people, most were still able to acquire some designer goods by the lawful means described.

Indeed, throughout fieldwork the importance of presenting the ‘right look’ was evidenced, at least in part, by the consequences of failing to do so. This is illustrated by the story of Laiq, depicted in the following fieldnote:

*Laiq arrived at the Maple youth club around 19.00. He was wearing his work experience uniform; black shoes, smart trousers and a black polo shirt, with a green company logo. Amused, Ceclo and Killa were quick to joke that Laiq had only attended the session in uniform because he could not afford any more fashionable clothing. Ceclo (becoming animated at this point) went on to tease Laiq, loudly recounting a story about a t-shirt he had worn throughout the previous summer. When the days grew warmer and the group took to wearing vests and sleeveless basketball jerseys, Laiq (without the resources to buy a vest) had cut the sleeves off his t-shirt and attempted to pass it off as a new vest. The alteration fooled nobody and formed the basis for a story that was often retold at Laiq’s expense.*

Across the data respondents took pride in the fact that young people from Maple and Meadow were recognised by their peers for being distinctly stylish and streetwise. During the focus groups Zannoti pointed out that people from Meadow wore “expensive tracksuits” and Halimo acknowledged that people from Maple “wear Nike shoes”. Respondents also commented on the utility of designer brands for achieving popularity in school and distinguishing between groups. This is articulated in the following exchange:

Killa: I think you get popular by the way that you dress. So say in school yeah, whoever comes with the freshest creps<sup>iv</sup> yeah, obviously everyone would chill with him.

Saeed: Yeah you can make friends from the way that you dress. Because there's some guys around my school that I'd not seen before, and they were wearing nice trainers and I was like "Yo yo you've got some nice dress sense, where did you get this and that from?"

Killa: This comes back to brands as well. People, obviously some normal people don't know about the designer brands, like the big ones like Fendi and that. But a person who does know about it, and a person who's wearing it, they obviously recognise each other. Real recognise real.

An interesting feature of Saeed and Killa's discussion is the emphasis placed on their knowledge of high-end designer brands, like Fendi. This consumer knowledge was mobilised as a means of positioning the groups they defined as 'normal' or 'real'. Becker's (1963) analysis of deviant group culture illustrated the processes by which Jazz musicians positioned themselves against outsiders or 'squares'. Here, every 'item of dress, speech and behaviour' which differed from that of the musician was taken as evidence of the 'squares' ignorance of the culture of the deviant group (Becker, 1963: 90). In the extract above, Saeed and Killa articulate a similar process, where 'normal' people, who were also imagined as 'white', are positioned as unable to interpret the symbolic value of high end designer brands. By referring to themselves as 'real' Saeed and Killa also position themselves as authentic ambassadors of their peer group, identifiable through their consumption of expensive goods and their presentation of stylized black masculinity (Alexander, 1996). Indeed, the implicit operation of 'race' within these positioning narratives was demonstrated further by the groups' comments on branding, class and place:

Interviewer: You don't see Gucci and Fendi in like, Oakridge (an affluent and predominantly 'white' area).

Halimo: Yeah but Gucci and Fendi, we've took it off the rich people. We've took it off the rich people.

Ceclo: But the rich people don't even wear Gucci man.

Halimo: Yeah they don't wear it because they think it's cheap. Them guys, whatever they wear, we'll wear it. Like now everyone's starting to wear that, Ferragamo.

...

Saeed: Do you remember Burberry? Burberry used to be big. Rich people used to wear it at first, until everyone started wearing it. Then rich people scammed<sup>v</sup> it because it started becoming 'chavy'.

In this exchange the perceived avoidance of designer brands, like Gucci and Fendi amongst the residents of Oakridge (an affluent and predominantly 'white' area) is interpreted as a product of the respondents' brand appropriation. For Halimo, presenting in Gucci and Fendi represented a conscious application of agency, taking brands "off the rich people" by imbuing them with less desirable 'racial' and classed associations. These data have a bearing on existing studies of brand appropriation, particularly in terms of the recoding of aspirational brands, like Tommy Hilfiger and Ralph Lauren Polo, observed amongst African-American youth in the first wave of hip-hop influence (Lewis and Gray, 2015).

Sociological studies of childhood poverty (Ridge, 2002) and low income families (Hamilton, 2011) have largely theorised the consumption of designer goods by economically marginalised groups as a means of 'fitting in' to avoid the 'shame' and stigma of poverty (Lister, 2004). Conversely, instead of trying to conform to the tastes set by those with the power to do so (Bourdieu, 1984) what Saeed, Halimo and Ceclo articulate is a conscious play on classed and 'racial' boundaries, through their appropriation of the signs that signify white middle/upper class privilege (Archer et al., 2007).

Indeed it was the perceived cheapening of these brands, through their appropriation, that allowed respondents to feel like they had ‘taken them off’ the ‘rich people’, positioning themselves as distinct or even better than their ‘white’ peers. As Zimbo put it, swagger is not about ‘fitting in’, “swag is a way to compete with people from higher classes”. Rather than focusing on working class consumption as a means of conformism these data suggest that more fruitful attention might be paid to the conscious processes of ‘racial’ and classed positioning, constructed through young people’s expression of sartorial racialized masculinity and swagger.

### **‘Don’t beg it’: swagger and authenticity**

Swagger is a term that arose consistently throughout the field work. For the most part, its use was complimentary; suggesting that somebody had swagger functioned as a means of validating the way that they presented themselves. Yet, despite the regularity of its use, swagger was difficult for respondents to define. In their attempts respondents offered energetic and nuanced depictions of style and gait, detailing the significance of fashion knowledge and embodied markers of race and class:

Saeed: It depends what type of swagger. You know? Top swag is the ones that are up there and not anyone can have it. And, you could be wearing nice wicked clothes yeah, but it’s also the way you present yourself. You need to be looking, head up, shoulders up, you need to be walking like you’re on top of the world innit.

Killa: Posture 100

Saeed: But then if I’m wearing these clothes and I’m all looking down then I’m not gonna be up there. You’re gonna be like: “all right nice clothes but you haven’t got the full swag”. Swag’s the full package. The way you walk, the way you talk, the way you stand [...] It’s about more than just clothing. It’s about the way you present yourself.

Saeed and Killa's attention to *how* clothing is worn, rather than simply *what* clothing is worn suggests that there is an art to achieving 'top swag'. For Saeed and Killa 'top swag' required both a particular kind of fashion knowledge and bodily discipline. If performed successfully, with the appropriate level of nonchalance (Harvey et al., 2013), this facilitated a look that was rich in exchange value for those 'literate in reading the subcultural codes' (Harrison, 2009:106).

Authenticity was also central to the respondents' definition of swagger (Harvey et al., 2013) and indications of 'racial' and classed backgrounds were identified as central markers of authenticity. This was policed by respondents throughout the field work by their use of the phrase "don't beg it", the best translation of which I received was "don't act like something you're not". Those identified as 'beggin' it' lost face amongst their peers for delivering an inauthentic presentation of self. As Ahmed illustrates:

Ahmed: So say if I'm from a posh side like Millside (an affluent and predominantly 'white' area) or somewhere, and you see me wearing a track suit with my posh accent, I'm gonna look like a dick head. I'll look like I'm beggin' it. I'm trying too hard to be something I'm not.

Skeggs' (2004) theorisation of the 'middle class self' has detailed the processes by which those with the power and resources to do so sample and appropriate elements of working class culture into their own 'accumulative self'. This is a practice Skeggs (2004) calls 'middle-class omnivorousness', which denotes the re-fashioning of the self through the appropriation of cultural resources (from high to low). Indeed, the increasing commodification of urban fashion and music genres, like grime, demonstrates both the economic and symbolic value of the racialized urban styling associated with working class youth culture (Dolby, 2010; Frosh et al., 2002). Respondents' use of the phrase 'don't beg it' allowed them to resist inauthentic appropriations of swagger by 'threatening to expose and ridicule the pretensions and inaccuracy of new middle-class formations' (Skeggs, 2004: 154). For example, Ahmed recognised that the embodiment of individuals' social conditions (being from

Millside) is expressed through their gestures and actions (having a posh accent). This is a condition Bourdieu (1977) coined ‘bodily hexis’, a term used to signify ‘the manner and style in which actors ‘carry themselves’: stance, gait, gesture etc.’ (Jenkins, 1992: 75). Across this data, respondents consistently interpreted the information individuals ‘gave off’ (Goffman, 1969), through their ‘bodily hexis’ (Bourdieu, 1977) as markers of authenticity in the performance of swagger. In this respect swagger and the boundary work surrounding it signified respondents’ attempts to make exclusive the value associated with the racialized working class youth culture they identified with. Indeed, on one occasion, during the field work, this boundary work was demonstrated at my expense. The following field note illustrates how:

*I'm working with Fadila and Maryam downstairs on the (Homework Club) laptops. They're being chatty, as usual. After a while Fadila and Maryam's chatting reaches a level that seems disruptive for the students around them. I attempt to split them up and Fadila tries to convince me that she and Maryam are working on their homework together. This is clearly not the case. Because Fadila is lying to me, I tell her not to 'beg it'. Using this term seems to amuse Maryam and the surrounding students. Fadila quickly counters, arguing that I'm beggin' it by saying 'don't beg it'.*

Fadila’s quick response demonstrates the expositive function of the phrase ‘don’t beg it’. In this case revealing my inauthenticity enabled Fadila to challenge my disciplinary rites within the space of her local Homework Club. In doing so Fadila distinguished the boundary between herself, a local Somali girl and me, a white, middle class volunteer and researcher. This purpose was later confirmed by Ceclo in his interpretation of the event:

Interviewer: One time, one of the girls in the Homework Club said that I was beggin’ it by saying ‘don’t beg it’.

Ceclo: (Laughs) It's because you're white, that's why they're gonna say that, it's because you're white.

These data suggest that the performance and regulation of swagger represent an attempt to control access to the symbolic value of racialized working class youth culture (Skeggs, 2004). Indeed within the everyday settings that these young people spent much of their time, like school, the youth club or the local neighbourhood, it was their position as authentic ambassadors of these cultural attributes that enabled them to generate the most social value from their otherwise constrained racialized and classed positioning. This observation was demonstrated further within the respondents' discussion of getting and being known.

### **On getting and being known**

The young people involved in this research often talked about 'getting known'. Indeed, local notoriety and popularity were both clear priorities. During focus groups respondents reflected on their efforts to stand out and achieve popularity by 'getting known' in school.

Ceclo: I used to try so hard in school. All these lot. All these white people yeah (pause) they had money. They had a lot of money. Like, man got like helicopter and stuff. I'm jokin', but they got a lot of money. But they wear like the same jacket and stuff for four days – and I'll wear a new jacket every day and they're like: "Oh are you rich, are you this, are you that?"

Maqil: Check this, like Saeed said, if we're not known, or rich, now, and we see bare (lots of) people who are wearing like Stone Island and Ralph [Lauren], and we've got no money like, our family's broke, we're gonna think like, oh how are we gonna get known?

Ceclo and Maqil's exchange suggests that at school coming from a disadvantaged background amplified the importance of 'being known'. For both respondents wearing designer clothing functioned as a means of 'getting known', prompting attention from 'white people'. Arguably, these

priorities demonstrate the lack of opportunity, beyond conspicuous consumption, that respondents faced in their pursuit of social recognition at school. This is distinguished against the broader range of opportunities available to more affluent young people. As Archer et al. (2007: 232) have highlighted, 'middle class pupils may not only be able to draw on a broad range of resources from which to attempt to generate capital, but appearance may be just one site among others for generating value or worth'. For these respondents, the performance of swagger facilitated the generation of as much value as possible from the basis of their racialized and classed positioning. These data resonate with the findings of Abdi (2015), Phoenix (2011) and Frosh et al. (2002) who have all highlighted Somali respondents' propensity to adopt and perform black masculinity in order to gain status in school.

Outside of school the importance that respondents 'attributed to the symbolism carried by consumer objects' (Treadwell et al., 2013: 11) also played an important role in their aspirational popularity. However, respondents also noted that actually 'being known' alleviated the necessity to achieve status through the consumption of designer goods and the presentation of swagger. This is something Maqil explained in his discussion of local drug dealers:

Maqil: So for example let's say if someone is known in Forgefield, they don't have to wear Stone Island, Gucci, whatever makes. They can wear anything and they'll still look alright to everyone. Certain guys, you know the top ones, as soon as they made their money they don't buy certain stuff because they don't want to get attention. So for example, they're not gonna buy all these makes, all these makes like Luke that are gonna bring attention to the area.

In this extract Maqil explores the unwanted attention that conspicuous consumption can generate. Both of the research sites were subject to disproportionately high levels of surveillance and policing. Indeed during the research Maple and Meadow were both the target of large-scale drugs operations,

where a number of local young people were arrested for drug dealing. As Maqil points out, 'top' drug dealers, with local notoriety often no longer purchased expensive designer clothing. This could be understood on the one hand, as a means of sidestepping the unwanted attention that wearing designer clothing could provoke from the police, and, on the other, as a marker of 'top' drug dealers' social status. However it is also important to recognise that 'being known' was not restricted to deviant occupations like drug dealing, as Saeed and Ceclo confirmed:

Saeed: If you're a proper big timer like Maqil said, you don't need to be showing that you've got this and that. If you're a football player or like a doctor you don't need to show off.

Ceclo: You could just wear boxers in the street and people would still show you respect.

Saeed: You could be wearing just plain everything, but everybody would be like: 'Yo this guy's the biggest drug dealer or this guy's a football player, or this guy's thingi. He doesn't need to splash'.

In their comments Saeed and Ceclo reinforce the idea that being successful, either through legitimate or illegitimate means, elevates individuals' from the need to 'get known' through the performance of swagger. Being a footballer, a doctor or indeed a drug dealer generated enough local status to simply 'be oneself'. This suggests that, in the end, the performance of swagger closely relates to the insecurities that stem from relative inequalities of access to social and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1986). Performing swagger was strategic in that it enabled the respondents to stand out and generate as much value as possible from their racialized and classed positioning at the same time as aspiring, one day, not to need to. To this end, rather than attempting to fit in, the performance of swagger constituted a means of recoding as positive the racist and classed inscriptions that attribute value onto working class minority groups (Back, 2007; Skeggs, 2004). This is despite the fact that, as Back (2007: 58) puts it, this 'is a form of identity that turns the straightjacket of racist urban associations inside out, but remains held in it'.

## **Conclusion**

This article has contributed to sociological understandings of contemporary youth culture, consumption and identification. Given the scale of the study from which the article is based the findings presented should not be applied to other cases without caution. However, it is important to recognise that the practices observed are unlikely to be particular to Somali or male youth. Other studies have reported on similar findings across different samples, albeit with a less specific focus (Archer et al., 2007; Dolby, 2010; Hamilton, 2011; Harvey et al., 2013; Nayak and Kehily, 2014). This suggests that, though the article has presented data relating to a particular case, the findings are broadly representative of an increasingly common set of identity practices that can be observed across minority ethnic and marginalised youth.

The central argument presented has been that clothing and embodied dispositions, popularly referred to as swagger, play an important role in young people's negotiation of similarity and difference, alongside their accrual of social value. The argument has shown that, through a critical reading of signifiers like neighbourhood and accent, respondents were able to distinguish between what they interpreted as 'authentic' and 'inauthentic' appropriations of swagger according to markers of 'race' and class. In doing so the respondents, who positioned themselves as authentic ambassadors of racialized working class youth culture, resisted middle class appropriations of swagger, affirming boundaries of 'racial' and classed distinction. These findings are important for two key reasons.

In the first instance, they challenge previous analyses which have understood working class consumption primarily as means of 'fitting in' to avoid the 'shame' and stigma of poverty (Hamilton, 2011; Ridge, 2002). Instead, the respondents in this study discussed swagger as a means of standing out and becoming 'known' both within school and the local neighbourhood. Rather than something 'shameful' or stigmatising swagger was presented as a sought after status, evidenced by examples of

middle-class appropriation, not despite *but because* of its racialized and classed associations. In-depth ethnography and focus group discussions have elicited details of the ways in which, from an otherwise marginalised position, claiming swagger allowed these respondents to inhabit a position of status, compounded by narratives of ‘authenticity’ and the increasingly widespread popularity of racialized youth culture. Fundamentally these data evidence a conscious playing on and recoding of negative signifiers associated with working class, minority ethic youth. As Nayak and Kehily (2014: 1339) put it, rather than passive subjects these young people acted as critical agents who were able to “dissimulate from aspects of social class [and in this case racialized] stereotyping even as they acknowledge the existence of these formations”. Rather than studying marginalised youth from a deficit positon, these findings suggest more could be done to engage meaningfully with the processes by which disadvantaged young people actively produce and recode values in ways that allow them to challenge their marginality (Bennett, 2005; Nayak and Kehily, 2014).

Secondly, these findings demonstrate the value of studying everyday identity practices, even in relation to seemingly mundane signifiers like clothing, in order to extend understandings of ‘racial’ and classes positioning. Indeed, throughout the fieldwork respondents’ frequent discussions of swagger actually spoke to profoundly meaningful processes of social identification and positioning. These data reveal some of the ways in which the interpretation and reproduction of structural ‘racial’ and classed distinctions are woven into the mundane and everyday practices of young people, and inscribed into the material attributes of contemporary youth culture (Hollingworth, 2015). As Miles, Cliff and Burr (1998) have argued it is only by focusing on the mundane realities of everyday life that the relationship between consumption and identity can be fully realised. Yet, there remains a paucity of attention paid to the performative and sartorial aspects of ‘racial’ and classed identification within sociological studies of contemporary UK youth culture. This is despite the fact that young people are becoming increasingly image conscious and dissatisfied with the way that they look (The Children’s Society, 2014). Further research should build on the findings of this study in

order to more adequately capture the ways that young people utilise positioning narratives to challenge marginalisation, acknowledging the centrality of material culture within these practices.

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<sup>i</sup> All locations have been anonymised to safeguard the identity of respondents

<sup>ii</sup> The most recently available data suggest that 58% of Somalia-born people in Forgefield lived in the Maple area (Census, 2011).

<sup>iii</sup> The methodological efficacy and challenges of conducting research with young people as a youth worker are also demonstrated by other studies (*see for example* Alexander, 2000; James, 2015)

<sup>iv</sup> ‘Creps’ is a slang term for trainers

<sup>v</sup> ‘Scammed’ is a slang term for ‘rejected’

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### **Author biography**

Will Mason is a research associate based in the Department of Sociological Studies at the University of Sheffield. His research interests include the sociology of childhood and youth, consumption, families, identities and inequalities. He is currently working on the Nuffield-funded Child Welfare Inequalities Project.

Table 1. Respondents

Pseudonym	Age	Ethnicity	Location
Killa	17	Somali	Maple
Saeed	17	Somali	Maple
Halimo	17	Mixed heritage	Maple
Ceclo	16	Somali	Maple
Ahmed	17	Somali	Maple
Maqil	16	Somali	Maple
Zimbo	16	Somali	Meadow
Abillahi	17	Somali	Meadow
Mitch	17	Somali	Meadow
Zannoti	15	Somali	Meadow