What does it mean when people call a place a shithole?: Understanding a discourse of denigration in the British Isles

Abstract

This paper investigates what people mean when they engage in the discourse of denigration. Building on existing literature on territorial stigmatization that either focuses on macro-scale uses and effects of territorial stigmatization or micro-scale ethnographic studies of effects, we develop a novel approach approach that captures the diverse voices that engage in the discourse of denigration by tracing the use of the word and hashtag 'shithole' on the social media platform, Twitter in order to examine who is engaged in the stigmatizing discourse, the types of place that are stigmatized, and the responses to stigmatized places Using a robust data set, we highlight two key findings. First the majority of tweets were aimed at places where the tweeter was not from, a form of othering consistent with how territories are stigmatized by those in positions of power, such as policymakers, politicians, and journalists. Second, we note that an important and gendered minority of tweets can be characterized by a 'cry for help' and powerlessness, where the stigma is aimed at their own places. We offer an interpretive lens through which to understand and frame these minoritarian voices by engaging with theories of abjection that allow us to see how minoritarian voices relate to place

1. Introduction

Territorial stigmatization has emerged a key means of understanding place-based stigma. In a 2015 review of the literature on territorial stigmatization, a term coined by Loïc Wacquant

(1993), Tom Slater (2015) categorized the existing literature according to four themes: the political activation of territorial stigma; neighbourhood investment and disinvestment; residents' strategies for managing territorial stigmatization; and the production of territorial stigma. While Slater provides clear evidence on how researchers have painstakingly investigated issues of political activation, investment and disinvestment and coping strategies, "very few studies have taken up the challenge of tracing the production of territorial stigmatization (Slater 2015, 6)."

This paper specifically attempts to meet Slater's call for greater understanding of the production of territorial stigma. In this study, we take 'production' to mean the formation of denigration and stigmatization, the most basic act of stigmatizing through language. We seek to understand who is actively stigmatizing places, which places are being stigmatized, and which criteria are used to judge whether a place is worthy of condemnation. While the answers to some of these questions may *seem* obvious, they are not. As Slater has made clear, scholars have established how stigma is used, how it is coped with, and how it impacts policy and investment, but there remains a gap regarding what goes into someone making the decision to denigrate a place. Not enough is known to answer even the simple question: do people denigrate only other places or their own? The assumption would be that the former is true but, as this study shows, an important minority of stigmatizing behaviour is self-inflicted by residents.

One reason why we suggest the question of production has been overlooked is methodological and we argue that using a different methodological framework can guide studies of territorial stigma in novel ways.. Most existing studies are orientated either towards the study of powerful actors, or the study of lived-reality. Since stigma is about language and voice, most studies use either ethnographic methods or discourse analysis, for well-established reasons, generally

through single or comparative case studies. But the literature has generally been lacking approaches which attempt to analyse unmediated voices at scale – i.e. a large quantity of diverse voices not necessarily bounded by specific case studies or the inherent practical limits of ethnography and interviewing. Particularly, literature has tended to focus on places of poverty, deprivation and destitution (see for example Devereux et al. 2011a; Devereux et al. 2011b; Kallin and Slater 2014; Morris 2013; Rhodes 2012; Slater and Anderson 2011; Wacquant 1993; Wacquant 2007; Wacquant 2008). Our study extends the focus away from people and places of poverty and considers how territorial stigma's clutches extend beyond where the literature has so far shown us.

We solve this problem by conducting the first large-scale study of territorial stigma using nonreactive data from Twitter users in the United Kingdom and Ireland. As explained in more detail in the methodology section below, we examined a sample of 2,076 individual tweets emanating from the United Kingdom and Ireland between December 2015 and May 2016 which contained the word "shithole" or used the hashtag '#shithole'. User data enabled us to identify from where the Twitter user tweeted, the Twitter user's home location, the geography which the tweet was referring to, and the gender of the user. Using a process developed through rounds of discourse analysis developed from popular literature and online forums, we were able to develop a set of codes which get at the meaning of each use of "shithole". Further, and more fundamentally geographic, we coded each tweet according to the relational geography of each tweet. Was the person tweeting about a place where they lived or about r someone else's place?

Through this approach, we have been able to see who is stigmatizing place, which types of place are being stigmatized, where specifically is being stigmatized, whether a place is being

stigmatized by outsiders or by its own residents, and what criteria are used to determine whether a place is to be denigrated. Do Twitter users stigmatize for the same reasons that policy and the state does, i.e. the presence of certain people, poor conditions, or socio-economic difference? Or are there other reasons, like a persons' desire to leave, or something mundane like a place being boring? To what extent do the contours of the shithole discourse as evident in the data conform to the ways in which the literature shows it has been used by those in power, i.e. often along race or class lines?

While the dominant discourses of denigration operationalized by the state and media are heavily present in the data, and at times even dominant themselves, we argue that there is a great need to listen beyond the dominant voices who speak about 'other' places from afar and who reinforce the majoritarian discourses of demographic and politico-economic difference. While the same markers picked up on by powerful actors seeking to divide and stigmatize are prevalent among the majority of Twitter users who produce and re-produce stigma about an 'other' place from a distance, the minoritarian voices often speak from within places and engage in a form of auto-stigmatization which appears as a means of coping or a desire to leave. Part of our argument for the importance of these minority voices is that women are a key subset within this group. Although the majority of all denigrating tweets were from males (70.3%), women were the prime stigmatizers at the 'personal' scale. While the numerical imbalance in overall stigmatizing behaviour affirms existing literature on gender differences in online disclosure, we note that there are particular relational geographies ('own' and 'personal' scales that represent lived, quotidian geographies) at which women are actively involved in the (auto) stigmatization process. Many female Twitter users expressed a 'desire to leave' in response to proximity to or presence in what they perceived to be a stigmatized 'own' or 'personal' geography. We posit that this type of reaction can best be understood through a conceptualization of spatial abjection that builds on the work of Julia Kristeva (1982), Judith

Butler (1993), David Sibley (1995), and Imogen Tyler (2013). Such an approach highlights the desire, particularly among women, to eject place from self-identity.

In what follows, we first provide a more in-depth review of the literature on territorial stigma, better situating our study and making clear the logic behind the strategy we adopt. We then explain our methodology in depth, including our detailed coding mechanism. Next, we examine our findings in depth, focusing first on the majoritarian findings, which generally conform to similar logics as when the discourse is used or reproduced by the state. Race, class, foreignness and the act of 'othering' feature prominently. We then focus on the minoritarian voices within the dataset, on the aforementioned way in which gendered voices operationalize the notion of 'shithole' for very different reasons than do those in power. The penultimate section explains how a conceptualization of spatial abjection can allow us to understand these minoritarian voices and the desire to reject place from self-identity. Finally, we conclude with a summary of our findings and several questions that our study has raised, including whether national differences in territorial stigma noted by Wacquant (2008) transfers to individuals within those states. Is there a culture of place-based denigration in the UK and Ireland?

2. Origins of territorial stigmatization and the discourse of denigration

As developed by Wacquant, (Wacquant 1993; Wacquant 2007; Wacquant 2008; Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014), territorial stigmatization is situated at the intersection of space and place. Wacquant's framing of territorial stigmatization was the result of a union of Goffman's work on stigma with Bourdieu's work on symbolic violence and group-making (Wacquant 2008, 7), explaining that territorial stigmatization becomes normalized as a result of the internalization of social and political power dynamics. The concept is described by Wacquant as "the *powerful stigma attached to residence in the bounded and segregated spaces*, the 'neighbourhoods of exile' to which the populations marginalised or condemned to be redundant

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by the post-Fordist reorganisation of the economy and state are increasingly being relegated" (Wacquant 1993, 369).

Wacquant's conceptualization of territorial stigmatization has a strong discursive element. He explains that stigmatized locations are "widely labelled as 'no-go areas', fearsome redoubts rife with crime, lawlessness and moral degeneracy where only the rejects of society could bear to dwell" (Wacquant 2008, 29), thereby highlighting that it is the 'labelling', the rumour, the reputation surrounding an area that enables and facilitates territorial stigmatization. Language, in this understanding, is being used "as a form of social practice" (Fairclough 1995, 7) that constructs and attaches reputations, stigmas and stereotypes to certain geographies and those who live there and the adhesiveness of such discourse cannot be underestimated (Gourlay 2007).

In line with Slater's categorization of the literature according to four themes (2015), we also note two distinct focuses that divide the literature. The first includes work that focuses on the role of the powerful producers and users of stigma including the state, policy, and media whose dominant voices construct stigmatized locations (see Devereux et al. 2011a; Devereux et al. 2011b; Gray and Mooney 2011; Kallin and Slater 2014; Kornberg 2016; Schultz Larsen 2013; Wacquant 1993; Wacquant 1996; Wacquant 2007; Wacquant 2008) The second strand of literature has a primary focus on the lived experience of residence in a stigmatized location (see Gourlay 2007; Holt and Wilkins 2014; Keene and Padilla 2010; Morris 2013; Rhodes 2012; Slater and Anderson 2011). Several studies attempt to bridge the divide by considering and comparing the different perceptions of place by residents in and neighbours of stigmatized locations (see Hastings 2004; Hastings and Dean 2003; Jensen and Christensen 2012; Permentier et al. 2008 and Rijnks and Strijker 2013). This focus-oriented distinction is one of

the most important ways of understanding how the literature on territorial stigma has formed along the contours Slater (2015) discusses.

Literature in the first strand largely follows either a field-analytic approach detailed by Schultz Larsen (2013) that considers the roles of institutions and actors in positions of power, or a comparative ethnography and analysis as detailed by Wacquant (1996; 2007; 2008) that compares the roles of states in applying and facilitating spatial smear (Schultz Larsen, 2013). For Wacquant, the emergence of territorial stigma as a phenomenon is part of a larger advanced marginality that is the result of politico-economic changes at the end of the 20th century, defined by the post-industrial era and resultant economic changes, changing welfare systems and social structures (Wacquant 1993, 368; Wacquant 2007, 67; Wacquant 2008, 169). Stigmatized areas, in this analysis, are perceived as 'dumping grounds' (Wacquant 1993, 368) and areas of containment (Wacquant 1993, 371) for victims of changing economic and ethno-racial structures.

While Wacquant and Slater primarily consider the role of politico-economic actors as the activators of stigma, Devereux et al. (2011a; 2011b) introduce the media as another actor whose powerful voice creates a form of territorial stigma. Using a discourse analysis of newspaper coverage rather than an ethnographic approach, their study of the stigmatized Moyross housing estate in Limerick, Ireland, shows the prevalence of certain themes and descriptors in the coverage of Moyross (Devereux et al. 2011a). Their study highlights the role of the media and mainstream press in presenting a negative image of an area (Devereux et al. 2011a).

Wacquant, Slater, and Devereux et al. all consider the role of dominant forces and actors whose social, political or economic position allows them to create or promote territorial stigma,

sometimes for economic ends. Even when these studies use ethnographic methods, the ultimate analysis focuses on power dynamics that permit the activation of stigma. Several studies have compared the role of powerful groups with powerless groups through considering internal and external perceptions of an area. These studies highlight that the dominant, negative view of an area is largely held by outsiders, and that insiders tend to hold a more positive view of the area in which they live (Jensen and Christensen 2012; Permentier et al. 2008; Rijnks and Strijker 2013). These studies, whilst acknowledging the dominant and powerful producers of stigma, give voice to those living in the area to highlight the perceived positive traits of the location or the mechanisms used to cope with presence in a denigrated locale. However, Hastings (2003) and Hastings and Dean (2004) stress that within both groups there exists those who stigmatize. They highlight the role of other external agents who wield power over an area such as estate agents who can veer potential residents towards or away from perceived negative areas.

While most literature that focuses on dominant actors who activate territorial stigma connect the phenomenon to "forms of inequality and stratified social relations" (Rhodes 2012, 699), James Rhodes' ethnographic study of territorial stigmatization among British National Party (BNP) members in the de-industrial Northern city of Burnley shows that those involved in stigmatizing areas of the city do so based on perceived cultural or ethnic difference, thereby deflecting attention away from larger socioeconomic issues that create 'difference' (Rhodes 2012, 699). His study falls into the second category of work that considers the lived experience of reality from below or within a stigmatized location. The two focal approaches can be seen as differing in accordance to the voices that are dominant. In the first strand powerful voices that construct and activate stigma are the focus of the work, but the second strand foregrounds minoritarian voices that live and experience stigma daily.

While considering insider vs outsider perspectives, Jensen and Christensen also consider the role of actual and perceived cultural markers such as racism and difference as the foundations upon which territorial stigmatization are built. In their study of Aalborg East, Denmark, the authors contend, like Rhodes, that the visibility of race and ethnic difference is enough to trigger an imagined geography that invokes notions and fears of foreign 'ghettos', crime, danger and 'otherness' (Jensen and Christensen 2012, 83). Rhodes (2012) and Jensen and Christensen (2012) show that while territorial stigmatization may have a larger structural cause, at the micro-level individuals use cultural markers to build up their discourse of stigmatization and denigration.

Like Jensen and Christensen, Slater and Anderson (2011) highlight a sense of collective pride among residents of the stigmatized neighbourhood but, unlike the Danish study, Slater and Anderson's study from St Paul's, Bristol, shows that despite the pride, residents are acutely aware of the affects of living in a 'reputational ghetto', with respondents discussing judgement from friends, taxi drivers and other visitors (Slater and Anderson 2011, 10). The studies highlighted above that consider lived reality as the focus of study are primarily, effects-oriented. These studies add much to the debate but, by focusing on a single location (or locations), the data set is numerically and geographically limited. Though the 'powerful actors' focus picks up much of the state and economic power structures that can explain some structural, macro-scale dynamics, neither they nor the lived-reality focus studies can capture at once an aspect of the national discourse that explains how people perceive and stigmatize certain places.

Our strategy to deal with this gap is to use the wealth of data available online that can engage in micro-level analysis at a wider scale. Rather than using ethnographic methods that can only capture the story of a particular place and its people, this study uses a large Twitter data set to

allow individual voices to emerge while still giving a mappable, interpretable national picture of what people mean when they stigmatize place and what kinds of places they denigrate. Employing such an approach can move beyond the limits of one or two key locations presented in ethnographic studies (generally chosen as ideal or extreme types that represent locations assumed to be stigmatized), and can, instead, consider the national discourse of both insiders and outsiders at diverse locations.[1] While it may not be able to reach the individual stories that ethnographic methods may elicit, using online data can give a bigger picture of where people stigmatize and what qualifies a place as being worthy of stigma. Indeed, our approach captures the fuller extent of the impact and prevalence of territorial stigma, noting that it is not limited to places of poverty and deprivation. Further, by using nonreactive data, the findings better reflect stigmatization in its 'natural' form.

3. Methodology

This study began by a review of popular British literature, including the infamous *Craptown* books (Jordison and Kieran 2013; Kieran and Jordison 2003; Kieran and Jordison 2004) and important journalistic treatments (cf. Hatherley 2010). The *Craptown* books include an online component, which alerted us to the existence of other online forums that discuss and dissect locations using terms with obvious place-focused, derogatory intent, and widespread usage in the UK and Ireland. Within the popular discourse of denigration, we identified several key terms. The term 'craptowns' was popularized by books of the same name (Jordison and Kieran 2013; Kieran and Jordison 2003; Kieran and Jordison 2004). 'Armpit of England' is another popular term but is nation-specific, and places are often simply described adjectively as 'shit' or 'crap'. When examined against both Twitter data and online forums, it was clear that the term 'shithole' has common and widespread usage.[2] By selecting and analysing this one key

term it was possible to note trends and to engage in a level of qualitative analysis that would have been prohibitive with a larger data set that included more denigrating terms.

To access a robust dataset that would permit capture of minoritarian voices that often drowned out by the majoritarian or dominant discourse, we elected to use the social media platform Twitter to gather the data to be used for further analysis.[4] Twitter is a social media platform that allows users to microblog about their daily lives in 140 characters or less. There are 313 million monthly users worldwide (Twitter, 2016). The data for this study was collected over a 155-day period between December 2015 and May 2016 by a Twitter Listener programme to collect a sample of 2,337 tweets that included both a geotagged location and the term 'shithole'.

Each tweet was coded at three levels (Fig. 1). First, we sought to ascertain what, if anything, the user deemed to make a location a 'shithole'. Our analysis of the online forums, popular literature and responses to a failed online survey helped us see that that the term 'shithole' is employed to refer to: (1) a place defined by the type of people living there, (2) by a religious, racial or minority presence in an area, (3) by the area's socioeconomic factors, (4) by the area's physical attributes, and (5) by a lack of amenities in the area. Further codes such as those for crime, terrorism and rurality were generated according to the content of tweets.

[Fig. 1]

Second, we coded according to the user's personal reaction to the 'shithole', such as defensive discourse, comparative discourse or synecdoche--the generalization of the whole based on only one part or aspect (Fig. 1). Finally, and most critically for this paper, we developed relational geographies to explain the 'scales' at which the term 'shithole' was used or directed in the tweet. The geotagged location had to be checked for each tweet as the location corresponds not

with the user's given home location but with the location through which he or she is passing at the time the tweet is published. Each tweet was checked and corrected for accuracy to ensure that the location of the user was the home location rather than a temporary location. Tweets were thus categorized based on the geographic relation between the person and the object of the tweet (Table 1). The four main categories were: 1) "other" (n=760), i.e. a tweet about a place that was not the home of the tweeter, 2) "own" (n=480), i.e. a reference to the tweeters own area or region, 3) "particular facilities" (n=462), like a sports stadium, which were so common as to deserve their own category, and 4) "personal" (n=306), often a room or home or place of work. We include a miscellaneous category (n=67) to capture tweets which did not fit into the main typology.

[Table 1]

After coding, tweets were deleted where the meaning of term 'shithole' could not be derived from the tweets or the larger tweet-based conversation, or where tweets were duplicated, resulting in a final sample size of 2,076 tweets. Tweets were then also coded for gender, determined by comparing the user's username, photographs, tweets and profile page biographical information or links to other personal websites or online profiles. Gender was only coded as 'male' or 'female' when these factors all pointed to the user being of that particular gender. Where gender was not obvious through examination of the user's Twitter profile, tweets were coded for gender as 'unknown'.[6] The large data set (n=2,076), combined with detailed qualitative analysis, allowed us to capture and analyse the voices of hundreds of women who would otherwise be hidden by the prevailing assertive male-dominated conversation that characterizes online interaction and disclosure (Herring, 1993).[7]

4. Majoritarian voices, minoritarian voices

Table 1 provides a thorough breakdown of the results of the coding process, showing how tweets are broken down into relational geographical categories and how each of these geographical levels is stigmatized according to gender. We see that cumulative 'other' geographies (i.e. other area, other city, other region, other nation, and international) were most frequently stigmatized and branded as 'shitholes' with 36.6% of all tweets directed at the 'other' geographical scale. Conversely, 23.1% of tweets were directed at the 'own' geographical scale (i.e. own area, microgeography of own city, own city, own region, and own nation). 22.3% of tweets labelled particular facilities (including sports facilities and stadia, and other facilities including leisure facilities) as 'shitholes'. Finally, 14.7% of tweets were directed at 'personal' geographies (those that refer to a Twitter user's immediate and intimate geographical surroundings, including individual rooms, homes, and places of work or education)[8].

Across all geographical levels, it is clear that cities and sports facilities/stadia were denigrated most often. Analysis found that 29.4% of all tweets referred to the 'other city' level, followed by 'particular sports facilities' at 12.8% and 'own city' at 9.7% (see Table 1). These findings point to the fact that both at the cumulative category level (such as 'other' or 'own' geographies) and at the sub-category level (such as 'other city' or 'personal—home') that it is 'other' geographies that are most stigmatized and, as such, we can see that the majority of stigmatizing is directed *at* places rather from *within* places. That is, the stigmatizating occurs at a distance and these 'other geographies' tweets generally appear based on visits or external perception of place rather than an internal or lived experience.

While not all users specify a particular attribute that they deem paramount in a place being considered a 'shithole' and worthy of denigration, of those that do, demographic characteristics, including presence of a religious group, accent, migration, racial group, racist group and type

of people[9] and politico-economic traits are common at the 'other geographies' scale (Fig. 2). Evident, too, is that the 'other city' scale is often tied to a sporting rivalry, with 46.7% of tweets at the 'other city' level linking a city and a sports team/stadium, suggesting that Twitter users engage in synecdoche: they denigrate an entire town or city because of the presence of a particular sports team. This furthers the notion of denigration being used as a method of othering, stratification, and self-identification based on definition of an 'other'.

[Fig. 2]

Although synecdoche is used as a reaction to presence in or proximity to a perceived shithole, it is not the most common reaction used at the 'other geographies' scale. Most commonly employed is comparative discourse (Fig. 3), which serves to further separate the Twitter users from the location about which they speak. By comparing the 'shithole' or denigrated place to another area, the user asserts distance from the denigrated place, contributing to a popular hierarchy and stratification of places. By using geotagged locations it is also possible to note the 'hot-spots' of denigration at the 'other city' scale and, as might be expected, it is major urban areas that are stigmatized by outsiders but, as will be discussed later, the stigma is not limited to these urban areas.

The data overall shows clearly that it is an 'other' place that is most regularly stigmatized (36.6%). Most often, these dominant voices are men, and these male voices tend to stigmatize at the urban scale, and respond to denigration with comparative discourse thereby putting distance between the self and the denigrated. These dominant or majoritarian voices reinforce the Bourdieusian interpretation of society put forth by Wacquant in his conceptualization of territorial stigmatization (Bourdieu, 1991; Wacquant, 2008; Slater, 2016). In such a vision, symbolic power is enabled by a dominant group to impose a vision of society and to shape and stratify society (Wacquant, 2014: 1699; Slater, 2016). The majoritarian voices we hear in the

Twitter data inform, are informed by, and (re)produce the dominant groups, creating visions of society. Crucially, as we see from the data, most of these voices are talking about 'other' places, places that they are visiting or on which they paint stigmatizing imagery from a distance. Powerful majorities claim the debate and replicate the same tropes of race, physical dereliction, and class to create a discourse of denigration for political or economic ends (see Gourlay 2007; Gray and Mooney 2011; Hancock and Mooney 2011; Hastings and Dean 2003; Kallin and Slater 2014; Shaw and Porter 2009; Porter, 2013; Slater, 2015). But dominant voices, by writing from the outside or from-above, from positions of power and externality, do not capture the lived reality and the true views emerging from within a stigmatized location. They do not represent the silenced voices who offer a different perspective on what constitutes a denigrated location.

Digging beneath the dominant noise

Although most tweets talk about 'other' geographies, an important set of findings emerge from the non-dominant or minoritarian voices. Many of the 'own geography' tweets come from those who feel trapped and who want to remove themselves from the geographies in which they find themselves, and who use the language of territorial stigma to do this. These minoritarian voices that are most apparent in the 'own' and 'personal' geographies which account for 23.1% and 11.4% of tweets respectively. Even combined they do not equal the 36.6% of tweets that are directed at 'other geographies', but it is here that we find alternative reasons given as to what constitutes a denigrated place and what discursive reactions users take.

[Fig. 4]

At the 'own geographies' scale, demographic characteristics and politico-economic change are, as with the 'other geographies' scale, seen to be characteristics that make a place worthy of denigration. However, we also see that the physical surroundings and amenities become important at the 'own' scale (Fig. 4). Users pay attention to and stigmatize based on the appearance and physical degradation of their area, and they are also acutely aware of what is missing. They define a denigrated place based on what is lacking, on the lack of amenities and connections, and the perceived level of 'boredom' elicited by the location. At the 'personal geographies' scale, however, specific attributes are rarely given and we are simply left with the discursive reaction of a desire to escape, which echoes as a cry for help. For, at both 'own' and personal' scales, 'desire to leave' is used overwhelmingly as the reaction to presence in a denigrated place (see Figs. 5 and 6). As discussed in the following section, it is women who most often employ 'desire to leave' as a response.

[Fig. 5]

[Fig. 6]

5. Gendered voices

Research on online communication and gender tells us that there is a gender divide in terms of what males and females communicate online and the language they use. Online communication often falls "in line with the public man/private woman dichotomy that has been previously identified in gender research" (Herring et al. 2007, 17). Further, women are more likely to write with "their own lives as their subject" whereas men tend to write about other than themselves (Courtney Walton and Rice 2013, 1467). In terms of the language and register used online, where men use authoritative language, assertion, sarcasm, and challenging language (Herring 1993), women are more defensive and supportive, using apologies, justifications, and discussion based on personal values and experiences (Herring 1993).

From this, we might hypothesize that the discourse of denigration – a discourse of assertion, authority and othering that fits Herring's model of language and register (Herring 1993) – would be primarily male-dominated. Our study largely confirms this hypothesis. Although Sloan *et al.*'s study of a month of worldwide tweets in July 2012 tells us that Twitter users are roughly split between genders with 45% of Twitter users having a male name, 47% having a female name and 8% having a unisex name (2013), in our sample of 2,076 tweets, 70.3% of tweets were from males, 28.2% were from females with the remaining 1.4% from those whose gender was not ascertainable or who had a male-female shared account. This suggests that the shithole discourse, in which the majority of tweets are directed towards the 'other' scale in the UK and Ireland is, generally, male-dominated.[10]

While men are the primary stigmatizers of place, they are only the prime stigmatizers only at the 'other' scale (83.3% male, 14.6% female) and 'particular facilities' scale (87.7% male, 11.7% female, 0.4% unknown, 0.2% shared male and female account), the latter a reflection of the centrality of football to the shithole discourse in the UK. At the 'own' scale, the gender divide is more evenly split (54.0% male, 44.4% female), and it is females who overwhelmingly stigmatize 'personal' locations (35.6% male, 63.4% female) (see Fig. 2). Males engaged most in the discourse of denigration and were most frequently active in discussions of other locations—either specific 'other' geographic locations such as towns, areas within towns, regions or nations, or 'other' facilities to which they have no personal, lived or intimate connection. Females were active in the discussion of 'own' geographies almost as much as men, but they were most vocal and active at the personal geographic scale stigmatizing and denigrating their own personal geographies.

Further difference in gender can be seen in users' reactions to proximity to or presence in a perceived shithole. By 'reaction', we refer to the discursive response exhibited including affectionate or defensive discourse, comparative discourse and, commonly, a statement of a desire to leave. Only 4 users (3 males, 1 female) use direct distancing as a discursive response (for example, expressing sentiments of relief about not being from a particular place) but all discursive responses apart from affectionate/defensive discourse can be read as a means of indirect distancing. By noting a place is a 'shithole' and passing judgement, already the user is seeking to draw a division between self and place.

The difference between genders can be seen particularly in these reactions. Male tweeters frequently used comparative discourse to react to presence in a perceived shithole, which served as a means of separating and othering, echoing back to Courtney Walton and Rice's findings that men tend to write about things other than themselves (2013: 1467). By engaging in a reaction to a perceived shithole that is comparative, men increased this tendency to 'other' and to separate themselves, drawing a distinction and highlighting that what they are discussing is public rather than private. Women, however, offered a more personal response and, at all but the 'particular facilities' scale,[11] women react to proximity to or presence in a perceived shithole by stating a desire to leave (compare figures 3, 6, 7 and 8). While this, too, suggests a separation, it suggests a *desire* to separate, a desire that stems from an existing and enduring connection to a place. It implies a wish to sever ties with a place that they have experienced intimately. Female voices in the data are less assertive and challenging and more emotionally-charged, suggesting a desire to remove an element of fixity to a particular place, at least discursively. Their reaction of desiring to escape can be read as a desire to convert a lived and experienced place ascribed with emotion into a distant space from which they can remove their emotional and experiential ties.

While our findings affirm current literature in online psychology and linguistics that notes that males are engaged in assertive discourse about things 'other' or distant from themselves and their own personal space, we can add a spatial dimension and highlight that there are geographical scales inherent in the discourse of denigration. More importantly, while male voices may dominant, female voices play a critical role in shithole discourse. Women's engagement in the discourse of denigration occurs at the 'personal' scale and, to a lesser extent, at the 'own' scale both of which are built on lived experience in geographies of quotidian life.

6. Interpreting minoritarian voices through the lens of abjection

The territorial stigmatization literature largely explains the majoritarian voices captured in our study. Studies by Wacquant (1993; 2007; 2008) and Slater (Kallin and Slater 2014; Slater 2015; Slater and Anderson, 2011) highlight the racial and class motivations for stigmatization by powerful actors of disadvantaged peoples and places. But, the main body of territorial stigmatization literature rarely extends to 'ordinary' places, to consider the towns, cities and rural villages of the British Isles and the attendant ability for all of these places to be perceived as a 'shithole'. Nor can this literature entirely explain the gendered differences that our study located.

The concept of territoriality, a type of "super place attachment" (Kintrea et al. 2008) may help to understand the connection young males have to place (ibid; Pickering et al. 2011). The data shows clearly that it is young males who practise this form of territorial behaviour most, using overt displays or actions to defend their territory against 'others'. This overt display of behaviour directed towards an 'other' fits with research on online communication gender patterns, which tell us that where women tend to respond in a defensive manner about their own lives or situations, men tend to respond with assertive, challenging language that is

directed towards an 'other' (Courtney Walton and Rice 2013; Herring 1993; Herring et al. 2007). Territoriality, then, can provide an understanding of how males may respond to 'other' geographies that they perceive as threatening in some way to their own, for example in terms of sporting rivalry. But, territoriality cannot explain why women respond with boundary-making discourse.

Disaffiliation, a lack of elective belonging (Watt 2009, 2875; Pinkster 2013, 811) can answer questions about class and boundary-making. The literature on disaffiliation acknowledges that "place…has become part of conspicuous consumption and a tool to distinguish and distance oneself from 'others'" (Pinkster 2013, 810) and highlights the practices of middle-class residents to separate and segregate (Atkinson 2006, 819) themselves from other social classes and places (Watt 2009, 2875). By creating enclaves and clusters away from other social classes, the middle-class seeks to distance themselves from fellow residents of a location and characteristics of the location itself. This explanation is useful when considering gentrified areas or areas of white or middle-class populations, but it cannot explain fully the desire to distance and eject place from identity as our study shows.

We argue that a useful way to interpret the minoritarian views highlighted above, especially those of women, is through the lens of abjection. Here we move beyond traditional psychoanalytic and social conceptualizations of abjection and the abject and consider, instead, how abjection can be applied at a spatial level. We extend the definition to understand how residents use territorial stigma to separate self from place, thus contributing to a geography of abject places.

Abjection, crystallized by Julia Kristeva's work on vomit, nausea and cadavers, links to a larger theory of disgust (1982) but, where disgust literature of the same era during which Kristeva was writing primarily focuses on food and revulsion based on ingestion and contamination (see Rozin and Fallon 1987), Kristeva's work considers traditional 'disgust' responses in a non-food context. Kristeva's abjection is primarily about the body, its excreta and society's concurrent fascination and revulsion towards that which the body expels. For Kristeva, our revulsion and disgust, our desire to remove and separate ourselves from secretions and waste, constitute 'abjection' and the focus of our abjection (the excreta) is 'the abject'.

Imogen Tyler has expanded the field by introducing the theory of social abjection, a lens through which to "consider this production of human waste from multiple perspectives" (Tyler 2013, 47). Tyler applies her theory at a state level, considering how neoliberal policy has created and continues to create 'human waste', social refuse or excreta around whom, according to Tyler, society creates boundaries and borders (Tyler 2013). Her conceptualisation of abjection ties Kristeva's notions of expulsion and borders with Georges Bataille's 1934 work on abjection, which highlights a distinctly stratified social system divided into "oppressors and oppressed" (Bataille 1993 [1934], 6) with society's 'dregs' (ibid) constituting the abject in society. Tyler's work, which builds on Bataille, highlights how we can apply the concept of the abject and the process of abjection to other than the excreta of the body.

Abjection can then be applied spatially, building on Judith Butler's "'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject" (Butler 1993, 3). Adéle Nel's work on cinematic representation of abject Johannesburg progresses the idea of the city as abject. She explains that "the abject is also concerned with space, and the term 'space of abjection' is sometimes used to refer to a space inhabited by abjected things or beings" (Nel 2013, 139).   Both Butler and Nel imply that it is the presence of an abject population (Bataille's 'dregs') and the state's

response to this population (such as the use of enforced segregation, barbed wire fences, security cameras etc.), which constitute an abject geography. However, the discourse of denigration studied in this project tells us that it is not always the demographics of an area that make it worthy of denigration and condemnation. Especially if we listen to minoritarian voices at the 'own geographies' scale, we hear that it is often appearances and lack of amenities that contribute to making a 'shithole'. We see that it is not always the state's active response to the presence of a demographic group in a particular area but the presence of, for example, litter or poor housing that might lead to residents maligning an area.

It is the minoritarian voices who express a wish to leave an area who provide a compelling account of separating the self from place. These Twitter users attempt to discursively distance themselves in order to create a division between self and place. Where dominant voices may engage in comparative discourse that allows a direct reinforcement of difference, non-dominant voices who use 'desire to leave' as a discursive response express a *desire* to be separate and begin to highlight difference between self and place. While they may be bodily present in a denigrated location, stating a desire to leave suggests that the user is not themselves worthy of denigration and wishes to be seen as different, other, and separate from such a place. This 'desire to leave' constitutes a form of 'othering'—the othering process is inverted and reflected back on the self, making the self different and separate to the location. As users seek to create distance between self and place and, in effect spatialize place, they attempt to remove from it the emotions and personal attributes that connect it to self and, instead, to imbue a location with tarnishing discourse and attributes. We see that such users, while trying to free themselves from the spatial taint that may transfer and stain the self, actually further add to the press of stigma that lies heavy on the location.[12]

Through this process of othering, they expel from their sense of self the label and stigma of place. This process of expulsion results in a form of boundary-making between self and space, which at once further contributes to territorial stigma and is a form of abjection in a Kristevan sense. It is entirely at odds with the sense of 'pride' that Slater and Anderson (2011) and Jensen and Christensen (2012) note in their ethnographic studies. In these examples, the residents of a maligned space invert the socially-imposed stigma and create a sense of internal, collective pride in response to externally imposed stigma. In this way, place becomes central to understanding the self. Rijnks and Strijker (2013) remind us that 'othering' and boundary formation are central to positive identity formation; we add that it is the process of abjection, of ejecting place from the self, that creates a negative 'other' or abject place based on removal of place from self-identity. In our study, we find that this desire to separate and to expel place from the self is commonly found amongst those directing the discourse at their own places.

If we accept that these actors are engaging in a process of abjection whereby they expel place from self identity and, in the process draw a boundary between self and space, we can see that what they expel is the abject: place. Through the process of abjection is created geography of abject places. Nel argues that abject "refers to all people who are shifted out of the centre, in other words, a specific sort of boundary crossing from one space/world to another" (Nel 2012, 556) but this holds true when the word 'people' is replaced with 'place': abject places are "shifted out of the centre" (Nel 2012, 556) as a result of their visible difference, deprivation and disorder, and symbolically reside on the fringes, the edges of acceptability. In this way, as individuals engage in the process of abjection, abject locations are generated, and a geography of abjection is formed of all of those places that individuals deem to be spatial 'dregs' that are lacking in appearance, facilities and amenities.

However, the notion of a particular geography of abjection is problematic. When we analyse the data, we can find no pattern to denigration and abjection: individuals cry for help and want to leave virtually everywhere and every type of place. They want to leave dirty, ill-equipped homes, villages that are boring, towns that lack amenities, and cities that are dirty and full of 'others'. Everywhere in Britain and Ireland becomes part or has the potential to become part of the geography of abjection, returning us back to cultural understandings of stigmatization (Jensen and Christensen 2012; Rhodes 2012) to understand those, who, when confronted with difference *or* lack, seek to create boundaries and borders. When we consider stigmatization of place, most voices engaged from afar as a means to distance and denigrate for political, social or economic means. But even for those who aim the discourse at their own places, everywhere has the potential to be denigrated by its residents. Any markers of difference feed into a tendency to denigrate, stigmatize, and to attempt to expel place from self-identity. In this way, the process of territorial stigmatization seems to be a coping mechanism, but not in the way the literature deals with it. It is less about coping with life in a stigmatized place, and more about using territorial stigma to cope.

7. Conclusion

While there is clear evidence that the a male-dominated majority speaks in ways that match neatly with the state's use of stigmatization based on demographic difference and politico-economic difference and distancing of 'other' geographies, a significant minority of voices gave us a different picture. Where the dominant, majoritarian voices are men who 'other' places to which they have no intimate connection, it is women who are vocal at the 'own' and 'personal' geographic scales, suggesting that women stigmatize geographies of quotidian experience far more than 'other' geographies. While their voices in Twitter data are often drowned out by the dominant male voices, a robust data sample allowed us to analyse hundreds

of women engaging in stigmatization. Similarly, we were able to hear other minoritarian voices in the dataset. These voices underscored the diverse criteria used by individuals to establish whether or not a place is worthy of stigmatization. Where majoritarian voices suggest that individuals may note demographic markers of difference, minoritarian voices highlighted that markers of difference of any sort, including those defined by a lack or absence, and physical appearance are used to evaluate a place and, ultimately, to denigrate. We posit that a conceptualization of spatial abjection could help to understand those who would aim the denigration inward, vocalizing a desire to leave by seeking to create boundaries between self and place or, as we frame it in the language of abjection, to expel place from self-identity and conception of self.

These findings push us to have a broader view of territorial stigmatization and how and why it is produced. We see that anywhere is a potential target for stigmatization, and that while the voices of outsiders decrying cultural difference might be loudest, there are valuable lessons to be learned from the quieter voices living in quotidian geographies defined by lack, boredom and physical degradation, from which they desire to escape. One question which remains is how these two discourses interact, and to what extent what are essentially cries for help unwittingly reproduce the negative depiction of place.

Our inability to find major substantial geographic difference in the use of shithole in the UK also demands a deeper dive into the culture of denigration in the British Isles. There is some evidence that the tendency to denigrate place appears stronger in England than in Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and Ireland, but far more research is necessary. Is this a result of analysing one specific term that may have more widespread usage in England or does it hint at a cultural tendency to view and stigmatize place? Certainly, we know that there are different

ways in which states use and manipulate denigration (Wacquant, 2008) but does this transfer from a macro- to a micro-level? More research is be required to address a link between the construction of negative place image and national or regional cultures, but this study has highlighted that the tendency to stigmatize is widespread, not limited to dense urban areas, and not limited solely to demographic or politico-economic difference.

While we think that methodologically we have made an important contribution, much more could be done with a larger dataset, different coding mechanisms, or other sort of similar nonelicited data. We are currently working with computer scientists to use this coding structure to build machine learning mechanisms that will enable a big data approach that may provide some better evidence as to geographical difference. There are many ways in which this work could be combined with critical ethnography and discourse analysis, especially with regards to the culture of denigration and territorial stigma. There is also a clear need to go beyond the boundaries of social science, in particular into areas of social psychology which have methodological tools designed to better understand how people think and why they think what they think or say what they say. Territorial stigma in the British Isles is a widespread cultural phenomenon, not just a tool of the powerful, and there is much more to learn about why this language is so widespread if we are going to combat the negative impacts of the constant stream of invective aimed at the everyday places and spaces of the British Isles.

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Notes

[1] Permentier et al's study of Kanaleineiland, Utrecht considers insiders and outsider but only at one specific location. Their findings also involve discussion of particular facilities, physical appearances, and demographics (2008).

[2] Regional variants of the term 'shithole' exist ('shitehole' and 'shitehouse', for example, are common in Scotland), but shithole was the most common and widespread, rendering it the most suitable term for a widespread analysis of the discourse of denigration in the British Isles. The term 'shithole' has four meanings ranging from the anatomical to the geographical (Oxford English Dictionary, 2016). First used in 1629, 'shithole' referred to the anus or rectum. Some three centuries later in 1930, the term was first used to refer to "a wretched place" (OED, 2016). By 1947, a third use had emerged that referred to a toilet and by 1974, the term was used to describe a person, as an alternative to the term 'asshole' (OED, 2016).

[4] A pilot study of a survey distributed on online forums proved problematic from a methodological perspective. It became clear that nonreactive, non-reactive data was better for the purposes of understanding meaning, at least outside of the context of formal social psychological research. This pilot study, however, proved useful when combined with the analysis of the popular literature and the online forums as part of an iterative process for developing a robust coding mechanism.

[6] The online world is different to the offline world where people rely on face-to-face interaction and visible characteristics and markers to determine gender, race, age etc. (Zhao et al. 2008, 1818). The online world can be divided into anonymous and nonymous worlds (Zhao et al. 2008; Hum et al 2011). The former, including chat rooms and role-player games, is defined by the lack of anchored relationships (relationships that connect the offline to the online world) and in these interactions gender swapping and gender fluidity are noted with 28% of users in a study presenting themselves as a different gender (Samp et al. 2003 in Armentor-Cota, 2011). However, in nonymized worlds such as Facebook and Twitter, online presence is linked to offline relationships through communication and contact with friends, colleagues, family, and links to work, school and other anchoring forces. While Zhao et al. note that the construction of identities in nonymized online settings is understudied, it is apparent that users in nonymized online environments present more closely to their offline personae than do users in anonymized online environments. In this paper, we follow work by others studying nonymized disclosure (see, for example, Courtney Walton and Rice 2013) and assign a gender classification to Twitter users according to visible markers presented on their profiles and embedded links. Where no gender information is provided or where visible markers are not available, we assigned a code of 'unknown' reflecting the lack of data available. We acknowledge that it is not possible to entirely eliminate the possibility of 'gender fraud' and that some readers may perceive all literature that follows the methods we have used as reproducing the problematic but we feel that, as with other literature in the field of online disclosure, our findings are valid and can present insight into the role of gender in stigmatizing place.

[8] The remaining 3.2% of tweets refer to miscellaneous categories such as non-places (life, situations, etc.), non-specific locations (e.g. 'lefty shitholes'), specific streets, or the entire world.

[9] 'Type of people' generally, but never explicitly, refers to perceived class dynamics and difference.

[10] The gender of users in this study was determined by comparing the user's username, photographs, tweets and biographical information. Gender was only coded as 'male' or 'female' when these factors all pointed to the user being of that particular gender. Otherwise, keeping in mind the notions of gender fluidity used in online interactions as noted by Janet Armentor-Cota (2011), tweets were coded as 'unknown'.

[11] At the 'particular facilities' scale, women use affectionate/defensive discursive responses more than they utilise a desire to leave as a response.

[12] While it is beyond the aims of this paper to determine whether users who 'desired to leave' actually attempted to exit their personal or own geographical area, the locations were compared to the Office for National Statistics' internal migration data to establish whether there was a correlation between the towns and cities that those engaging in the discourse of denigration seek to leave and a negative net migration rate for the local authorities in which those areas are found (Office for National Statistics, 2016). No such correlation was evident, suggesting that the 'desire to leave' serves only as discursive response to being in a self-reported denigrated area.
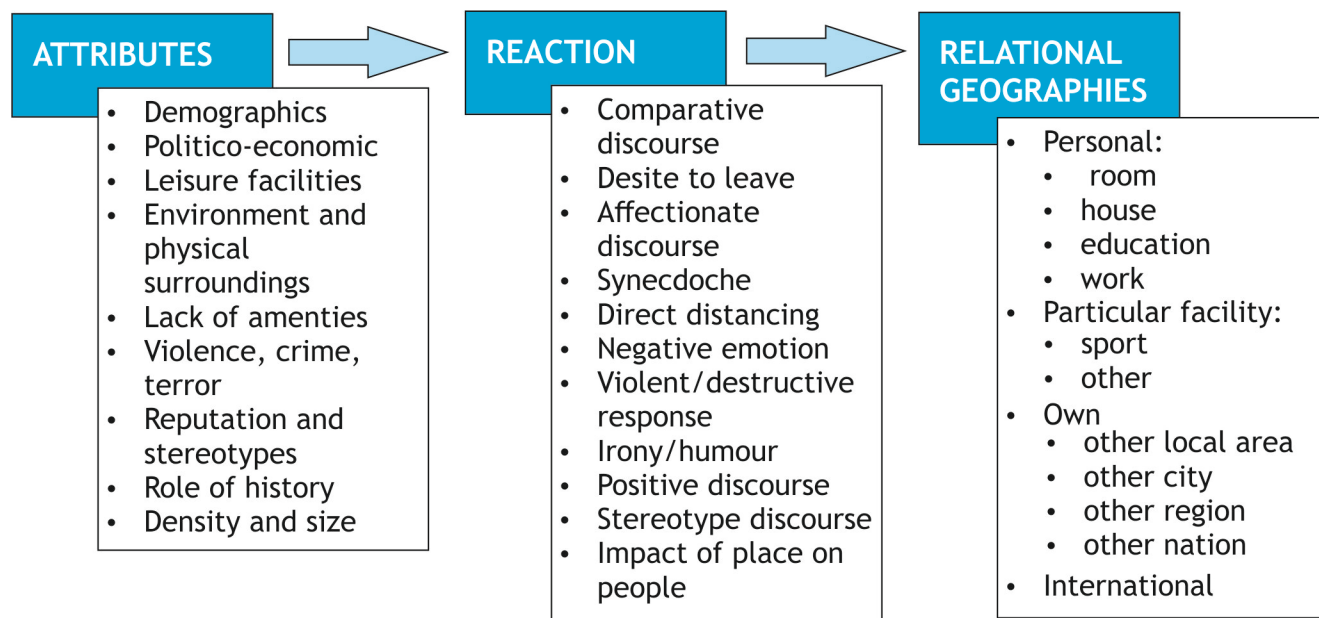

Figure 1: coding process showing the multiple levels at which each code was coded.

| Relational geographical scale	Number of tweets (T)	% of total sample (n=2,076)	Male (number and percentage of T)		Female (number and percentage of T)		Unknown gender (number and percentage of T)		Shared M&F account (number and percentage of T)	
OTHER	760	36.6%	633	83.3%	111	14.6%	15	2.0%	1	0.1%
Other area	20	1.0%	16	80.0%	3	15.0%			1	5.0%
Other city	610	29.4%	507	83.1%	93	15.2%	10	1.6%		
Other region	27	1.3%	25	92.6%	2	7.4%				
Other nation	46	2.2%	37	80.4%	6	13.0%	3	6.5%		
International	57	2.7%	48	84.2%	7	12.3%	2	3.5%		
OWN	480	23.1%	259	54.0%	213	44.4%	8	1.7%		
Own area	146	7.0%	59	40.4%	87	59.6%				
Microgeography of own city	59	2.8%	42	71.2%	13	22.0%	4	6.8%		
Own city	202	9.7%	105	52.0%	95	47.0%	2	1.0%		
Own region	17	0.8%	11	64.7%	6	35.3%				
Own nation	56	2.7%	42	75.0%	12	21.4%	2	3.6%		
PARTICULAR FACILITIES	462	22.3%	405	87.7%	54	11.7%	2	0.4%	1	0.2%
Particular sports facilities	266	12.8%	248	93.2%	16	6.0%	2	0.8%		
Particular facilities (other)	196	9.4%	157	80.1%	38	19.4%			1	0.5%
PERSONAL	306	14.7%	109	35.6%	194	63.4%	3	1.0%		
Personal—room	46	2.2%	16	34.8%	30	65.2%				
Personal—home/housing	91	4.4%	33	36.3%	58	63.7%				
Personal—work	53	2.6%	29	54.7%	23	43.4%	1	1.9%		
Personal—education	116	5.6%	31	26.7%	83	71.6%	2	1.7%		
MISCELLANEOUS	67	3.2%	52	77.6%	14	20.9%	1	1.5%		
Specific road/street	12	0.6%	12	100%						
World-scale	2	0.1%			2	100%				
Non-specific place	9	0.4%	9	100%						
Non-place/situation	44	2.1%	31	70.5%	12	27.3%	1	2.3%		

Table 1
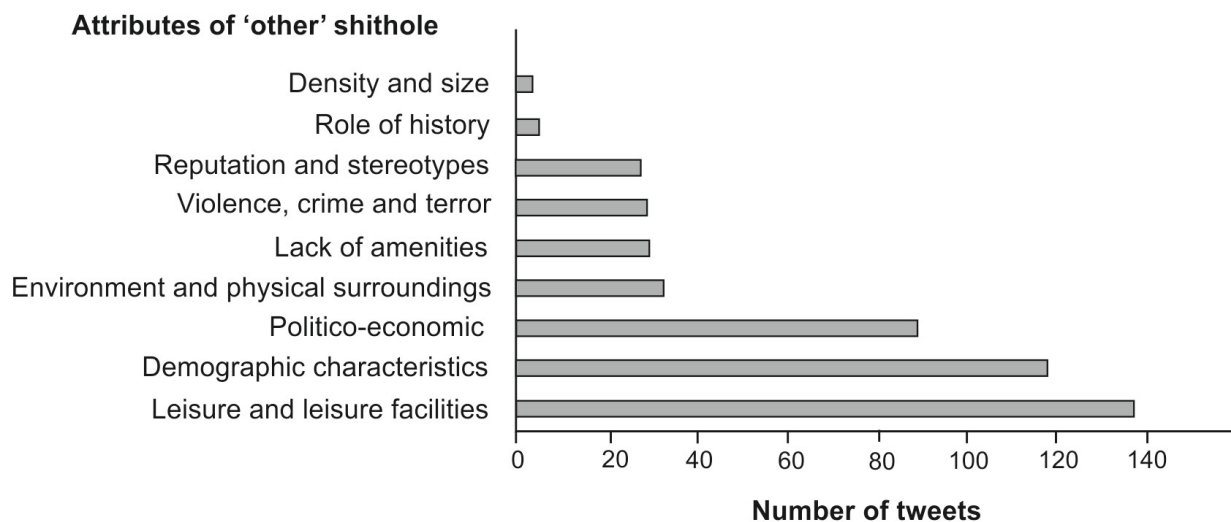
Figure 2: attributes noted for 'other' shitholes (including, other area, other city, other region, other nation, and international scales). N=760 but some tweets received multiples codes and others were uncoded because of a lack of codeable detail.
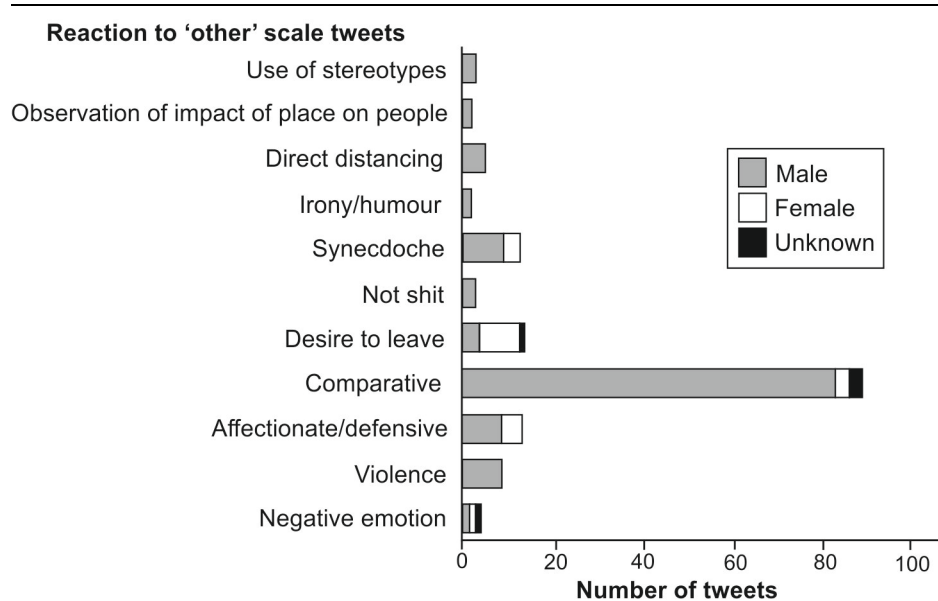
Reaction to 'other' scale tweets
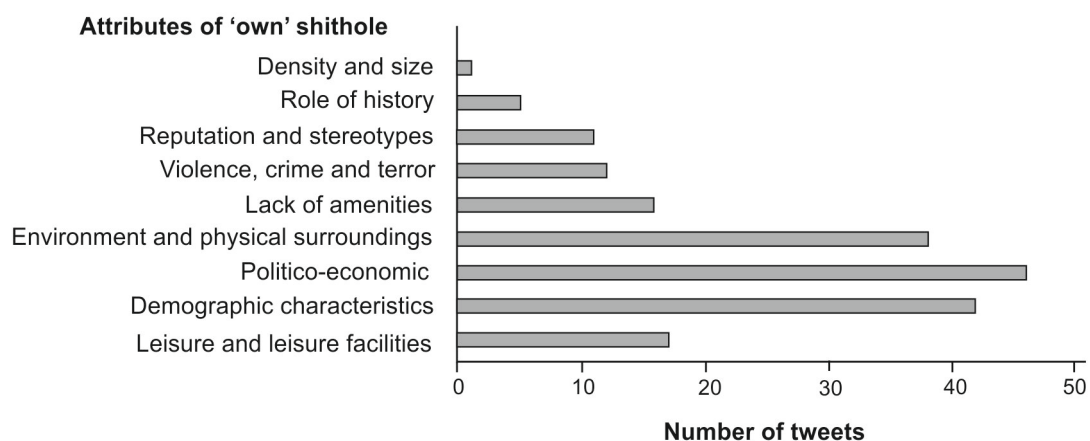

Figure 3

Attributes of 'own' shithole

Figure 4: attributes noted for 'own' shitholes (including own area, own city, own region, and own nation). N=480 but some tweets received multiples codes and others were uncoded because of a lack of codeable detail.
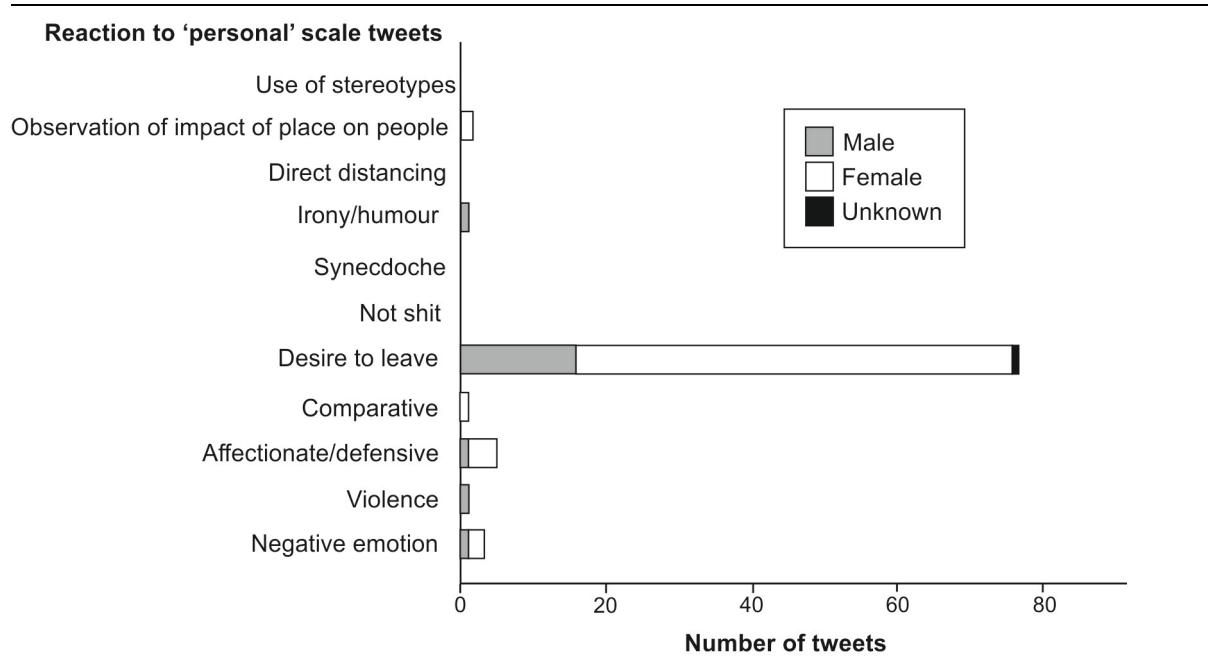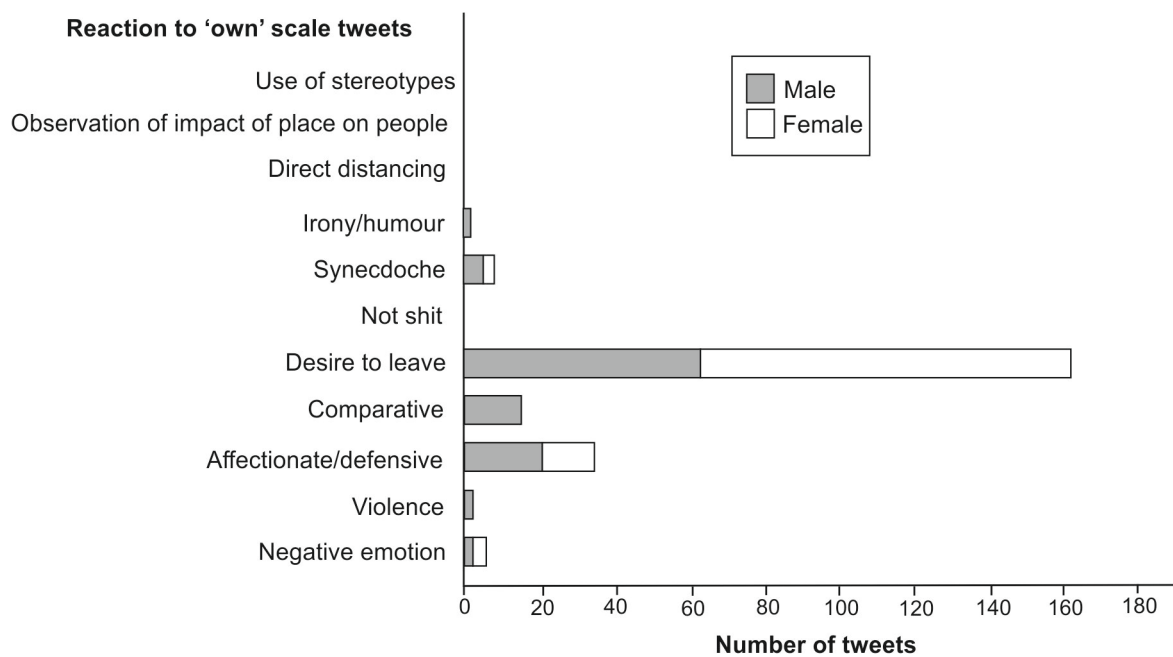
Figure 5

Figure 6