'Scrounger-bashing' as national pastime: the prevalence and ferocity of anti-welfare ideology on niche-interest online forums.

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"Scrounger-bashing" as national pastime: the prevalence and ferocity of anti-welfare ideology on niche-interest online forums

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ABSTRACT

Recent research has noted the persistence of a long continuum of "anti-welfare" discourses that are increasingly embedded in the UK news media, political communication, and popular culture (e.g. Golding and Middleton 1982. *Images of Welfare: Press and Public Attitudes to Poverty*. Oxford: Mark Robertson; Jensen 2014. "Welfare Commonsense, Poverty Porn and Doxosophy." *Sociological Research Online* 19 (3): 277–283; Morrison 2019. *Scroungers: Moral Panics and Media Myths*. London: Zed Books). Historical distinctions between the "deserving" and "undeserving poor" have been sharpened by successive governments in the service of varying shades of neoliberal governance. While Margaret Thatcher castigated "shirkers" in fostering an ideology of economic self-reliance, both New Labour and the Coalition obsessed over "welfare reform": promoting an ideology of "work" in symbolic opposition to supposed cultures of "worklessness". But, while "scroungerphobia" (Deacon 1978. "The Scrounging Controversy: Public Attitudes Towards the Unemployed in Contemporary Britain." *Social Policy and Administration* 12 (2): 120–135) is now a widely recognised sociological phenomenon, scholarly attention to the concept has largely been reserved for its manifestation in tabloid newspapers, political rhetoric and, latterly, "poverty porn" television. Even recent work considering the public's contribution to scrounger discourse(s) on social media focuses on mainstream platforms, such as Twitter and newspaper comment threads (e.g. Van Der Bom et al. 2018. "'It's not the Fact They Claim Benefits but Their Useless, Lazy, Drug Taking Lifestyles we Despise': Analysing Audience Responses to Benefits Street Using Live Tweets." *Discourse, Context & Media* 21: 36–45; Morrison 2019. *Scroungers: Moral Panics and Media Myths*. London: Zed Books; Paterson 2020). This paper begins to address this oversight, by examining how normative anti-welfare discourses infiltrate everyday communication in more disparate online communities – including niche consumer forums. It draws on previously unpublished findings from an analysis of welfare-related conversations in these and other spaces at the height of a recent moral panic over "scroungers": the period from 2013-2016, when Conservative-led governments strove to legitimise sweeping benefit cuts and punitive "welfare reform".

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1. Introduction

Other than "bogus" asylum-seekers and "feral" youths, perhaps the UK's most persistent tabloid "folk-devil" (Cohen 1972) is the welfare "scrounger" (Golding and Middleton 1982; Morrison 2019). A mainstay of everything from red-top headlines to television talk-shows, party conference speeches to official policy documents, this odious archetype has become the go-to latter-day iteration of a centuries-old archetype: the "undeserving poor".

Conceived of as feckless, lazy and behaviourally maladjusted, the essence of "the scrounger's" durability is that he/she serves a significant, highly malleable *political* function – one with both pragmatic and ideological dimensions. As with the similarly mythic concept of exploitative mass immigration, the spectre of pervasive "scrounging" tends to resurface most prominently at times of (real or confected) "crisis" (Hall et al. 1978): when politicians (and the media) are searching for simple answers and/or ways of displacing blame for complex societal problems. Studies tracing the historical recurrence of "the scrounger" in popular discourses have shown how, from a pragmatic perspective, they offer an ideal symbolic and policy target at times of economic stress (e.g. Golding and Middleton 1982; Morrison 2019). For ministers determined to cut government spending, what better place to start than by reducing the cost of the social security safety-net, and what stronger justification for this than the claim (or suggestion) that many of its beneficiaries are undeserving non-contributors (e.g. Fraser, quoted in Golding and Middleton 1982, 3; Osborne, quoted in Morrison 2019, 24)? But such instrumentalist drivers often intersect with ones rooted in *ideology* – and, even when this is not the case, can have significant ideological *consequences* for a society. To neoliberal governments with no principled attachment to welfare states, for example, the asserted "need" to cut public spending during economic "crises" can be used to mask ideologically driven antipathies towards state-funded social protection while legitimising openly declared policy ambitions to promote normative ideologies of self-reliance and conditional or contributory welfare. Moreover, the mobilisation of "scrounger discourses" (Van Der Bom et al. 2018; Morrison 2019; Paterson & Gregory 2019) can also serve an even more pernicious ideological purpose: governmental justifications for "welfare reform" have often been accompanied by (and formed part of) efforts to symbolically displace *blame* for the crises themselves, for the "necessity" to cut, onto the non-contributors whose indolence has supposedly caused or exacerbated them (as evidenced in, for example, Golding and Middleton 1982, 233; Morrison 2019, 160–1).

This paper focuses on the ways in which scrounger discourses can become so normalised, even ubiquitous, during periods of perceived or actual crisis that they infiltrate multiple and varied aspects of social life – moving beyond news media and popular entertainment to the ways in which publics routinely discuss and process their perceptions of poverty and the benefits system; in particular, through online interactions. In doing so, it draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of "doxa" (1999), as adapted by Tracey Jensen to problematise the ways in which neoliberal states have constructed discourses of "welfare commonsense" that paint the "social world", with all its inequities and normative imaginaries around "deserving" and "undeserving" poverty, as "self-evident and requiring no interpretation" (Jensen 2014, 277). However, in contrast to similar studies, which have generally focused on surveys (e.g. Taylor-Gooby and Taylor 2015), face-to-

face dialogue (Valentine and Harris 2014), newspaper comment threads or self-supporting social media such as Twitter (Morrison 2018 and 2019; Van Der Bom et al. 2018), the specific purview here is the encroachment of taken-for-granted scrounger discourse(s) into conversations between community members in "the third space" of "non-political" websites "where political talk emerges" (Wright 2012, 5). In this case, the chosen focus is inter-user dialogue on a purposefully unsystematic selection of niche-interest web forums the subjects of which have little or no obvious relevance to issues around welfare. The samples analysed are drawn from discussion threads published on these forums at the height of the UK's most recent outbreak of "scroungerphobia" (Deacon 1978) or (as it was then) "shirkerphobia" (Morrison 2019, 20): the period of sustained fiscal "austerity" implemented by the 2010–2016 Conservative-led governments of David Cameron.

2. From "scroungerphobia" to "shirkerphobia": scrounger panics

In their seminal 1982 study *Images of Welfare*, Golding and Middleton revived Stanley Cohen's definition of the "moral panic" – the process by which "a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values or interests" (Cohen 1972, 28) – to explore the systematic construction during a then recent year of austerity (1976) of a new "orthodoxy" that "the social services [welfare] should "share the burden" [of austerity] at a time of national economic misfortune" (Golding and Middleton 1982, 59). By analysing news articles and government pro-nouncements, and interviewing journalists and the public, they assembled a compel-ling montage of evidence to demonstrate that Britain had been gripped by a pervasive panic discourse of "scroungerphobia", as politicians and the press sought scapegoats for, first, recession, then ensuing public spending cuts. While the authors' description of this panic was unsettling in itself, their lasting contribution was the diagnosis that it represented just the latest episode in the "recurrent refurb-ishing of a series of images and beliefs that have a historical continuity" and today "lie very shallowly" beneath a thin "veneer of apparent 'welfare consensus'" (ibid). This was the historically hard-wired discourse that continues to cast many or most of those seeking social assistance, whether through alms, the benefits system or food-banks, as feckless and/or useless non-contributors: a backward and draining "class of failures" (Mann 1994, 79–80).

A recent iteration of this "recurrent refurbishing" of anti-welfare discourses came during the period of austerity imposed by prime minister Cameron's governments between 2010 and 2016. In seeking public buy-in to their benefit cuts, and wider "welfare reforms", his initial Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition and subsequent majority-Conservative administration repeatedly mobilised a cast of imaginary opposites: pitting those idealised models of social contribution, "hard-working families" (Cameron 2014), against unemployed households content to receive "something for nothing" (Cameron 2011). At times, such oppositions were drawn even more pointedly: during a 2012 exchange in the House of Commons, Cameron (quoted in Toynbee 2012) aligned his government with "workers" and the Labour Opposition with "shirkers", while at that year's Conservative Party Conference then Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne juxtaposed the virtuous "shift-worker, leaving home in the dark hours of the

early morning" with the "closed blinds" of his morally deficient "next-door neighbour, sleeping off a life on benefits" (Osborne 2012).

As several studies have since demonstrated (e.g. Wiggan 2012; Morrison 2019), the discourse of "shirkerphobia" promoted by the Coalition and amplified across the mainstream press (ibid: 20) became pervasive. In popular culture, it spawned a whole sub-genre of "poverty porn" television reality shows (e.g. Wood and Skeggs 2011; Jensen 2014; Patrick 2017), while the coincidence of timing of austerity politics with the mass-digitalisation of the press and surging social media use both encouraged and made more public the normalisation of scrounger discourses in everyday conversations, as recent qualitative analyses of comment threads and Twitter have shown (e.g. Van Der Bom et al. 2018; Morrison 2018 and 2019; Paterson 2020).

3. "Figures" of disgust and disdain: "welfare commonsense" and its objects

The significance of this re-popularisation of scrounger stereotypes, or rather this latest iteration in a continuum of reinventions, from "underclass" (Welshman 2013) to "chav" (Bennett 2013), has been persuasively conceptualised by Jensen as a discursive process she terms (after Bourdieu) "doxosophy": a discourse which revived historical concepts of "undeserving" poverty in order to "embed new forms of "commonsense" about welfare and worklessness" just as the full force of the Coalition's cuts to the social security system were being enacted (Jensen 2014, 277). As in previous periods of "crisis" and panic, a key agent of the embedding of welfare doxa she identified was the deliberate revival of the morally bankrupt scrounger figure – in a new guise explicitly contrasted with the virtuous "hardworking" majority through the "rhyming binary" of "'skivers' and 'strivers'" (ibid: 278). While others, notably Patrick (2017) and Van Der Bom et al. (2018), have also emphasised the influence of ratings-winning TV docusoaps like *Benefits Street* in powering this latest incarnation of scrounger discourse, the importance of Jensen's contribution lies in its argument that the *effect* of poverty porn was to enable "the welfare discourses of political elites" to "become translated into authoritarian vocabularies" (Jensen 2014, 278). By exploding into the pop-cultural mainstream at a key point in the Coalition's mission to legitimise its assault on the welfare state, these discursive displays of "welfare disgust" served a crucial "ideological function": by embedding "a new 'commonsense' around an unquestionable need for welfare reform", by presenting "neoliberal welfare" as "doxa" (ibid).

In unpacking the iconography of "poverty porn", Jensen's favoured touchstones were the visual language of earlier eras of TV and film: the "pejorative shorthand" of the "sofa abandoned in the street, piles of windswept rubbish, the satellite dish, cigarettes, tins of cheap lager" and "kids loitering in the street after dark" (ibid: 279). She persuasively argued that "the production processes of "fast media"" harness such recognisable tropes to sensitise and/or infuriate "striving" viewers about the deviancy of "skivers"– further consolidating elite-level efforts to promote a taken-for-granted scrounger discourse. What was missing from this thesis, however, was an explicit identification of the circumstances in which such imagery is at its most effective: when it chimes (or appears to chime) not just with the "pejorative shorthand" of popular culture, or even normative elite anti-welfare discourses, but scenes and figures that seem heuristically familiar

to people from their everyday lives. The importance of this connectivity between *mediated* social reality and that which is "lived" (directly or vicariously) is an integral dimension of arguments advanced in other recent explorations of the enduring salience of "scroungers". Imogen Tyler argues that the discursive potency of caricatures like "the chav" is that they activate feelings of "class disgust" towards "abject figures" we perceive (or *think* we perceive) in our day-to-day encounters (2013, 9). A related idea is that "the scrounger" is a "familiar stranger": a "plausible" archetype that can be projected onto all the "unkempt-looking, uncouth-seeming others we pass or glimpse as we go about our lives" (Morrison 2019, 255). However, for abject figures and familiar strangers to achieve full *effectiveness* as ideological weapons – as tools for promoting suspicion, displacing blame and undermining trust in the morality, fairness and efficacy of existing social protection systems – they must be integrated into persuasive overarching discourses. In the socio-political context that concerns this paper, Jensen's "welfare commonsense" offered the discursive "glue" that bonded together what would otherwise have been disparate, intangible fragments of scrounger mythologising into a plausible imaginary: a freshly minted, yet historically rooted, anti-welfare discourse that operationalised the caricatures of tabloids, poverty porn and political rhetoric via the melange of heuristics, anecdote, gossip and rumour that inform our lived experiences.

4. From Twitter to niche forums: "welfare commonsense" in "third spaces" online

Online discussion of politics and social issues has become the subject of growing academic interest, with particular attention paid to more polarising arenas of social media debate (e.g. Dahlberg 2007; Williams et al. 2015). Much of the recent wave of research has involved sentiment analysis of specific case studies that problematise the transformation of Twitter and other platforms from sites of civil deliberative debate into spaces riven by adversarial and/or abusive disputes. Terms like "Twitter storm" (e.g. LeFebvre and Armstrong 2018) and "antisocial media" (Vaidhyanathan 2018) have increasingly been used to characterise the vicious exchanges that have erupted, especially (though not exclusively) in relation to so-called "identity politics" issues, from trans rights (Hines 2019) and online racism in the context of Brexit (Miller et al. 2016) to internal divisions in the Labour Party (McLoughlin and Ward 2017).

What unites most of these studies, though, is their focus on conversations and communities that are *intrinsically and explicitly* devoted to discussing politics and social issues – if often from particular (liberal/conservative) standpoints (e.g. Childs and Webb 2012). Commensurately, the few who have analysed discourses embedded in lay debates about poverty and welfare have tended to confine their purviews to below-the-line comment threads published *beneath* articles focusing on these issues and/or conversations *about* these stories on platforms like Twitter (e.g. Morrison 2018 and 2019; Paterson and Gregory 2020). This paper attempts to do something different, by purposely turning its attention towards online forums that have no obvious focus on politics or wider society: ones that are instead preoccupied with highly specialist pastimes, activities and other niche interests. In doing so, it draws on other studies that have interrogated the emergence of political discussion in "'non-political' online spaces", such as Jackson et al.'s analysis of "politics in everyday talk" on three niche-interest sites comparable to

those that are the subject of this paper: *HotUKDeals, Digital Spy* and *Mumsnet* (2013, 205). What follows, then, is an attempt to build on such work by demonstrating how welfare commonsense became so ubiquitous at what other studies have established as the height of Britain's 2010–16 "shirker" panic (see Jensen 2014; Morrison 2019, 21) that scrounger discourses insinuated themselves into conversations in spaces to which they had no intrinsic relevance – from fan sites to niche consumer forums. I argue that this all-pervasive discourse acted as both indicator and agent of the normalisation across society of a hegemonic anti-welfare consensus which consistently manifested itself in British Social Attitudes throughout the period (e.g. Taylor-Gooby and Taylor 2015, 9).

5. Identifying sites of "everyday scrounger talk"

The following critical discourse analysis adapts Jackson et al.'s concept of "everyday political talk" to focus specifically on everyday welfare talk – or, in this case, everyday scrounger talk. It does so by examining the ways in which welfare-related topics were introduced, responded to and deliberated in the context of singular discussion threads published on three niche-interest UK websites serving distinct online communities during a period when the subject of the benefits system was of heightened salience, due to the sustained austerity cuts and rapid welfare reform pursued by the 2010–16 governments. The threads concerned were initially identified based on a series of wide-scale exploratory Google searches combining the terms "forum" and "welfare", "forum" and "benefits" and "forum" and "scrounger" – the aim being to locate discussions on non-political websites that either focused on then current debates about the working-age welfare system and its beneficiaries or in which direct references to this subject were made in the context of conversations about something else entirely.

The final choice of threads for analysis was determined, in part, by the relative popularity of the niche websites hosting them: i.e. the sites selected could claim to have high profiles in their particular fields, as measured by numbers of Facebook "likes", cumulative posts and/or community members, making it likely that these discussions had been viewed by comparatively large numbers of people (even if only a small proportion had actively participated). The three websites selected were: *pistonheads.com*, a news, reviews and premium car sales site which bills itself as "the UK's largest online motoring community" and, by June 2020, boasted 162,000 "likes" on Facebook (facebook.com/pistonheads 2020); *avforums.com*, a site devoted to news, reviews and discussion of "audio-visual home consumer electronics", which describes itself as "the no.1 home entertainment and tech community resource" and between 2000 and 2014 reached 20 million user posts (Wright 2020); and *landlord-referencing.co.uk*, the membership-based website of "the UK's most comprehensive tenant referencing company" (landlord-referencing.co.uk 2020). The specific threads chosen for analysis were ones that focused *exclusively* on welfare-related topics, rather than discussions about non-welfare themes during which benefits and/or claimants were mentioned only in passing. In the process of identifying suitable threads for analysis, a total of 12 different websites carrying forum comments about "scroungers" were initially visited – all of those found on the first two pages of Google search results. All but two of these were discarded for the purpose of in-depth analysis because they referred to "scroungers" only incidentally, in the course of discussions otherwise concerned with issues of no relation to the UK benefits

system. The other two were omitted from detailed analysis because both appeared on sites already included in the sample (*Pistonheads* and *Landlord Referencing*) and it was felt that the threads selected were stronger examples, in that they concerned *general* welfare-related themes: namely benefit recipiency and poverty itself. By contrast, the discarded *Pistonheads* thread (while containing substantial evidence of scrounger discourse) focused on a debate about prospective government cuts to Disability Living Allowance – a non-means tested benefit for people with disabilities and long-term illnesses which is not limited to those on low incomes or out of work – while the *Landlord Referencing* thread focused on homeless beggars.

Samples from the first two sites consisted of single lengthy threads – the first of which ran intermittently on *Pistonheads'* general discussion forum, "Gassing", for a period of nearly two years, between 13 May 2013 and 14 April 2015. In the case of *Landlord Referencing*, by contrast, two (much shorter) threads were sampled – both focusing on TV documentaries about benefit recipients. Though the fact that these threads ran to just seven and four "on-topic" posts respectively suggests that *Landlord Referencing* users outside a narrow "echo-chamber" (e.g. Edwards 2013; Morrison 2018) of concerned community-members were less engaged with scrounger discourse than posters on both other sites, the strength of some comments quoted below nonetheless demonstrates how easily a topic heading framed around benefits could act as a discursive cue triggering anti-welfare sentiment.

Given these highly partial samples, it is impossible to extrapolate anything conclusive about the overall pervasiveness on their host websites of "anti-welfare" discourses. However, it arguably *is* possible to view the samples as useful indicative snapshots of how the benefits system may normatively have been discussed on occasions when it *was* raised as a conversation topic in these (and, one assumes, other) third spaces during the 2010–16 period. Moreover, the first two samples support the argument that a societal preoccupation with the deservingness or otherwise of benefit recipients was so pervasive at this time that it was becoming the subject of entire threads in out-of-context, "non-political" online (and offline) arenas. By contrast, the value of including the *Landlord Referencing* threads is that they offer glimpses of how benefit recipients were normatively discussed in forums that, while not *intrinsically* relevant to a particular online community, were nonetheless indirectly related to it – in this case, because many of its members (residential landlords) were likely to have had experience of renting to low-income tenants, including benefit recipients.

While this paper limits its central focus to three specific non-welfare related online communities that nonetheless carried entire threads devoted to this issue, in the process of identifying suitable discussions for analysis several other relevant *strands* of conversation were noted in other (similarly disparate) third spaces. An animated February 2016 debate on soccer fan site *thefootballramble.co.uk* about the UK's then impending European Union referendum took a brief tangent when, responding to another poster's suggestion that tabloid coverage about the supposed strength of the campaign for Britain to remain in the EU could encourage "Leave" supporters to vote in higher numbers, one poster drew a parallel with ignorant viewers being encouraged to find ways to play the welfare system by watching poverty porn TV shows – suggesting that "thick people looking at them" might think that "they are now justified in being on the dole" (a form of imitation Cohen (1972) and others have termed "deviancy amplification").

In a similarly casual February 2016 aside while debating an entirely unrelated issue on Sony PlayStation forum www.community.playstation.eu.com – the relative costs of paying for different brands of video game – a poster normatively remarked that "nothing is free in this world unless your [*sic*] a benefits scrounger", in an apparent allusion to familiar tropes, or "indices of social class" (Paterson, Coffey-Glover, and Peplow 2016; Van Der Bom et al. 2018), associated with benefit dependency. Meanwhile, a thread head-lined "State pension to be classed as a benefit" on a forum aimed at farmers (www.thefarmingforum.co.uk) provided a display of open hostility towards the latter term, demonstrating the negative connotations it had acquired through its discursive associ-ation with working-age welfare recipients. This thread was predicated on the launch of an online petition opposed to government plans to re-classify the state pension as a social security benefit for fear that this would enable it to be means-tested or reduced in value in future years. During a lively discussion about the justification for this move, one disgruntled poster symbolised the implicit association between benefits and free-loading with the plaintive whinge, "I'm an official scrounger then!"

6. Analytical approach

The analytical process was twofold. Comments were initially coded using a form of quali-tative content analysis drawing on manual sentiment analysis techniques, as in other recent social media studies, including those focusing on online discussions about welfare and poverty (e.g. Lopez et al. 2012; Serna et al. 2017; Morrison 2018 and 2019). The first stage involved identifying the range of discursive categories present in the sample (e.g. "scrounger" or "counter-discursive") and quantifying the number of posts that fell into each. Categories were identified through "inductive category development" (Mayring 2000), based on Pfeil and Zaphiris's rationale that this "offers a way to capture the essence of the communication within an online community" (2010, 7). Rather than imposing a pre-determined set of categories onto the data, the researcher immersed himself in it to allow these to emerge from "the pattern and content of the [specific] online communication under investigation" (ibid: 8). Comments were then analysed in more depth using a CDA approach drawing heavily on Van Dijk's "socio-cognitive" model, specifically his focus on "the role of discourse in the reproduction and challenge of dominance", as manifested and embedded through "different "modes" of discourse-power relations", including "the more or less direct or overt support, enactment, represen-tation, legitimation, denial, mitigation or concealment of dominance" (1993, 249–50).

Initial coding of the four threads – which totalled 737 posts – identified five broad dis-cursive categories that were present across all of them, the first three being of primary interest: "scrounger" posts (those manifesting anti-welfare discourses); "counter-discur-sive"; "neutral"; "indeterminate" (ones engaged with the central discussion but whose dis-cursive positions were unclear); and "tangential" (posts that diverted discussions onto "off-topic" matters). The limited number of "neutral" posts (just 43, or 5.8% of the total) were generally comments which, while accepting certain aspects of fellow posters' remarks, questioned the simplicity of anti-welfare discourses and often raised points about the macro-economic causes of unemployment and benefit recipiency. As an example, one poster on the *Pistonheads* thread (which focused on *Skint,* a Channel 4 doc-usoap about benefit recipients) agreed that "the 'world owes me a living' lot should be

frog marched into work/self-sustainability", before qualifying this, at some length, by identifying the "wider causes of the current problem that affects so many areas nowadays", as exemplified by his own experience of seeing "a whole community … pretty much lose a complete industry that sustained it for decades". By contrast, "indeterminate" posts (numbering 136, or 18.5% of the total) were those that appeared to express a view on the discussion topic but could not easily be classified as anti-welfare, counter-discursive or neutral – often because they contained wording indicating irony or sarcasm. For instance, one poster on the *Pistonheads* thread joked that he was "quite looking forward to the six-part Channel 4 documentary of middle-class people doing rather well, going to school on time & agonising over Quinoa or Polenta for tea". While clearly demonstrating a degree of knowingness about the editorial approach of "poverty porn" shows, it was nonetheless hard to be certain whether their mockery was directed at the programme and its agenda or fellow posters – let alone whether this necessarily meant they disagreed with the prevailing anti-welfare discourse. The 116 "tangential" posts (15.7% of the sample) were those that veered off-topic: for example, a brief diversion on the *Pistonheads* thread sparked by one poster's remark that he was moving to Spain prompted another to ask him if he wanted to sell his car.

Following this initial coding, closer analysis fine-tuned the categories into a total of seven – by dividing the two most important ones, "scrounger" and "counter-discursive", into sub-categories distinguishing between posts that manifested "hard" (i.e. uncompromising) and "soft" (more qualified) anti- or pro-welfare discourses. "Soft" scrounger posts were often ones in which posters began by condemning the behaviour of a particular type of benefit recipient, or expressed disgust about a specific case (e.g. one publicised in the media), before going on to display a more liberal attitude towards individuals or types of claimant they framed as "deserving" cases and/or the underlying principles of social security. To illustrate, one *Pistonheads* poster described the subjects of Channel 4 "poverty porn" show *Skint* as "absolute scum of the earth", before declaring that "I believe in the benefits system", as long as it was used "to give honest people a hand in difficult times" rather than for "career morons that see it as an excuse for not working, ever". Conversely, "soft" counter-discursive posts were those that went into some detail contesting the dominant anti-welfare discourse and/or expressing sympathy for benefit recipients, while still accepting certain aspects of the consensus view. For example, another *Pistonheads* poster conceded that, while it might be true that the individuals featured on *Skint* could "get an education, help themselves etc", some post-industrial areas were suffering from a lack of opportunities and "the attitudes and types of people flagged up last night weren't a problem in Scumthorpe [*sic*] when they still had the steelworks". While implicitly accepting that such "types of people" *did* now exist, and *were* "a problem", then, the poster qualified this view by *contextualising* them as symptoms of flaws in macro-economic policy – couched as a drive to "take a highly-populated industrial economy and attempt to turn it into Switzerland". The distinction between "neutral" posts and "soft" scrounger/counter-discursive ones, then, was one of both tone and *degrees* of acceptance/rejection of scrounger archetypes. Neutral posts typically indicated a broad acceptance of the consensus that scroungers existed before going on to detail the structural socioeconomic conditions that produced them/caused unemployment. "Soft" scrounger posts, by contrast, spent most of their time condemning scroungers and casting them as a pervasive problem (often in harsh language) and paused only to

briefly qualify their statements and/or acknowledge that not *all* claimants were workshy; while "soft" counter-discursive posts did the reverse, focusing mainly on defending benefit recipients and/or their communities, while still accepting (generally in moderate language) that small numbers of people exploited the system.

To ensure that the content analysis results were replicable, 10% of comments (74) were re-coded one month after coding was first carried out. Re-coding produced a match of just under 95%. Only four comments were coded differently the second time round: three switched between the subtly differentiated "tangential" and "indeterminate" categories and one was re-categorised from "indeterminate" to "soft scrounger". The latter was a short post responding to a scene in the programme *Skint* in which a protagonist consulted a medium with the terse comment, "Money to spend on fortune tellers … " This was re-categorised as a scrounger post in the context of the immediately surrounding dialogue, which more explicitly criticised the subjects' feckless spending habits – a key trait of scrounger discourse (see Van Der Bom et al. 2018)

7. Into the digital rumour-mill: scrounger-bashing in cyberspace

Table 1 breaks down the overall balance of discourses in each of the four datasets, while Table 2 refines these by omitting the "indeterminate" and "tangential" categories, to focus solely on posts directly contributing to the welfare-related debates that were the subject of analysis. As Table 1 demonstrates, by far the most numerous "scrounger" posts were found on the 23-month *Pistonheads* thread. More than 62% of all 596 posts coded (378) included assumptions and judgments embodying an unambiguous scrounger discourse. Well over half adopted "hard" anti-welfare positions, while barely three per cent (17) raised any objections to this discursive alignment with the then dominant elite position on welfare and just 0.7 per cent (4) challenged it overtly. So prevalent and vociferous were these commonsense "us-versus-them" "'evaluative' social representations" that they indicated the dominance on *Pistonheads* of what Van Dijk terms "schematically organized attitudes": ones inscribed by the repeated exchange and mutual consolidation of "socially shared opinions" and "basic ideologies", including that around welfare (1993, 258). Besides the term "scrounger" itself, benefit recipients were referred to by an encyclopaedic array of demonising pejoratives – from "scrotes" and "scumbags" to "utter pond life", "vermin", "pigs" and "scum". Some comments displayed such hatred and aggression – and/or detailed such colourfully violent "solutions" to the supposed problem of mass welfare dependency – that, had they been targeted at racial or religious minorities, they would have broken the law on incitement (www.legislation.gov.uk 2006). Policy solutions espoused by various posters included the suggestion that the best way of dealing with "sink hole estates" was to "build a big wall around them and fill with water"; that "a sniper" should be employed "to take them [the show's subjects] out one by one"; and that one of the main protagonists, and "his little mates", should be "euthanised" (a comment later partially retracted, following criticism from a fellow poster). The extent of this discourse's hegemony appears even more conclusive, however, if we look at Table 2, which removes unclear and/or off-topic posts. Three-quarters of the 426 posts in this smaller sample took "hard" scrounger positions, with nearly nine out of ten adopting some kind of anti-welfare stance.

Table 1. Breakdown of comment sentiments across sampled websites.

Sentiment	"Hard" scrounger	"Soft" scrounger	Neutral	"Hard" counter-discursive	"Soft" counter-discursive	Indeterminate	Tangential	Total
Pistonheads	322 (54%)	56 (9.4%)	31 (5.2%)	3 (0.5%)	14 (2.3%)	109 (18.3%)	61 (10.2%)	596
AVforums	9 (8.3%)	16 (14.7%)	10 (9.2%)	15 (13.8%)	9 (8.3%)	24 (22%)	26 (23.9%)	109
Landlord Referencing (overall)	5 (31.3%)	5 (31.3%)	1 (6.3%)	0	0	1 (6.3%)	4 (25%)	16
LR1	3 (27.3%)	3 (27.3%)	1 (9.1%)	0	0	0	4 (36.4%)	11
LR2	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	0	0	1 (20%)	0	5
All	341	82	43	18	23	136	116	737

Table 2. Breakdown of comment sentiments engaging with 'scrounger' concept.

Sentiment	"Hard" scrounger	"Soft" scrounger	Neutral	"Hard" counter-discursive	"Soft" counter-discursive	Total
Pistonheads	322 (75.6%)	56 (13.1%)	31 (7.3%)	3 (0.7%)	14 (3.3%)	426
AVforums	9 (15.3%)	16 (27.1%)	10 (16.9%)	15 (25.4%)	9 (15.3%)	59
Landlord Referencing (overall)	5 (45.5%)	5 (45.5%)	1 (9.1%)	0	0	11
LR1	3 (42.9%)	3 (42.9%)	1 (14.3%)	0	0	7
LR2	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0	0	0	4
All	341	82	43	18	23	507

Aside from the fact that it generated the most extreme (and largely uncontested) views, the most significant characteristics of the *Pistonheads* thread were its sheer longevity and the fact that it was collaboratively anchored and directed by three key participants throughout most of its extended duration – spanning the first run of Channel 4 series *Skint* (which ended in June 2013) and its revival for a second series, in November 2014. The thread was briefly reconvened again (in April 2015), by a different poster, for the first episode of what they dubbed a "new taffy [Welsh] version". The launch of *Skint* – whose title was used as the thread's topic heading – appeared to exert a priming effect on community members, by plugging it, intertextually, into a continuum of "poverty porn" shows broadcast since the initial run of the same channel's *Benefits Street* in 2014. That programme had catalysed a lively public debate about both the legitimacy of then dominant scrounger discourses and the ethics of exploiting benefit recipients for popular entertainment (see, for example, Jensen 2014; Van Der Bom et al. 2018).

Unlike all the other conversations, which focused on topics of short-term interest over periods of a single day or a few days, in this case each episode of *Skint* was collectively constructed by three of the thread's most active posters as a weekly "date": a rolling week-to-week members' club. In contrast to the often lengthy comment threads published beneath news websites, for instance – which largely take their cues from news organisations' institutional judgments about which stories are newsworthy (and how to frame them) - the significance of this thread was that it stemmed from political decisions taken by a handful of regular posters leading the discussion to invite fellow community members to resume their live commentary on the series the following week, as if organising a weekly social gathering. While three regular posters may have taken the lead in reconvening for each week's session, however, this could not easily be dismissed as a narrow echo-chamber attracting only limited engagement: on the contrary, over its duration this thread attracted posts from some 140 participants. An early illustration of the thread's "spectator sport" approach was offered by the tone of the opening post, on 13 May 2013, which led with the expectant line, "Channel 4 now. This should be interesting". In combination with the thread's title, the unspoken discursive cues underpinning this comment primed fellow posters, conspiratorially, for a TV spectacle with whose semiotic composition, and underlying discourse, they were assumed to already be familiar – not least from other poverty porn programmes. But it implicitly went beyond this, too: to *reaffirm* the unquestionable "commonsense" accuracy of scrounger discourse at a time when the 'shirker' panic was close to its peak (Morrison 2019). Similarly, at the end of this initial session the poster who was to become the thread's second "anchor" signed

off with a cheery, "That hour just flew by. Same time next week lads?" This was echoed a week later when, after tuning in for episode 2, a third regular poster closed proceedings with the near-identical farewell, "Same time next week?" On this occasion, however, the effect of the sign-off was more significant, as it triggered one of the most explicit examples of voyeuristic dialogue posted on the entire two-year thread. In a comment displaying an Orientalising curiosity worthy of Victorian social explorers, one poster posed the (presumably) tongue-in-cheek question, "Who's up for a pistonheads day trip to scunny [Scunthorpe] to see it for ourselves?" Cue a slew of overtly dehumanising comments from fellow posters, with one observing that "as a species we are regressing to cavemen" and hypothesising that, "if Darwin was right", the subjects of *Skint* would "become sterile".

This reference was far from the only example of intertextuality to be found on this thread, as posts repeatedly echoed the dominant scrounger (or "shirker") discourses then endemic to the rhetorics employed by tabloids, government and other agents with discursive privilege, including the producers of poverty. On 21 May 2013, a poster condemned benefit recipients as people who "consume resources for nil societal return" – adding that the solution was "cutting their benefits until they simply have to change their behaviour". This and other similar posts implicitly affirmed the taken-for-granted discourses – loudly manifested in repeated ministerial pronouncements – that the over-generosity of the existing welfare state encouraged scrounging behaviour by disincentivising people from pursuing paid work. In a widely publicised October 2012 speech, then Work and Pensions Secretary Iain Duncan Smith had made the sweeping commonsense assertion that the Welfare State itself was partly (or largely) responsible for promoting the "destructive" and "dysfunctional behaviour" of many unemployed people (PA/Huffington Post UK 2012). Similarly, one *Skint* poster had dismissed its subjects as "feckless wasters" before complaining that the effect of "dumping people on sink estates" had been to create a "generationally hopeless" underclass. Again, this intertextually referenced a long continuum of commonsense discourses framing the unemployed as denizens of inherited cultures of dependency – or, as Mr Duncan Smith had put it in his 2011 speech to the Conservative Party Conference, "pockets" of "social housing" that had "become a place of intergenerational worklessness, hopelessness and dependency".

Scrounger discourse was similarly dominant on the two *Landlord Referencing* threads, the first of which ran over four days, from 4 March to 8 March 2015, under the rhetorically worded topic heading, "When did private landlords become responsible for social tenants who cannot find a home?" Of the seven "on-topic" posts analysed, all but one (adopting a neutral stance) assumed anti-claimant positions in response to the TV documentary that had prompted the discussion – though this scrounger discourse was modified in several posts by a concern for the children depicted, with the initial poster (the site's moderator) framing the programme as "quite upsetting", in "highlighting the plight of children who have no permanent home". By largely absolving from blame the claimants' *children*, such posts exemplified certain kinds of qualified scrounger discourse that have been observed elsewhere, in which specific groups or types of poverty are popularly distinguished as "deserving" (e.g. Morrison 2019, 136–7).

While the moderator opened this discussion with a relatively "soft" welfare-sceptic position, they nonetheless went on to mock tenants who got into rent arrears because they "did not understand that the housing benefit department were not going to pay all of the

rent", and blamed dampness and black mould complained about by some renters (an issue the programme covered) on their own "behaviour". Such references to deviant claimant behaviour represented default interdiscursive restatements of a long litany of behaviourist theses attributing the causes of poverty to "the poor" themselves, and problematising their supposedly immoral values and actions as the symptoms of "pathological poverty" (Morrison 2019, 62) – in defiance of substantial empirical evidence disputing the truth of such assertions (e.g. Heath 1992; MacDonald, Shildrick, and Furlong 2014). What followed was a succession of posts infused with anti-welfare invective, replaying the hegemonic discourse of welfare commonsense. Taking their cue from the moderator's framing, several posters explicitly displaced responsibility for child poverty onto the dependency-fuelling "failings" of both the Welfare State and, by extension, claimants themselves – *individualising* blame onto the (morally deviant) minority. They included one who claimed to have "worked in social work for 30 years", drawing on this experience to affirm the accuracy of the prevailing discourse, by arguing that the programme portrayed "not poverty" but "bad parenting and selfishness of parents". Collectively, then, forum-users constructed themselves as an in-group – a respectable community of property-owning landlords – diametrically opposed to a deviant out-group of scrounging others. In so doing, they aligned themselves, intertextually, with the "strivers" lauded by ministers and tabloids – and against the "skivers" (Jensen 2014, 278).

The introduction of claimed first-hand and/or heuristics-based knowledge here was highly significant, as it added a dimension largely lacking from the comments by *Piston-heads* posters – who rarely claimed to have directly known or encountered scroungers. By contrast, the landlords framed the subjects of the BBC programme as proxies for *their own* low-income tenants: discursively mobilising their (asserted) experiences to *legitimise* the "'polarized' model" promoted by elite discourses, in so doing disdainfully separating their imagined "us" from "THEM" (Van Dijk 1993, 263). However, they did so, again, while reflecting the discourse of welfare commonsense propagandised from the top of government: the view that poverty, unemployment and lack of opportunity were not the symptoms of complex structural factors but of an amoral, dysfunctional "lifestyle choice" (e.g. Osborne, quoted in Wintour 2010). For instance, one "evidence-based" poster used an extended comment criticising irresponsible benefit recipients with too many children to condemn his own sister for having "5 of the little sods" and being "a burden on the state", while supporting another user's proposal for a "two-child" Child Benefit policy: an approach to family benefits repeatedly floated by Ministers. As far back as his October 2012 speech, Mr Duncan Smith (himself a father of four) had mooted limiting eligibility for Child Benefit and/or other payments to two children for unemployed households (Ramesh 2012), while by December 2014 he was suggesting that this policy could be used to socially engineer "behavioural change" (Mason 2014). A two-child limit to Universal Credit and tax credits was subsequently introduced in Mr Osborne's July 2015 Budget (Nemeth 2015).

The second *Landlord Referencing* thread (published on 5 February 2016) was also characterised by scrounger discourse, with anti-welfare views voiced in all four comments pertaining directly to the topic: "The Big Benefits Handout", a reference to then contemporaneous Channel 5 reality show *The Great British Benefits Handout*. Among the "hard" scrounger comments prompted by discussion of a series which paid a group of unemployed families £26,000 (the value of a then recently introduced household benefit

cap) to turn their lives around was a sweeping statement from the poster who had pre-viously championed the two-child policy, in which he unhesitatingly dismissed claimants as "feckless benefit scroungers". However, a subtler form of welfare commonsense was evoked by a "soft" scrounger poster, who appealed to fellow forum-users' "schematically organized attitudes" (Van Dijk 1993, 258) by remarking that tuning into the show would be "like watching a new film and knowing in advance what the ending will be".

The picture was more conflicted on the *AVforums* thread, which ran over four days from 27 to 31 March 2013, under an intertextual heading truncated from its opening post: "Another one of those benefit scrounger stories the DM [Daily Mail] likes to drum up just to remind us the country is full of them". Significantly, this post framed the ensuing discussion (intentionally or not) as much as an implied critique of the *Daily Mail's* predilection for anti-welfare narratives as an endorsement of such approaches. Of the total number of posts here (109), those manifesting scrounger discourse outnum-bered counter-discursive ones only marginally, by 23–22 per cent (25–24) – or just 42.4–42.3 per cent, disregarding "indeterminate" and "tangential" posts (22 and 28 respect-ively). Perhaps more significantly, the "strength" of the counter-discursive voice was more strident than the anti-scrounger one on this thread, with barely one in six of the 59 posts directly focusing on benefits adopting "hard" anti-welfare positions, compared to more than a quarter that took strongly oppositional viewpoints. Nonetheless, anti-welfare comments remained in the majority (albeit marginally), and comments were often infused with a strong dose of intertextual Coalition-style imagery. In a near-direct quotation from one of the most prominent ministerial axioms of the time – Mr Duncan Smith's repeated declaration of war on "something-for-nothing culture" (quoted in Mason 2013) – one prolific poster addressed benefit recipients directly on 28 March, with the charge that "the taxpayer is giving you money for nothing". Elsewhere, familiar commonsense assertions about lifestyle choices, benefit dependency and intergenera-tional unemployment abounded: a "soft" scrounger poster on 29 March directed their cri-ticism at the "extreme cases" involving "[inter]generational benefit claimants" and "a lifestyle that's handed down or taught", while another comment echoed this more prosai-cally on 28 March, asserting that there were "too many lazy buggers out their [*sic*] which expect to sit in their arse and get given everything on a plate". This poster proposed that the unemployed should be required to "earn there [*sic*] benefits in some way", for example by "cleaning the streets". In this case, the form of welfare commonsense expressed parroted not just the sentiments of tabloid and ministerial rhetoric but the sub-stance of then recent "welfare reforms" *introduced* by Ministers – and their justification for doing so. These included a work-for-benefit "Mandatory Work Activity", modelled on US-style Workfare initiatives, and three-strikes-and-you're-out sanctions for people "refusing" job offers or unpaid community work (www.gov.uk 2015). There was, then, considerable variation in the duration and depth of discussions about welfare across the four threads, but a strong overall consensus supporting dominant anti-welfare discourses promoted by media and politicians at the time.

8. Conclusion

Everyday talk is a place for everyday sentiment, commonsense – and, occasionally, preju-dice. The everyday conversations held on highly specialised niche-interest forums are no

exception. As the above analysis demonstrates, during this recent moral panic about "scroungers", dismissive and, at times, viciously hostile sentiment about out-of-work benefit recipients became so normalised that it would surface in debates in the least likely online spaces – prompting entire threads devoted to this theme on forums dedicated to everything from luxury cars to residential lettings. These threads, and the *incidental* comments posted in discussions with no obvious connection to the subject of welfare, frequently took the form of commonsense diagnoses of the nature, causes and consequences of the "condition(s)" of unemployment and supposed welfare dependency. Many posts directly echoed received phrases, accepted "truths" and normative value-judgments familiar from the politics, press and popular culture of the time – reflecting the prognoses and policy prescriptions favoured by politicians and pundits. Examples of discursive tropes that might have been lifted wholesale from the tabloids or speeches by Conservative Ministers included numerous comments condemning "bad parenting", "fecklessness" and benefit "dependency" as a "lifestyle choice" (see, for example, Morrison 2019, 30–36).

One criticism of this paper's approach might be that, rather than eavesdropping on conversations between "typical" members of the *general* public, it has instead focused on those of atypical *sub-cultural* publics with particular concerns and/or worldviews. For example, as the owners of domestic properties let out to households in the private rental market, many users and members of *Landlord Referencing* are likely to have encountered low-income households while undertaking their business, including people receiving benefits.

Notwithstanding such factors, it remains the case that anti-welfare commonsense strongly redolent of the dominant neoliberal Workfarist discourse promoted by Conservative-led governments of the time was normatively echoed and amplified, at various points and to varying degrees, between 2013 and 2016 in all of these disparate third spaces – none of which had any obvious reason to be debating the UK benefits system in the first place.

While unavoidably partial, then, the four threads analysed here offer useful illustrative snapshots of the prevalence of normative scrounger discourse during a period when UK ministers were striving to build a consensus in favour of sweeping welfare cuts, assisted by narratives popularised in the news media and poverty porn TV. The findings support those of other studies from the period which have identified the prevalence of scrounger discourses in online spaces more directly and explicitly devoted to discussion of welfare, including comment threads posted beneath news articles and associated Twitter conversations (e.g. Morrison 2018 and 2019). However, notwithstanding the (largely quantitative) British Social Attitudes surveys, and with notable exceptions (Paterson, Coffey-Glover, and Peplow 2016; Paterson, Peplow, and Grainger 2017), there remains a puzzling lack of in-depth qualitative research into public perceptions of the UK benefits system – and their origins. Future projects would do well to build on the existing corpus to examine the extent to which "welfare-sceptic" perspectives prevailed and/or continue to prevail among more representative cross-sections of the UK adult population, while unpacking the main factors that shape such attitudes and perceptions – including the role played by dominant elite discourses.

Disclosure statement

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