

**“He’s got Jheri curls and Tims on”: Humour and indexicality as resources for authentication in young men’s talk about hair and fashion style**

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This paper examines humour and indexicality as resources for identity construction in a group of young South London men, with a particular focus on the ideological meanings which are ringfenced by the young men’s conversational humour about hair and fashion style. The young men’s self-recorded, playful talk includes instances of joking as well as of high risk teasing which, as the paper shows, in many ways conforms to rules of ritual insulting. The references to hair and fashion choices throughout the playful competition constitute indices of group membership at various levels, from hip hop culture to aspects of what Silverstein (2004) calls the ‘macrosociological order’, in particular with respect to race. The paper argues that by considering both the style and the substance of conversational humour, we gain a fuller picture of the range of indexical meanings which are invoked on micro and macro social-levels, and therefore of the multi-layered authenticating practices at the core of the young men’s identity construction.

Humour; identity; authenticity; indexicality; hip hop; race

## **1. Introduction: humour, verbal competition and identity**

Although pragmatic research still often foregrounds issues such as typology, design and (multi)functionality of conversational humour, there has been a growing body of work exploring the relationship of humour and identity. Marta Boxer and Cortés-Conde's (1997) seminal paper "from bonding to biting" (1997: 282) highlights that everyday, conversational humour such as teasing is not only a resource for "the display of individual identity" but also allows for "the negotiation of a relational identity with others and through others". The understanding that identities are always constructed in relation to others is central to social constructionist identity theory, captured in Bucholtz and Hall's (2005) "relationality principle", and underpins some of the recent work on humour and identity (e.g. Holmes and Marra 2002; Schnurr 2009; Wolfers, File and Schnurr 2017).

Research on conversational humour and identity at times explores both discourse style and content (Schnurr 2009; Wolfers et al 2017), though analyses tend to be more heavily weighted towards the former. Holmes and Marra (2002) distinguish a range of different types of humour, from supportive to contestive, and styles of humour, from collaborative to competitive and single to extended contributions. Their research on humour in the workplace shows not only that humour is varied and multifunctional, but also that each community of practice has their own distinct "culture" in which humour plays an important role (ibid 1707). Janet Holmes's research frequently captures the link between the use of humour and leadership styles/identities, e.g. in the construction of positions of "the leader as a good bloke/mate" (e.g. Holmes 2009). Conversational humour in the workplace allows leaders to combine authority and solidarity, even when exploiting gender stereotypes, such as in the

example of a female IT company leader's "double voiced", ironic performance of a "technical klutz" (Holmes and Schnurr 2011).

Moving from workplace culture to workplace identities, Schnurr (2009) considers the construction of leadership identities in relation to a range of different teasing "styles" first described by Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997): "biting" (which includes jocular abuse), the rather less challenging "nipping" style, and, finally, "bonding". These different styles, whose function ranges from distinctly contestive and competitive, to supportive and collaborative, are used as resources to construct different leadership styles and/or to combine competing demands of leadership due to the ambiguous nature of teasing.

Ambiguity and multifunctionality are also at the core of playful verbal competition, which, as this paper will demonstrate, can be very similar to conversational humour such as high risk teasing. Delfino (2016) studied the use of "joning", a form of ritual insults, among African American pupils in an after-school programme in Washington DC. Delfino shows that joning is used by the pupils, in conjunction with other AAVE style features, to perform the kind of tough street identities which were essential "to maintain positive social face and to defend themselves from potential harm in the neighbourhood setting" (ibid. 632). On the other hand, joning also allowed some of the high achieving students to balance competing requirements of "academic knowledge" and "learning readiness" with "street toughness" and "ghetto identities" (642). Thus, "joning served as a resource for several of the after-school students to index and display culturally black identities in alignment with academic learning" (Delfino 2016: 649)

The current paper explores competitive verbal play and conversational humour about hair and fashion style in the talk of a group of young South London men from ethnically mixed backgrounds. I am particularly interested in the ideological positionings ring-fenced by the teasing, joking and verbal competition, which frequently index the young men's alignment with black, hip hop culture, and provide important insights into the young men's authentication.

## **2. Indexicality and authenticity**

Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 594) sum up the relationship between language, identity and indexicality when they write that indexicality “is fundamental to the way in which linguistic forms are used to construct identity positions” as it “involves the creation of semiotic links between linguistic forms and social meanings”. The fact that this relationship between linguistic forms and identity positions is usually mediated rather than direct has been captured in Ochs's (1992) concept of “indirect indexicality”. Michael Silverstein's (2003: 193) work on the “indexical order” foregrounds the processes necessary “to relate the micro-social to the macro-social frames of analysis of any sociolinguistic phenomenon”. The relationship between the micro and macro, between situational and larger-scale sociocultural meaning, is central to the analysis of the data presented in this paper. It is informed by an understanding of identity as including many “different levels”, from fleeting conversational stances to ethnographically relevant positions and larger, macro-social categories, including ideological structures which can shape local positionings (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 591-593).

Whereas much recent work on humour and identity, and more broadly, sociolinguistics and identity, focuses on the indexicality of (phonological, grammatical and conversational

features of) language style, this paper argues for extending the discussion of indexicality (and authenticity) to the level of discourse. Different discourses are “particular ways of representing part of the world” (Fairclough 2003: 26) reflecting different ideologies or belief systems, and shaping (social) knowledge, practices, identities and structures (e.g. Fairclough 1989; 2003). In the context of language and gender studies Cameron (1997: 62) warns against “the sort of analysis that implicitly seeks the meaning [...] of an interaction among men and women primarily in the style, rather than the substance, of what is said”. In the case of Cameron’s young white college men the “substance” of what was said revealed traditional discourses of heteronormativity which positioned them as “red-blooded heterosexual males” (1997: 62).

In order to move the focus of indexicality and authenticity onto the level of discourse this paper will draw on Silverstein’s (2004) work, and, in particular, the term “cultural concept”. Cultural concepts capture the sociocultural knowledge which is invoked in our interactions by certain words and expressions and is deployed “like identity-linen by hanging it out interpersonally and intersubjectively in a specific interactional moment” (Silverstein 2004: 633). Silverstein shows that by dropping into the conversation references to elite universities, or wine connoisseurship, speakers do much more than demonstrate their university education or knowledge of alcoholic beverages: they index certain sociocultural knowledge which, if shared by their interlocutors, identifies them as members of the elite. But even outside the realm of elite identities, shared sociocultural knowledge of terms and expressions constitutes a significant resource for speakers to index macro-sociological identities.

In the context of hip hop, Alim, Lee and Mason Carris (2010: 120) capture some of these indexical ties between micro-and macro-sociological orders in freestyle rap battles. They discuss “four different ways that emcees perform racial and ethnic identities in battles”,

including direct mention of an opponent's race or ethnicity, mocking the language style stereotypically associated with a specific ethnic/racial group (e.g. mocking Chinese tonality), making references to stereotypical work or other practices associated with a specific ethnic/racial group (e.g. landscaping or day laborers), and making references to icons of black and/or hip hop culture (e.g. "It's Eddie Murphy in a Sherman Klump costume", *ibid*). Just as Silverstein points out, the mutual understanding of the sociocultural meanings (indirectly) indexed by words and linguistic forms is central for everyone involved in the interaction.

The direct and indirect indexicality of hip hop and race (rather than ethnicity) plays an important part in the identity work of the four young men from South London at the centre of the current paper. The friends' joking, teasing and verbal competition about hair and clothes polices sociocultural knowledge and norms which are central to the young men's construction of authentic identities.

The idea that authenticity is constructed in discourse and interaction has been foregrounded in recent sociolinguistic theorisation (Bucholtz and Hall 2005; Coupland 2003; see also Pichler and Williams 2016 for a detailed discussion). As Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 601) argue: "We call attention not to authenticity as an inherent essence, but to authentication as a social process played out in discourse". This means that rather than considering which linguistic or other semiotic practices are reflective of authentic identities, the analytic focus shifts to a consideration of the kind of practices employed by speakers to authenticate themselves. Studies on crossing and stylisation are examples of the non-essentialist nature of these processes of authentication (Bucholtz 1999; Cutler 2003; 2009; 2010; Rampton 1995). Linguistic studies of hip hop capture the various ways in which emcees construct authentic

hip hop, ethnic and racial identities for themselves in rap battles. As Cutler's (2003; 2009; 2010) work shows, at times marginal members from the hip hop community (e.g. white, middle class backgrounds) have to work even harder to authenticate themselves.

The current paper demonstrates that although the teasing, joking and competitive humour on its own provides an interesting insight into how the young men construct their identities in relation to one another, a consideration of the ideological implications of their talk about hair and fashion style will allow for a fuller understanding of the young men's efforts to authenticate themselves in their interaction.

### **3. Teasing, joking and verbal duels**

The type of humour which is at the centre of the current paper has been described as "conversational humour" (Coates 2007; Dynel 2009; Goddard 2016; Haugh 2016; Sinkeviciute and Dynel, 2017). In contrast to the act of telling a (canned) joke, which is usually ready-made and repeated in different contexts with only minor variation, (see Coates 2007: 31, Dynel 2007: 1296), conversational humour tends to emerge spontaneously in everyday interaction, and includes many different categories such as humorous stories, banter, teasing, self-denigrating humour and spontaneous joking about others. Boxer and Cortés-Conde use the term "conversational joking" rather than "conversational humour" in their 1997 seminal paper. They describe 3 different types of conversational joking/humour 1) Teasing; 2) Joking about absent others and 3) Self-denigrating humour or self-teasing. All three types are present in my data, although the focus of this paper is on teasing and joking about the absent other.

The examples of conversational humour in this paper are highly “contestive” (Holmes and Marra 2002) and “high risk” (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997). The three episodes of humour I shall discuss centre on fashion and hair style, mainly in the form of joking about others, and a style of teasing which certainly “bites” and blurs into jocular abuse or even a form of (ritual) insulting. The humour clearly serves to bond and reinforce group norms, both in content and style.

### **3.1 Teasing**

Despite the context-dependent nature of teasing which has been described extensively in research, it is useful to consider some of the over-arching characteristics of teasing. In terms of participation frameworks, “teasing requires that the conversational joking be directed at someone present” (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 279; but see Clark and Carlson’s “talking laterally” in Eisenberg 1986: 1990 for an exception). Another, functional, key feature of teasing is reliance on both “playfulness/joking and derogation/aggression” (Alberts 1992: 164). As Haugh (2016: 122) sums up “teasing is generally understood to involve combining elements of (ostensible) provocation with (ostensible) non-seriousness”.

This combination also explains the inherent ambiguity of teasing, which has been described in many previous studies (Alberts 1992; Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997; Eisenberg 1986; Schnurr and Chan 2011). Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997: 279) highlight the importance of the correct encoding and decoding of the meta-message, either explicitly (e.g. “only joking”), or implicitly with the help of contextualisation cues. How speakers signal that they are (playfully) teasing rather than (seriously) threatening or complaining, and how recipients of

teases signal their own understanding of what is going on, has been at the centre of a considerably body of research on teasing. This research explores what Haugh (2014) calls both “design features” and “response features” of teasing, and discusses issues such as speaker intent, and playful vs. serious framing (Alberts 1992; Drew 1987; Eisenberg 1986; Haugh 2014; Hay 2001; Schnurr and Chan 2011).

The functional analysis of particular episodes of teasing is, however, not straightforward (for speakers as well as analysts), not only because teasing “runs along a continuum of bonding to nipping to biting” (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 279) but also because teasing can serve more than one function, even in the same situation (e.g. see Schnurr and Chan 2011).

What is particularly relevant with respect to “high risk teasing” among intimates (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997:286), which can be found in my own data, is the potential of teasing to function as a resource of socialisation or social control. This function of teasing has been explored particularly in research of parental teasing of children, such as Bambi Schieffelin’s work on Papua New Guinea Kaluli mothers, Ann R Eisenberg’s (1986) work of Mexican immigrants in California, and Peggy Miller’s (1986) study of teasing as language socialisation in a white working-class community in South Baltimore. “In teasing, speakers often wish to reconcile attempts to change behavior with maintaining existing bonds with their interlocutors, particularly with intimates” (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: *ibid* 280). The potential of teasing to exert social control at the same time as signalling play is something which is not restricted to adult-child interaction, as my data will show.

### **3.2 Ritual insulting/verbal duelling**

The blurred boundaries between teasing and verbal duelling on the one hand, and ritual vs. personal insulting on the other, are evident throughout my data. The fact that teasing can contain insults has been noted by a wide range of scholars (Eisenberg 1986; Schnurr 2008; Schnurr and Chan 2010) and is reflected in recent terminology, including “jocular mockery” (Haugh 2014, 2016) and “jocular abuse” (Hay 2002; Goddard 2017). Indeed, Sinceviciute and Dynel (2017: 2) argue that “Jocular abuse appears to have its roots in the well-recognised notion of *ritual abuse*, which serves solidarity building in certain communities of practice”.

Ritual abuse is frequently distinguished from personal abuse, due to its playful framing and its alleged lack of intention to mock actual shortcomings of the target (Labov 1972; Lee 2009). Labov’s (1972) classic work on ritual insults, a form of verbal duelling also referred to as “playing the dozens”, “joining”, “signifying” (see Delfino 2016 for a differentiation of these terms), emphasises this distinction between ritual and personal insult, arguing that ritual insults “do not denote attributes which persons actually possess....” (Labov 1972: 336) and are not, unlike personal insults, “answered by a denial, excuse, or mitigation” (Labov 1972: 335). However, Kochman’s (1983) response to Labov argues that the question whether the metamessage “this is play” (see Bateson 1987/1972) is sustained, is not to do with the truth or untruth of the accusation, but lies in the hand of the recipient of the insult who, in order to sustain the play frame, must not issue a denial, even if personal insults have been issued (ibid 333; see also Delfino 2016 and Tetreault 2010 for a more recent discussion of blurred boundaries between ritual and personal insults).

That is, for Kochman, we need to focus on the reaction of the recipient of the insult. This focus on “response features” (Haugh 2014) has been equally central to a large body of

pragmatic work on conversational humour. Drew's (1981: 219) classic work on "po-faced receipts" of teasing found that overwhelmingly teases were met by denials or corrections although later research suggests that there is more variation in responses to other-directed humour (Haugh 2014; Hay 2001; Schnurr and Chan 2011;). Unlike teasing, reciprocation is an important feature of sequences of ritual insulting and frequently consists of participants trying to outdo one another by "recycling" part of the original insult, "turning it on its head" (Goodwin 1990; 158-163; 185-186) in order to show that they can come back with a reply which is "even more clever, outrageous, or elaborate" (Eder 1990: 67-68).

The significance of verbal practices such as "sounding" or "playing the dozens" has been highlighted by many observers of hip hop (Alim 2006: 99-100; Jeffries 2011: 18 and chapters 2 & 3; Terkourafi 2010b: 8-9;). Alim (2006) highlights that hip hop language and practice "is an extremely competitive discourse space" (ibid. 99), attributing the roots of it "Black American Oral Tradition", such as playing the dozens (Alim 2006: 101; see also Terkourafi 2010b: 8-10 on AAVE practice of sounding's influence on hip hop).

Relevant to my own data is the observation by Lee (2009: 586) that in street corner rap battles participants engage in considerable interactional work to sustain the play frame: they "smile, laugh, or make other playful gestures to show that they are not "catching feelings", a local saying for when someone is genuinely upset, agitated, or pissed off".

#### **4. Data and Participants**

The four speakers are young men in their early to mid-twenties living in southeast London. They met at music college and consider music-making their primary vocation. They describe themselves as being from working-class backgrounds with parents in manual labour or service sector jobs. Joe's mother and father are both of Filipino descent, Tim's father is from Jamaica and his mother from Wales, but both parents have lived in England for most of their lives. Les is of mixed Jamaican and English descent with his father now living in Jamaica. Nath is of Caribbean/English descent and grew up in foster-care in a working-class area of Birmingham. Tim, Les and Joe grew up in south London and have spent their adolescent and young adult lives socialising in Peckham, a formerly poor working class and now ethnically highly diverse area in south London (having undergone recent regentrification). These three speakers describe their life in Peckham as involving fairly frequent criminality and violent altercations. The data shows that Les frequently assumes the most insider position when the group talks about criminality, foregrounding his brother's membership in one of the most notorious South London gangs. Les was unemployed at the time of the recording whereas Joe had recently found employment and Tim was about to begin an undergraduate music degree. Nath and Tim were flatmates, and Nath got to know Les and Joe through Tim.

The data was collected by Nath whilst he was an MA student in London. He wanted to explore how young men from ethnically mixed backgrounds, such as his own South London friendship group, use language in everyday spontaneous talk. There was no a-priori interest in humour or even hip hop, but both emerged as highly significant from the recorded data. Consent was sought from the participants first by Nath for his MA project, and then a second time by the author for their own research. Nath subsequently received payment to transcribe all of the recordings and his input into the analysis of the data has remained significant since then, as will be evident below (see also co-authored paper between Nath and author, 2016). During the

more than five hours of recordings the young men talked about many topics, above all hip hop, but also fatherhood; family relations; the US; language use; social class divisions and race. Throughout the recordings the speakers were also frequently engaged in some other activities, mostly listening to music but also watching videos or looking at images on their phones. Nath recorded the conversations (with the full knowledge of the group) in various locations in South London between December 2012 and July 2013; some at Nath's house (in the basement), some in Tim's kitchen, and some in Joe's studio in Brixton.

### **5. Analysis: Humour and indexicality in the achievement of authenticity**

The following three lengthy extracts capture some of the group's conversational humour centering on fashion and hair style. The humour is certainly contestive, sharing several characteristics with the kind of verbal competition observed in research on playful insulting (; Alim 2006; Eder 1990; Goodwin 1990; Labov 1972; Lee 2009; Kochman 1983; Pagliai 2010; Tetreault 2010). The first two extracts capture extended sequences of "high risk teasing" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997), "jocular mockery" (Haugh 2014; 2016) or "jocular abuse" (Goddard 2017; Hay 2001; Schnurr and Chang 2011). The boundaries between these different types of conversational humour are blurred, but what is clear that they are used to balance competitive and solidarity enhancing functions in the group. The last extract shows an example of "joking about the absent other" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997) as the target of the teasing has now left the room. However, the humour is still at the expense of the same (now absent) target. Both the teasing and the joking are used by the young men to police group norms and authenticate themselves.

Fashion choices constitute an excellent resource for authentication, allowing speakers to index group membership and identity at micro and macro levels, frequently at the same time as presenting others in opposition to one's own group. Cameron (1998) shows how fashion choices can be used to assert in-group identity and heterosexual masculinity. In her study Cameron presents data in which young white US college fraternity men talk about what they position as inappropriate clothing and bodily appearance of a male fellow student (his tight "speedo" shorts and his white, skinny, hairless legs) who they promptly label as "gay". Whilst Nath and his friends in many ways represent a very different demographic from Cameron's white, middle class college students, they also exploit fashion choices as an important means for identity construction and authentication. The current paper highlights the significance of hip hop and race for the young men's authentication on the basis of talk which is framed as humour and/or playful competition. However, hip hop and race emerge as equally important to their non-playful talk, which frequently also captures important intersections with gender and class (see Pichler and Williams 2016).

In the following extract the authenticity of one of the group's members is being challenged. Tim, who is about to go out on a date, is being challenged by Joe, who has arrived shortly before at Nath's place. The extract starts with Nath lamenting the fact that Tim is about to go on a holiday, which, according to Nath "is not fair".

**Extract 1: Timberland boots**

1			
Tim		=I do deserve to go man (-)	
Nath	you shouldn't deserve to go (.) it's no- it's not fair		
Joe			why
2			
Tim	= yeah (.) that's why		what do you reckon of

Nath  
 Joe cause you got Timberland boots on Timbos on

3  
 Tim my Timberland boots =like them  
 Nath  
 Joe Tim boots hmm you just need erm a beanie hat saying

4  
 Tim oh yeah is that all I need that's it (.) yeah (xxx)  
 Nath  
 Joe Trap Star and a checkered shirt an extra long

5  
 Tim what one that goes down to erm and a t-shirt that  
 Nath  
 Joe checkered shirt and a leather jacket

6  
 Tim goes down to here {laugh}  
 Nath {laugh}  
 Joe na na na na na: the fa- the checkered shirt was long enough

7  
 Tim what  
 Nath  
 Joe though it's like double XL (.) but then the leather it's a fitted leather coat (1) = a

8  
 Tim and wear that round the erm wear that round the erm the old  
 Nath  
 Joe Trap Star beanie hat na na

9  
 Tim waist ah ok Topshop Topshop erm=  
 Nath yeah{laughing}  
 Joe na on the (xxxx) you're taking it too far man

10  
 Tim ah ok ok  
 Nath yeah yeah yeah  
 Joe =yeah I just see it the mannequin is like that everyday  
 ? {laugh}

11  
 Tim  
 Nath yeah (.) yeah yeah  
 Joe "oh so that's the new look ok cool" and you got like forty other

12

Tim oh gosh is that how it works in there eh  
 Nath  
 Joe guys working there wearing the same thing as well  
  
 13  
 Tim they ain't they ain't brought the Timberland boot [back yet]  
 Nath  
 Joe ju- just [just because (they're  
  
 14  
 Tim have [they] am I late  
 Nath [have] they  
 Joe different)] yeah they have you're late blood you're **very**  
  
 15  
 Tim ah I'm late it's alright it's alright  
 Nath  
 Joe late that's why I am stating the whole

In this extract the humour is clearly competitive, allowing the participants to show off their verbal skills, similar to extended sequences of ritual insulting. The content of the teasing or mockery is personal, which is common in teasing and less common in ritual insulting, although verbal duelling does not need to exclude provocations about real issues (Kochman 1983) and the boundaries between personal and ritual can be blurred (Pagliai 2010; Tetreault 2010).

At the start of the episode Tim does not immediately accept the playful frame: he initially objects to Nath's tease "you shouldn't deserve to go" (i.e. on holiday) with "I do deserve to go" (stave 1). However, immediately after this "po-faced reply" which is characteristic of teasing (Drew 1987) Joe issues another playful challenge, containing a "bite" or even an insult: "why, cause you got Timberland boots on". From this moment on it is clear that a shift of frame has taken place, and Tim plays along with the rules of the game as he understands it. In particular, Tim is now doing his very best not to take any of the personal attacks personally, so as not to "deny, excuse or mitigate" (Kochman 1983: 329), thereby observing

one of the central rules of ritual insulting or sounding (Eder 1990; Goodwin 1990; Kochman 1983; Labov 1972).

Tim skilfully balances playing along with the tease and redirecting the focus from himself back to Joe: “what do you reckon of my Timberland boots?” and “like them?” (staves 2-3). Further reply strategies used by Tim include showing mock/sarcastic agreement “oh yeah is that all I need” (stave 5) and trying to outdo Joe by increasing the level of exaggeration “what one that goes down to erm and a t-shirt that goes down to here” (staves 6-7). All of these strategies are designed to demonstrate that Tim can keep his cool whilst under attack (Lee 2009), and that he is an equal in this instance of verbal competition. Tim does an excellent job, to the extent that it is Joe who in the end cuts the exchange short with “you’re late blood” (stave 13).

The contestive humour not only allows the group to balance both solidarity and (verbal) competition, but it also functions as a resource of social control (Eisenberg 1986; Miller 1986; Schieffelin 1986) by policing the group’s norms around appropriate clothing and, as I shall argue, authenticity.

In this extract the following list of clothing items are positioned as inappropriate/inauthentic by Joe: “Timberland boots” (e.g. stave 2); “a beanie hat saying Trap Star” (staves 3-4); “a checkered shirt” (stave 4), “a leather jacket” (stave 5). The sizing and length of the clothes also clearly matter, with both X-large and fitted being positioned as inappropriate, depending on the item of clothing, e.g. “an extra long checkered shirt” (staves 4-5); and “the checkered shirt .... it’s like double XL” (staves 6-7) and “a fitted leather coat” (stave 7). All three participants appear to be aware of the fashion style which is being criticized here; in staves 9

Tim goes on record and identifies the style as that of Topshop. In stave 9 Joe confirms that he does think that Tim is dressed like a Topshop mannequin, and in staves 10-11 he gives reasons for why he finds this objectionable: “oh so that’s the new look ok cool”. McLeod (1999) lists “following mass trends”, “commercial success”, and “the mainstream” as being in opposition to “being real” in hip hop art and cultural practice (see also Jeffries 2011: 134). In this extract Joe positions Tim as inauthentic by ridiculing his attempt to look cool by copying the newest highstreet fashion.

Opposition to high street fashion and commercialism more generally has frequently been positioned as essential to hip hop authenticity (Jeffries 2011; McLeod 1999). Indeed, the group’s talk contains many extracts which explicitly challenge the authenticity of several hip hop artists such as Kanye West or Pharrell due to their commercialist endeavours. Whereas there is plenty of evidence from previous research that fans view the commercial drive of hip hop artists negatively (but see Kubrin 2005 on wealth as another way of “gaining respect”), it is interesting to consider to what extent this anti-commercial hip hop authenticity also informs the positioning of the four young South London men towards one another. However, differently from their anti-commercial stances in relation to famous hip hop artists, their in-group challenges in relation to high street fashion are playfully framed.

The changing and localized nature of indexicality can be captured well on the basis of the two brands which are mentioned in the extract, “Timberland (boot)” and “Trap Star (beanie)”. As one of Cutler’s informants suggests, the Timberland boot has even been appropriated by hip hop culture (Cutler 2003: 223-224). However, in this group the consensus is that Timberland is indexical of mainstream, highstreet fashion. The same appears true for the brand “Trap Star”, which originated very much in opposition to high street clothing as a streetwear brand,

and still aims to associate itself with street and hip hop culture. It appears that its commercial success, being now sold at top range UK department stores like Harvey Nichols and Selfridges, and the fact that it has been embraced by stars like Rihanna, Jay-Z and Cara Delevigne appear to have changed its indexicality from “street” to “mainstream” for Joe.

In this extract Joe’s playful but highly contestive challenge of Tim’s clothing constitutes an important “authenticating practice” (Bucholtz 2003: 403) for Joe, allowing him to present himself as “real” in opposition to Tim. Although Tim is clearly positioned outside the borders of acceptable fashion styling he does not defend his choices. Instead, Tim manages to reassert his rightful place in the group in other ways; by proving to be Joe’s equal on an interactional level as the challenge progresses. Thus he reasserts himself by demonstrating his understanding and mastery of the rules of the game, engaging in the kind of verbal competition which is central to hip hop authenticity (Alim 2006; Jeffries 2011; Lee 2009; Terkourafi 2010b).

A little bit later the group continues with their verbal playfulness. First there is a brief instance of what Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997) would refer to as “self-denigration” by Joe in staves 1-2, with Joe playfully suggesting that he is not quite as up-to-date as others, then the teasing of Tim resumes from stave 6.

**Extract 2: “the old heels”**

(1)  
Tim  
Nath  
Joe I’m not supposed to know the latest st- I’m like (.) know what I mean

(2)  
Tim it’s alright (it’s alright xxxxxx)  
Nath

Joe I'm 09 bruv (-) I'm 2009 you got guys that are like (.) yesterday

[...]

(6)

Tim

Nath

Joe you don't even feel comfortable then the way you're walking is like

(7)

Tim

they **are** comfortable

Nath

{*laugh*}

he's got the old heels on

Joe (-) they're heels

(8)

Tim

Nath

Joe they look like have you seen them women wear heels and it's like

(9)

Tim

[when] oh god or this one

Nath

(xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx)

Joe like why are you wearing heels if you can't walk in [them] that's

(10)

Tim

%I'm alright% {*to Nath's offer of beer*}

Nath

Joe kinda how I'm looking at you with the Tims or it's either that or

(11)

Tim

yeah yeah

Nath

Joe you're just trying to elaborate that you're wearing Tims is that what you're

(12)

Tim

[yeah] that's exactly what I'm [doing] I- I was trying to do the P Diddy step

Nath

Joe

[doing]

[ok cool]

(13)

Tim

the o- o:- P Diddy P Diddy step (.) the old (.) na

Nath

is tha- (xxx)

Joe

oh yeah it just loo-

mind

(14)

Tim

na {*imitating P Diddy step?*}

yeah

Nath

hit your head on the desk

Joe

mind don't trip on your laces as well

yeah and

(15)



appears that he tries to join into Joe's joking about clumsy heel-wearing women, whilst doing an impression of someone who is having difficulty walking in heels, as Nath recalls when I asked him about this extract. According to Nath, there is another level of indexicality in this imitation of clumsy heel wearing. It plays homage to a popular black comedy sketch show by Dave Chapelle in which Eddie Murphy's brother re-enacts real Hollywood stories about Rick James who wore heeled boots as part of his glamorous dress style in the 1980s. Tim's imitation is drawing on the group's shared specialised cultural knowledge, and, just as Silverstein (2003) observed in his discussion of cultural concepts, indexing meaning which goes well beyond the micro-social.

Tim tries to move the target of the tease from himself onto other clumsy heel wearers, thereby aiming to change the frame from verbal duelling to joking about the absent other (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997). This, however, appears to be unsuccessful, as Joe continues his teasing of Tim in stave 10. From stave 11 Tim then resorts to some of the most central strategies of verbal competition: not denying the charges but instead playing along and even elaborating and perhaps exaggerating them.

When Tim claims that he was trying to imitate the "P Diddy Step" (stave 13), there are multiple layers of identity and authenticating work at play. On one hand femininity is rejected, on the other hand Tim does not object to other potential charges of inauthenticity, aligning himself with P Diddy (or Puff Daddy, or Sean Combs). P Diddy, who frequently also wears extravagant and hyper-posh clothes, may not be seen as the most authentic of hip hoppers in the group, indexing the kind of commercial success and alignment with designer branding which they reject, but at least an alignment with him is a "step" away from an alignment with women's high heels.

As Tim imitates the “P Diddy Step” in stave 14, Joe goes on the attack once more, warning Tim “don’t trip on your laces as well”, followed by Nath’s “hit your head on the desk” (stave 14) and then “Tim boot will be higher than your head” (stave 15). Although both Joe and Nath sound like concerned parents, it is clear that they are in fact continuing their teasing of Tim, with their fake parental concern positioning Tim as clumsy and, by extension, perhaps also as child-like. Again, Tim maintains the playful frame, playing along with the challenges “yeah” (stave 14); “right on the corner” (stave 15); “done for mate” (stave 16) and “that’s not good you know” (staves 17-18).

In this extract then the Timberland-booted Tim is positioned as clumsy in the group’s playful but competitive teasing. This clumsiness is first associated with femininity in their talk about high heels, and then gains a more child-like quality when turning to Tim’s shoe-laces as a potential trip-hazard. By associating Tim with alleged female and child-like clumsiness his authenticity is challenged. Again, Tim’s only opportunity to reclaim some of the authenticity that his fashion choice has made him lose is to hold his own and keep his cool when under attack. A central resource for him in this endeavour is humour, playing along with the rules of the game without denying the charges and thus breaking the playful frame. He is the target of the tease, but by embracing, playing along with, exaggerating and elaborating on the playful challenges, he skilfully authenticates his group membership. He also tries to redirect the focus from himself (and being associated with women and children) onto others, by imitating Rick James as well as P Diddy, both clearly associated with black glamor style. Although this glamorous style is the subject of humour in this group and beyond, as the Chapelle sketch shows, Tim skilfully exploits its humorous potential, moving the teasing some way towards joking, and changing the target of the joke from himself to some glamorous if ridiculous (but

at least not female) R&B and Hip Hop personalities. In this way Tim signals his allegiance to his friendship group for whom hip hop plays an extremely central role, and, on a further level of indexicality, aligns himself with a black hip hop masculinity.

In the next extract the indexicality of the group's humour exploits further references to black 80s glamour style. Again, the target of the humour is Tim, but this time the group has clearly moved from teasing to joking about the absent other and references to race are a lot more prominent/explicit. Les, who has bumped into Tim as he was leaving to go on to his date, is entering the room, full of playful disdain about Tim's styling.

### Extract 3: Jheri curls

- (1)  
Nath *{laugh}*  
Joe *{laugh}*  
Les “nigger got Jheri curls like a muthafucker”*{laughing}* I know you seen them Joe
- (2)  
Nath  
Joe I saw it (.) I didn't even get him with the (.) Jheri curls  
Les he's got Jheri curls and Tims on
- (3)  
Nath *{laugh}*  
Joe I let him do that to himself *{laugh}*  
Les *{laugh}* you should have told him before he went out
- (4)  
Nath he's he's properly  
Joe oh boy it depends who he's seeing tonight it might be a  
Les it's not on
- (5)  
Nath *{laugh}* it's true (.) he proper gels that shit up gets the  
Joe Jheri curl bitch *{laugh}*  
Les *♪(xxx)♪* *{laugh}*
- (6)  
Nath (.) (little little) greasy locks going (xxxxxxxxxx) yeah

Joe he's proper done it innit (.) it's not like  
Les

(7)

Nath he loves it he loves it]  
Joe he's just had a bath and he]  
Les you know who he looks like you know what a-

(8)

Nath {*laugh*}  
Joe ♪just♪ na it needs to be a bit longer and it's  
Les all he needs is that Soul-Glo shit

(9)

Nath {*laugh*}  
Joe it's Lionel any longer and it's Lionel =he  
Les {*laugh*} yeah but longer at the back

(10)

Nath yeah yeah  
Joe wants it [he wants it]  
Les I know he wants the Lionel [he looks like Lionel]

(11)

Nath  
Joe roll up his sleeves his blazer sleeves=  
Les =my aunt said that to him the other day

(12)

Nath  
Joe huh  
Les (.) she's said "I'm not being funny but you'n half look like Lionel" to him

(13)

Nath is that wha- she {*laugh*}  
Joe  
Les she goes "who's he look like" (.) "Lionel Richie" 'n that

(14)

Nath (that's a fucking joke)  
Joe  
Les my mum always says that and someone else said it as well

(15)

Nath that's fucking jokes  
Joe (xxx)  
Les >you know at my son's party the other day two< people said it



everyday talk, as the recordings show. However, on this occasion, the references are framed as playful allusions by/for the group, which is likely to be the reason for Joe to follow Les's example. This additional level of playfulness only became clear to me when talking to Nath about this extract. Both stave 1 "nigger got Jheri curls like a muthafucker" and stave 5 "Jheri curl bitch" are references to a comedy show by Canadian comedian Dave Chapelle, which the group frequently quote from. This show, and especially its character "Beautiful being", foreground race and culture, frequently poking fun at the "Jheri curl", and employing terms such as "niggers", "muthafuckers" and even "bitches" freely to both men and women (e.g. see Chapelle Show "Thank you bitches"<sup>1</sup>.) The laughter in staves 1 and 5 thus not only acknowledges the playful frame of the group talk, but, at the same time, the allusions to the Chapelle Show.

The fact that the others have also agreed that the frame has now moved from teasing Tim (in his presence) to joking about Tim (in his absence) becomes even clearer in the subsequent staves. The talk is highly collaborative, lacking the competitive/contestive element which is characteristic of the ambiguity inherent in teasing/verbal competition. For Boxer and Cortés-Conde (1997: 280) this means that the bonding function in "joking about the absent other" is particularly pronounced and allows the group to reinforce group norms and engage in "identity display through reducing the "others" to some laughable characterization that makes them different from us" (Boxer and Cortés-Conde 1997: 283).

The laughable characterization rests on Tim's outer appearance, or, more precisely on the effort he has made to change this outer appearance, which, as Les puts it, "is not on" (stave 4)

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<sup>1</sup>E.g. see Chapelle Show "Thank you bitches": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dFM5JON8dJ4>

and which, as Joe playfully blames himself “I let him do that to himself” (stave 3). What is clear from my data is that in addition to bonding Nath, Joe and Les, the joking also allows them to ring-fence the group’s norms about acceptable or authentic looks, similarly to the teasing/verbal competition in the previous extracts.

The look which the three remaining members of the group object to consists of:

- Jheri curls (stave 2)
  - Jheri curls like a muthafucker (stave 1)
  - Jheri curl bitch (stave 5)
  
- greasy locks (stave 6)
- Soul-Glo shit (stave 8)
- gel - “gels that shit up” (stave 5)
- Lionel Richie (staves 9; 10; 12; 13; 17; 18)
  
- Tims (stave 2)
- rolled up blazer sleeves (stave 11)
- vintage jacket (stave 19)

In order to gain a fuller understanding of the norms the group’s humour is guarding, it is important to consider the indexicality of these concepts, making connections between micro and macro-social levels of meaning. Again, Tim is portrayed as making an effort to follow fashion trends, which challenges his authenticity in the eyes of the group. The rolled-up blazer sleeves and the vintage jacket can be seen in the same way as the Timberland boot, although of course they in themselves index a different fashion trend, a trend which goes well with Lionel Richie’s 1980s Jheri curls.

Tim’s hair styling is at the center of the group’s playful disdain. At a very basic level of indexicality it is possible that the group simply objects to the effort which Tim has made in preparing for the date, seemingly mindful of current fashion trends. Clearly for the group the “Jheri curl” is a significant cultural concept (Silverstein 2003), conveying stereotypic cultural

meaning. The Jheri curl is a particular 1980s African American hairstyle, renowned for its loose locks and glossy (or greasy) shine, and best captured by celebrities such as Lionel Richie, Michael Jackson in his video *Thriller*, or Samuel L Jackson in *Pulp Fiction*. Although the style was very much mainstream at the time, it was not before too long that it became the topic of parody and comedy, as in Eric LaSalle's slimy character in the Eddie Murphy comedy "Coming to America". The character's father is the owner of a business empire based on the fictitious product "Soul-Glo"<sup>2</sup>, precisely the kind of product which was used to achieve the infamous Jheri Curl.

Joe, Nath and Les exploit the humorous potential of the Jheri curl and the related hair relaxant product. They explicitly associate Tim's style with that of Lionel Richie, probably the most iconic representative of this 80s fashion trend, from staves 9-18. The similarity, according to Les, is so great, that even people outside the group remark on it. The group's consensus is also reflected on a conversational level. The joking about Tim is conducted in a highly collaborate fashion, containing lots of laughter, minimal support, and repetition, reminiscent of the informal talk of women friends (Coates 1996). This is humour which is both "collaboratively developed" and "humour which agrees with, adds to, elaborates or strengthens the propositions or arguments of previous contributions" (Holmes and Marra, 2002: *ibid* 1687).

The norm-enforcing function of the joking is enhanced by the fact that the young men are, simultaneously, engaged in gossip. Cameron's (1997) US college frats also gossiped about

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<sup>2</sup> Although "Soul-Glo" is a fictitious product (from the Eddie Murphy's film "Coming to America), there is a huge industry of similar creams and lotions product which aim to "relax" or "straighten" tight curls.

the clothing and bodily appearance of one of their fellow students, the “really gay guy” in their class. Whereas the US students’ gossip aided their construction of heterosexual masculinity, the joking about Tim’s hair indexes a different kind of macro-social meaning/identity, with race being foregrounded.

Robinson (2003: 360) sums up the significance of interpreting “hair as race” in her essay on black female beauty: “White-dominated culture has racialized beauty so that hair that reflects European ancestry is more attractive than hair that reflects African ancestry”. Robinson then goes on to highlight the indexical link between different types of curls and race. In her interviews with 38 black US women, Robinson (2003: 368) found that many women were unhappy about their tightly coiled hair:

Definitions of good hair include hair that is “straight”, “wavy,” and “not kinky.” States one participant, “Good hair is hair you can just pop up and do a little something with real quick, without having to use the brush and the grease and the comb and the pressing iron like me.”

The racialisation of hair is also the subject of films/documentaries such as *My Nappy Hair* (2008) and *Good Hair* (2009, inspired by comedian Chris Rock little daughter’s complaints about having kinky hair). The fact that the subject is not restricted to humorous contexts is also clearly evident throughout my own data, and is captured in Tetreault’s (2009) research on playful insults about hair in her discussion of “afficher”, a form of insults and teasing used by working-class French teenagers of Algerian descent.

In my own data it is clear that Tim’s authenticity is at stake, and the indexicality of Tim’s “Jheri curl” is likely to go beyond simply being too “over-styled”, “80s”, or “uncool” for the group. Tim is not only being positioned as inauthentic because he is trying too hard, or

because he is following mainstream fashion (orienting to the 80s) but also because he treats his hair to be less natural/curly, following white-dominated beauty ideals. That is, the joking about hair also indexes the relevance of race for the group's authentication. This does not come as a surprise in this group where discussions about skin colour and hair, or clothing items such as the hoodie, are frequently related to race in explicit terms. Les in particular frequently directs the talk to race, e.g. when he says during the recording "I was always told by black people I had good hair but then compared to my sister I had shit hair, I had nigga hair because my hair's like yours, do you get what I'm saying".

Unlike Robinson's research, however, in this group the following of white beauty ideals is problematised. This is of course not unusual in the context of hip hop culture, which constitutes one of the strongest unifiers of the group. Authentic hip hop identities are frequently constructed in opposition to mainstream, high street and white fashion norms, as Alim et al (2010: 126) find in their discussion of freestyle rap battles:

However, dark skin, "natural" and unstraightened hair, and other phenotypic markers of blackness may also be used as positive resources in battles between "black" emcees. Moreover, phenotypic markers of being mixed race (e.g. lighter skin, straighter hair) may become stigmatized. This is an uncommon interactional situation in which the dominant social meanings of blackness get turned on their head.

This shows that just like in their teasing, the group authenticate in relation to "popular cultural icons", a strategy also used by MCs to index ethnicity and race in rap battles by "making references to a figure who is a member of the social type, such as creating links to popular cultural icons and appealing to specialized hip-hop knowledge" (Alim et al 2010: 120).

Whereas previously they referred to Rick James and P Diddy, it is Lionel Richie and Chapelle's fictional character "Beautiful Being" whose iconicity is exploited here for his classic 80s Jheri curl look. Thus, despite the teasing and verbal duelling having given way to conversational joking, some of the group's most central authenticating practices remain unchanged.

## **Conclusion**

This paper captures the blurred boundaries between the high-risk teasing, jocular mockery/abuse and verbal competition in the talk of the four young men from South London. This other-directed humour, as well as the conversational joking about hair and fashion style, is clearly used for bonding in the group, but at the same time it also allows for the policing of group norms and constitutes an important resource for the young men's authentication.

Whenever the group's humour assumes qualities of verbal competition, it is clear that the target of the humour needs to show that he is not "catching feelings" (Lee 2009). Instead of denying the playful accusations, Tim therefore uses many other strategies, such as playing along with, exaggerating and even outdoing the playful challenges targeting him. By holding his own in these verbal exchanges, demonstrating his knowledge of the rules of the game and keeping his cool, Tim is able to reassert his group membership, thereby playing an important role in these authentication processes.

I have argued that in order to gain a full understanding of the authenticating work accomplished in their conversational humour, it is important to consider not only the type and

style but also the substance of the young men's humour, that is, to extend the discussion of indexicality onto a discourse an ideological level.

In the talk of the Nath and his friends, hair and clothes fashion choices index a range of different micro and macro social meanings, allowing the young men to construct themselves in opposition to mainstream trends, signal their membership in hip hop culture, and index racial authenticity. These indices of fashion and hair style become resources for authentication, together with the teasing/verbal dueling and joking which frequently frames these exchanges. Together they allow the young men to authenticate themselves by constructing themselves as relaxed and fun but also streetwise and tough, signaling alignment with black, hip hop masculinity.

By their opposition to a range of fashion and hairstyle trends the group construct their own identities as authentic in opposition to commercial high street fashion a la Topshop as well as glamorous 80s hair and clothing fashion exemplified by icons such as Lionel Richie or Rick James. In their spontaneous talk this fashion is associated directly with children and women (Timberland boots – high heels) and, more indirectly, with commercialisation of hip hop (Trap Star etc). In my communication with Nath he also associates some of these trends with hipsters, whose social class and race characteristics are frequently positioned in opposition to the group throughout the recordings (see Pichler and Williams 2016 on intersections of class and race in this group). Racial authenticity is implicated in the group's rejection of Tim's "greasy" Jheri curls. The Jheri curls, like many of the other indices of hair and fashion style, act as cultural concepts (Silverstein 2003), whose multi-layered indexical meanings need to be fully understood by the group for the humour to work. As Alim et al (2010: 120) argue with reference to MCs: "These verbal artists are aware that their victory depends on the

salience of their metaphors and images as well as on the audience's ability to make these indexical connections." The same applies to humour and verbal competition in spontaneous interaction. Thus, the cultural concepts as well as the joking about and verbal duelling with Tim all constitute resources for the group to authenticate themselves by constructing themselves as relaxed and fun but also streetwise and tough, and aligning themselves with black, hip hop masculinity. By considering both the style and the substance of conversational humour, we gain a fuller picture of the range of indexical meanings which are invoked on micro and macro social-levels, and therefore of the multi-layered authenticating practices at the core of the young men's identity construction

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### Transcription notations:

Transcription is based on the stave system. Simultaneous speech is represented by vertically aligned utterances within one stave. Information in italics, marked with \* at the bottom of each stave, explains some of the terminology used by the speakers in the group. Other symbols include:

?	identity of speaker not clear
<i>{laughter}</i>	non verbal or paralinguistic information
(.....)	doubt about accuracy of transcription
<b>bold print</b>	emphasis
=	latching on
(.)	micropause
(-)	pause shorter than one second
(1); (2)	timed pauses (longer than one second)