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Discourses of (hetero)sexism in popular music
The legacy of *Blurred Lines*

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This article analyses interview data to explore how participants negotiated discourses of (hetero)sexism in relation to the controversial pop song *Blurred Lines*. Our previous work, based on questionnaire data, interrogated interpretations of *Blurred Lines* (Handforth, Paterson, Coffey-Glover & Mills 2017) and showed how participants drew on discourses of sexism in their responses. Several participants experienced significant conflict in their interpretations, and here we focus on these more complex interpretations, considering the "small stories" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) identified in follow-up interviews with participants. Individual narratives acted as mechanisms through which participants linked *Blurred Lines* to wider issues such as rape culture, drawing parallels between these and their own lives. Following research in queer linguistics (King 2014; Leap 2014; Motschenbacher 2010) our use of thematic analysis, corpus linguistic tools and narrative analysis highlights the various subject positions that participants negotiated in their storytelling, and how these positions both echoed and challenged normative understandings of gender and sexuality.

Keywords: heterosexism, popular music, queer linguistics, discourses of sexism, corpus linguistics, narrative analysis

1. Introduction

Robin Thicke and Pharrell Williams' pop song *Blurred Lines* hit the charts in the summer of 2013 and was instantly popular, but it attracted media controversy for both its overtly sexual video and "rapey" lyrics (Romano 2013). *Blurred Lines* was conceptualised as a watershed moment in terms of the overt sexualisation of women in popular music (Lynskey 2013; Murphy 2014). Certainly, discussions of *Blurred Lines* in the media drew links between its content and issues of sexual

consent; connections have been made between the song's lyrics and the words spoken by perpetrators of sexual violence (Koehler 2013). Despite the media furore around the song, there has been little academic literature which discusses individuals' interpretations of *Blurred Lines,* or the wider social implications of a song viewed by so many as promoting rape culture. This paper, as well as our earlier article, Handforth et al. (2017), addresses this gap in knowledge. Our earlier study explored participants' reactions to *Blurred Lines* via an online questionnaire, examining their reactions to the lyrics and music video, interpretations of representations of men and women in the video, and whether or not they felt the song addressed issues of sexual consent. Over 1000 people responded, and our analysis revealed an overwhelmingly negative reaction to the song amongst participants. The majority of respondents expressed negative feelings about the song's video (74%), with the dominant interpretation being that the women in the video were passive and objectified, whilst the men were dominant and "sleazy". Moreover, two thirds of respondents felt that there was a clear link between the song and issues of sexual consent.

Our findings (see Handforth et al. 2017) also highlighted a number of complex interpretations of *Blurred Lines,* however. Given the tendency of the mass media to condemn the song, these more conflicted views were worthy of further exploration. Our data showed that some individuals had very different public and private reactions to the song and acted as though their enjoyment of the song was something they had to confess to. For example, one participant stated that they would "guiltily nod my head and hum along to it in private". Such conflict was usually felt by those who had expressed positive feelings about the song but felt unable to react positively to it in public because they felt that the acceptable reaction to the song was condemnation.

These complex responses necessitated a more qualitative approach to analysis than could be undertaken with limited data gathered through the questionnaire. As such, we conducted a small number of interviews in the summer of 2015 after conducting the questionnaire in late 2014. The sample was self-selecting, as it was limited to those who had expressed interest in participating in further research after completing the questionnaire. There was some attrition in the number of participants willing to be interviewed due to the time it took to secure further funding for this research. Interviews with nine participants (see Table 1 for details) were conducted, and details about their age, gender and broad view of *Blurred Lines* (as expressed in the original questionnaire) are listed below, for context. Participants were given pseudonyms to ensure their anonymity.

This paper draws on this interview data and provides a detailed thematic analysis of reactions to *Blurred Lines*, demonstrating how participants oriented

Table 1. Details of participants

Name	Gender	Age	Overall view of *Blurred Lines*
Paul	M	31–35	Dislike
Sam	M	25–30	Dislike
Joe	M	25–30	Dislike
Megan	F	31–35	Dislike
Robyn	F	31–35	Neutral
Rosie	F	25–30	Dislike
Anna	F	Over 45	Dislike
Chloe	F	36–40	Neutral
Jenny	F	31–35	Dislike

to, constructed and negotiated discourses of heterosexism in *Blurred Lines*. Our analysis addresses the following research questions:

1. Do interview participants construct positive and/or negative opinions about *Blurred Lines* and is there evidence of conflict in their responses?
2. What kinds of discourses or interpretative repertoires (Potter & Wetherell 1987) do participants draw on in their discussions of *Blurred Lines*?
3. How do participants position themselves and others in relation to different (feminist) subject positions in their discussions of *Blurred Lines*?

To answer these questions, we used a combination of thematic analysis and tools from corpus linguistics (see Section 3). In addition, most participants gave examples of how hearing the song in public or private had made them feel, using personal narratives as a mechanism for stance construction. The analysis of participants' narratives enabled us to understand how they linked *Blurred Lines* to the kinds of heterosexist discourses they encountered in everyday life (Section 4.2).

2.   Studying reactions to sexism and popular music with queer linguistics

Much of the existing scholarly work investigating individuals' understandings of sexism in popular music is based on empirical studies examining the psychological effects of watching particular music videos in a controlled environment (for example Burgess & Burpo 2012; Cobb & Boettcher 2007). Such studies have also focused almost exclusively on the visual aspects of music videos (Kalof 1999; Wallis 2011), rather than considering how song lyrics might interact with visual elements to produce particular meanings. Linguistic studies of popular music have focused on the stylistic features of song lyrics (Kreyer 2015; Werner 2012),

or the use of language varieties in musical performance (Beal 2009; Jansen & Westphal 2017), rather than audience response specifically. Motschenbacher (2013, 2016) analyses naturally-occurring data from Eurovision Song Contest press conferences to examine how European identity/ies are constructed, partly in relation to non-heternormative discourses, with a view to examining ESC press conferences as a Community of Practice (CofP) (see Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1992). In this CofP, aligning with non-heteronormative discourses is a way of (indirectly) indexing a non-conservative European identity. The focus of our research differs from Motschenbacher's in the consideration of a popular music text (rather than a community around a genre of popular music) as the locus for analysing discursive strategies in audience responses, as a way of gaining insight into how individuals negotiate heteronorms.

According to Leap (2014: 558), queer linguistics is concerned with rejecting binary interpretations of gender and sexuality and acknowledging the various ways in which conceptions of gender and sexuality might be discursively produced. This approach to studying the relationship between language and identity categories is grounded in a now well-trodden shift in thinking from identity as an *essence* to something which is *performed* (Butler 1990, 1993) or *constructed* (see Sunderland 2004: 23–24) through linguistic and non-linguistic semiotic practices. Observed patterns in these discursive practices constitute discourses. Dominant discourses, over time, become ideologically imbued in a particular culture; that is, they come to be *naturalized*. Queer theoretical approaches to identity are interested in unpicking the perceived "naturalness" of ideologies of gender and sexuality, such as heteronormative discourses, which presuppose a universal heterosexuality (Cameron & Kulick 2003: 55). This broad theoretical framework is useful for analysing the complexities involved in how people talk about perceived connections between gender and popular music, because it is underpinned by a performative account of identity: if we are to understand identity formation (both "self" and "other") as a process which occurs partly through the discursive act of talking, then we must acknowledge that all accounts of individual experience are a form of interpretation that is context dependent (Baxter 2010: 127). Therefore, there are no fundamentally "true" or "objective" opinions which can be harvested through ethnographic-inspired methods. However, when people construct their identities or discuss their understandings of a particular phenomenon (such as music videos), they draw on a series of discursive elements which are made available to them as a result of their schematic knowledge about the world (Foucault 1972). Thus recurrent patterns, or "interpretive repertoires" (Potter & Wetherell 1987) in how people talk about gender and sexuality, can reveal something about how discourses of gender have become naturalized in society.

Traditionally, there has been a perceived tension between queer theorists' liberatory interest in erasing categories like "male/female" and feminist theorizing, which focuses on issues of power and agency that necessarily recognises the saliency of binary structures (see, for example, the discussion in Bucholtz & Hall 2004: 483–493). However, we argue that insights from feminist linguistics can be usefully incorporated into queer linguistic analysis, since queer theory's interest in challenging the status quo via the deconstruction of discursive acts that reproduce heteronormative ideology can be seen as entirely in alignment with the feminist linguists' interest in challenging hegemonic patterns of dominance that reproduce inequality based on the grounds of gender identity (where "identity" is viewed in the performative sense as a set of socially produced and regulated practices). This is because understandings of normative sexuality depend on the naturalization of gender-based binaries, or what Butler (1990) refers to as the "heterosexual matrix".

The queer principle of embracing fluidity and the rejection of binary categories can also be applied to feminist linguistic thinking in other ways. As mentioned in Section 1, the media's reaction to *Blurred Lines* framed the song in terms of sexual consent. Responses to questions about the lyrics in Handforth et al.'s (2017) questionnaire showed that certain lines from the song, such as "just let me liberate you" and "I know you want it", were interpreted as sexist. In feminist linguistics, definitions of sexist language have centred around a fairly binary distinction between "direct" or "overt" sexist language items that operate at the level of the word (such as the use of discriminatory insult terms), and "indirect" or "covert" forms of sexism that operate at the level of inference (such as sexist jokes or presuppositions) (see Mills 2008). However, feminist linguists also acknowledge that in practice it is often difficult to determine whether a particular instance of discourse can be described as sexist, since identifying the meanings of words depends in part on how a recipient interprets speaker-intent (Cameron 1992: 110). For example, those who seek to reclaim a term like "bitch", conventionally an insult term for women, might not find insult in a lyric from *Blurred Lines* such as "you're the hottest bitch in this place". In this case, there is not as much of an obvious distinction between "direct" and "indirect" sexism as this feminist linguistic conceptual framework suggests. We propose, therefore, that in addition to understanding how heterosexual norms may be negotiated, a queer approach to conceptualising sexism is also fruitful for our discussion of individual responses to *Blurred Lines*. In drawing on principles from both queer and feminist linguistics, our analysis of audience responses to *Blurred Lines* contributes to politically-inflected interrogations of norms of gender and sexuality, as well as work that attempts to bridge the tensions between queer and feminist theorizing in linguistics.

3.   Methodology

Examining interview transcripts facilitates discursive analysis of what people say about the song. As interviews require participants to provide accounts of their experiences, we have found the notion of "interpretive repertoires" from social psychology a useful concept to describe the "recurrently used systems of terms used for characterizing and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena" that index salient discourses (Potter & Wetherell 1987: 149). For example, a repertoire of states of (un)dress occurs across the dataset, which serves to index discourses of objectification and unequal power relations (Sections 4.1.1 and 4.2.2). Identifying interpretive repertoires involves capturing recurring lexical patterns, which can be done both qualitatively and quantitatively, and therefore suits a combined corpus linguistics and discourse analysis approach.

For this study, we conducted one-to-one follow-up interviews with nine of our original survey participants (Handforth et al. 2017). Seven out of the nine participants had expressed negative views of the song in the questionnaire, compared with two who had expressed more neutral views. Our original sample of those who had completed the questionnaire and agreed to participate in further research largely consisted of those with negative opinions about the song, and this is reflected in the views of those interviewed. Participants ranged in age between 26 and 46, and two men and seven women were interviewed. The two participants who had more neutral feelings towards the song were women in their 30s. Due to the self-selecting nature of the original questionnaire, and the subsequent interviews, participants represent a small sample of the wider population. The initial questionnaire was widely circulated across university networks, and three participants were academics. This is likely to have an impact on the data generated in these interviews, as these participants are likely to be conversant in relevant intellectual arguments, for example feminist discourses and concepts such as "rape culture"; therefore, their views may not be representative of the wider public. However, obtaining an unbalanced sample is a potential consequence for any research using self-selecting methods, and attempts were made to create a representative sample of viewpoints from our original dataset.

Interviews were undertaken by both researchers, with each lasting around half an hour. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing interviewers to pursue certain lines of enquiry but also giving the freedom for researchers to follow up on particular participant responses. Participants were shown the music video and asked to read the lyrics immediately before their interview. Questions were designed to further probe participants' views as expressed in the original survey data (Handforth et al. 2017). Participants were asked questions such as whether they felt that the video and lyrical content of *Blurred Lines* was similar or different

to other popular music, whether they felt that the representations of men and women in the video were positive or negative, and how they felt about the song lyrics. Interviews were transcribed using ordinary orthographic transcription methods, as the aim was to analyse what people say *about* Blurred Lines as opposed to more prosodic, or "micro" aspects of talk. This resulted in a small "specialized" (genre-specific) corpus of approximately 34,265 words of talk on the topic of *Blurred Lines*.[1] Rather than comprising a comprehensive account of responses to the song, this body of data therefore represents a snapshot of available subject positions taken up by viewer-listeners.

3.1   Analytical framework: Corpus-assisted discourse analysis

Our analysis began with one researcher undertaking thematic analysis, while the other researcher conducted a corpus linguistic analysis as a form of triangulation, to compare findings and to test for wider evidence of the themes uncovered during the close reading. Both the thematic and corpus linguistic analysis revealed the use of personal narratives as a framing device for participants' construction of stance.

3.1.1   *Thematic analysis*

Thematic analysis was used in order to identify, analyse and report on patterns within the data whilst maintaining the rich detail of the qualitative interviews (Braun & Clarke 2006). This involved "the identification of emerging patterns and categories from iterative reviews of the dataset" (Mabry 2008: 218). This was carried out by a process of coding the data, both inductively and deductively – some codes derived from our original interview questions whereas others emerged from the data itself. The process of coding allowed the data to be categorised into significant themes, and the relative small number of interviews meant that it was possible to undertake this process by hand rather than using software such as NVivo, which sped up the process of coding and analysis.

3.1.2   *Corpus linguistic tools*

Corpus linguistics is an approach to studying "language in use" that relies on methods of automatic text analysis to facilitate quantitative and qualitative analysis of large datasets, or *corpora* (Baker 2006; McEnery & Hardie 2012). Corpus linguistic analysis involves using computer software programs to calculate statistical information that can reveal linguistic patterns in a corpus of electronic data.

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1.   There were similar total word counts per person, with an average word count of 3,874.

The combination of corpus linguistics with methods of close reading is now a well-established approach to analysing discourses in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and other critical approaches to language analysis (see, for example, Baker 2006; Baker, Gabrielatos, KhosraviNik, Krzyżanowski, McEnery & Wodak 2008; Mautner 2009).

Within critical approaches to discourse, the use of corpus linguistic methods for the analysis of gender and sexual identity is a burgeoning area (for example Baker 2014; Baker & Levon 2016; Coffey-Glover 2015; Findlay 2017; Love & Baker 2015; Motschenbacher 2018; Taylor 2016). This can be attributed to the fact that the post-structuralist conceptualisation of gender as performative (Butler 1990, 1993) aligns well with the incremental focus of corpus linguistics; for instantiations of gender to become recognisable, they have to be reiterated, and corpus linguistics works on the basis of collecting numerous examples of an idea, which allows the researchers to see its cumulative effect. The effectiveness of corpus linguistic methods in establishing cumulative meanings is therefore ideally suited to the analysis of gendered discourses.

In this study we have found some corpus linguistic tools, such as the analysis of key words and collocates, useful for uncovering patterns in the data which might otherwise have gone unnoticed. In corpus linguistics, "keywords" are words which occur unusually frequently or infrequently in one set of data when it is compared with another set of data, usually that which is intended to represent some kind of established norm in the language or genre under investigation (Baker 2006:125). Calculating keywords in the interviewee's responses allowed us to find out which words were statistically salient to the data in comparison with a reference corpus. We calculated keywords in WordSmith tools (Scott 2012), using the spoken section of the BNC as a reference corpus. Only keywords assigned a keyness score of 15.13 ($p < 0.0001$) or above were included in the results. The lexical keywords were then grouped into semantic fields (see Table 2), as an analysis of the kinds of lexical or "content" keywords gives an indication of the most important concepts in the data. This was done by examining how keywords behave in their co-texts via concordance lines: a list of all the occurrences of a particular word in its surrounding context (Baker 2006:71).

Collocates are words which regularly appear together at a level of statistical significance and are useful for giving an indication of how we understand a particular concept, given that words take on meaning in relation to others (Baker 2006:96). Collocation analysis was useful for examining the semantic prosody of terms like *man* and *woman* in the interview data, which identified contrasting agency patterns (see Sections 4.1.2 and 4.1.3). Collocates were calculated using the Specific Mutual Information statistical test in Wordsmith Tools (Scott 2012), which is the default measurement for collocation in Wordsmith and one which

favours low frequency content words, making it a suitable option for a small specialised corpus like the interviews. The parameters for obtaining collocates were set at a span of 5 words to the left and right of the search term, and only collocates with an MI score of 3 or above were included for analysis.

3.1.3   *Narrative analysis*

During our analysis, we also found that participants drew on personal narratives to describe their interpretations of *Blurred Lines.* Bamberg and Georgakopoulou's (2008) concept of "small stories" is useful for highlighting how participants made links between their personal experiences and wider discourses of sexism. Labov and Waletzky (1967) and Labov's (1972) classic work on modelling narrative structure in sociolinguistic research interviews assert that the minimal criteria for identifying a narrative is that it must contain two past tense clauses that are sequentially ordered.[2] The identification of narratives in discourse analytic work is conventionally a qualitative process, given that narratives operate at a level above individual words (Juzwik 2014: 330). However, there are a number of linguistic cues to the construction of participants' stories in the interview data that can be explored using corpus linguistic analysis.[3] We identified narratives using lexical indicators, including the cognitive process "remember", as well as references to social actors that serve as indices of personal experience (see Table 2 in Section 4.1).

3.1.4   *Combining quantitative and qualitative methods of analysis*

In combining corpus linguistics with qualitative methods, we are following in the footsteps of integrative approaches to discourse analysis that combine macro and micro analyses (Edley & Wetherell 2008; Potter & Wetherell 1987). We also advocate more fully integrated ways of working across micro and macro approaches in the ways in which we have combined different methodologies: rather than conducting automated corpus linguistics to capture a broad picture of the data followed by qualitative discourse analysis to address the detail, we use corpus linguistics to find broad content and structural patterns as a "way in" to identifying areas for close analysis, which also then signal macro categories (in this case in

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2. There are other ways of modelling spoken narratives, for example Goffman (1974) identifies what he terms "framing keys", which are discursive cues that indicate the beginnings and endings of narrative, such as "once upon a time" in fairytales.

3. There are common discourse markers which research on narratives in spoken interaction shows can function as 'abstracts' for narration (Juzwik 2014), such as phatic phrases *you know*, deictic expressions serving as temporal or spatial locators (*then, there, now*), as well as lexical indicators, such as *remember*.

the form of narratives) that index broader discourses relating to heterosexual gender relations, feminism and sexism. This way of combining corpus linguistics with discourse analytical approaches shows how corpus linguistics tools can assist in the analysis of language use that operates above (and beyond) the discourse-level of a text.

4.   Analysis

Our analysis of the interview transcripts was largely deductive, focusing on responses which related to our three research questions (see Section 1). However, we also wanted to give voice to the issues participants raised in interviews and so did not exclusively focus on pre-determined themes in our analysis, using an inductive approach to examine data which did not relate to these specific areas. This section discusses the three related discourses of (hetero)sexism uncovered from our corpus-assisted thematic analysis of the interview data: unequal power relations, objectification, and rape culture. The personal links which participants made between these discourses and their own lives is discussed in Section 4.2.

4.1   Discourses of (hetero)sexism

Both corpus linguistic and thematic analysis of the data showed that sexism and other concepts relevant to feminism were salient to the participants' stance-taking. Six of the nine participants evaluated *Blurred Lines* as *sexist*, either directly or indirectly. The terms *sexist* and *sexism* also appear as keywords in the interviewee responses (see Table 2). Direct evaluations come in propositional form (as with "that video is sexist"), but there are also more indirect assessments, for example: "There are so many things in the media that have caught a lot of attention for being **sexist** or whatever else but I have a really strong memory of my own thoughts on Blurred Lines". What is interesting about this particular example is that the participants' evaluation of *Blurred Lines* as sexist is implicit, because a sexist reading has to be inferred. More explicitly, Table 2 indicates that there are more examples of negatively evaluating lexis than positive terms, including those that signal a feminist interpretive repertoire, such as *submissive, misogynistic* and *trivialises*.

Table 2. Lexical keywords in the interviews corpus grouped into semantic fields

Semantic field	Lexical keywords
Feminism	consent/ing, empowering/ered, equality, feminist, liberate, misogynistic, patriarchal, rape(d), sexist, sexism, sexualised, submissive
Blurred Lines and pop music more generally	album, Blurred, domesticate, Lines, lyrical, lyrics, media, music, pop, rap, rapper, song(s), version, video(s), genre, Youtube
Culture and society	childcare, children's campuses, career, celebrity, culture, entertainer, porn, pornography, society,
Social actors	actresses, artists, Eminem, female, gangster, girl(s), men, persona, Pharrell, rapists, Rhianna, Robin, Thicke, TI, victims, viewer, woman, women
Mental processes	angry, aware, complicit, conflicted, enjoying, feel, heard, interpret(ed), know, like, reaction, seem(s), think, want
Physical appearance	ass, clothed, topless, scantily (clad), groomed, naked, (look) uncomfortable
Negative evaluation	annoying, controversy, controversial, disturbing, extreme, horrible, inappropriate, lame, offensive, problematic, sexist, sleazy, trivialises, weird, unpleasant, bitch
Positive evaluation	hottest, interesting, OK, catchy, sexy
Creating meaning	blatant, connotations, content, context, endorsing, glorify, imagery, indicative, interpret(ed), makes, normalise(s), parody, saying, seem(s), trivialises, word
Hedges	guess (as in I guess), kind (of), like, OK, so, sort (of), way (as in in a way)
Stance adverbs	actually, basically, definitely, even, incredibly, just, maybe, necessarily, obvious/ly, really, sort (of), straightforwardly, suppose
Time and degree adverbs	anymore, more, quite, so
Speech	blaming, discussion, saying

As Table 2 indicates, lexically rich semantic fields relate to feminist discourses, with terms like *patriarchal* indexing radical feminist subject positions. The prevalence of terms referring to other popular music artists and genres indicates that *Blurred Lines* is understood relationally, as an intertextual resource. The groups of keywords which we have categorised here as having primary semantic functions of "creating meaning", "mental processes" as well as "stance adverbs" demonstrates the strategies participants use to "make sense" of the song, and which also point to negative stances based on feminist or even queer principles: for example, the term *normalise(s/d)* is used by three different participants to describe the way in which the gender relations depicted in *Blurred Lines* have become cultural norms:

1 **Paul**   Erm … so, yes I mean maybe we are completely normalised by it as a society as well. Yes it's really

2 **Paul**   de. I think yes I think it, it is incredibly normalised yes. So you watch it again and I guess the f

3 **Chloe**   think that is it's the the way that it just normalises that kind of sex object culture and that's w

4 **Chloe**   hink it definitely does feel like it sort of normalises rape really yeah normalises that idea that (

5 **Anna**   osed to, erm … you start to maybe it starts to normalise that kind of behaviour and encourage it, erm

6 **Chloe**   like it sort of normalises rape really yeah normalises that idea that (5) well yeah the thing that

7 **Paul**   ecome less erm … does it become like a, do you normalise yourself to it maybe you know you normalise

8 **Paul**   u normalise yourself to it maybe you know you normalise yourself to the language used and the way th

Figure 1. *Concordance of* normalise(s/d) *in the* Blurred Lines *corpus*

The referent of the subject pronoun *it* in these concordance lines is *Blurred Lines* in each case, and the proposition being normalised is the objectification of women and rape culture, stated most explicitly by Chloe here. Using the concept of *normalising* allows the participants to construct a negative stance, because of the negative conventional implicature of "normalise" – conventionally it is negative things that are described in this way, and indeed "rape culture" and "sex object culture" are generally negatively valued by Western societies. Paul also talks here about *normalising yourself,* implying a level of complicitness, as well as a perceived naturalization of misogynistic ideology in pop music ("maybe you know you normalise yourself to the language used and the way that women are talked about in songs and things like that"). Other evaluative terms in the "creating meaning" category *glorify* and *trivialises* can be said to have a similar function, revealing a critical feminist reading of the song. There are also terms indicating more academic discourse: words like *context, connotations,* and *imagery* are distinctive to the list of keywords generated using the BNC spoken reference corpus, suggesting that they are not usually found in other types of spoken discourse. This is not particularly surprising, given the types of participants we interviewed, but it does suggest that the idea of being able to "understand" or provide "readings" of *Blurred Lines* was important for these participants.

4.1.1   *Objectification*

All but one of the participants (Paul) drew explicitly on a discourse of objectification in their responses to questions about *Blurred Lines*, and Table 1 demonstrates that words indexing a feminist interpretive repertoire such as *sexist* and *sexualised* appear as keywords in the data. One participant (Jenny) observed that *Blurred Lines* promoted "this idea of … women being like props for men, like naked sexy writhing props". The choice of metaphorical label "props" here also signals the lack of agency involved in women's objectification in the song, linked to unequal power relations between men and women in heterosexual relationships. Partic-

ular moments from the music video were highlighted by participants who drew wider conclusions from these individual frames about the depictions of women in the video. For example, Megan notes that: "the women kind of crawling around on the floor, and … them having ice cream shoved in their mouth … it's just as if they are there to be used, to be looked at, to give sexual pleasure".

Objectification was also aligned with infantilisation by participants. One participant (Anna) commented that "somehow women are infantilised and animalised when they are sexual, they're, they're children or they're animals they are not fully responsible beings who are choosing to take part in a sexual act. They have to be either pushed back into childhood … somehow they have to be less". Another participant (Rosie) highlighted a particular instance from the music video in observing how she felt the women were being infantilised, but also the power dynamics between Robin Thicke and the women in the music video: "[it's like] he is watching a child, like he is … so in control, he is looking at it like it is kind of like a play-thing … the way he does it like, watching her while she looks straight on at the camera … you can sort of see it all in his face like, you are mine". These comments also therefore show how our interviewees interpret *Blurred Lines* as advocating female sexual objectification that relies on an assumed power differential between men and women.

Some of the adjectival descriptions and social actions participants use also reveal some interesting linguistic genderings of men and women in the video to *Blurred Lines*. For example, looking at concordance lines for participants' use of the word *sleazy* shows that it is only used to describe men in the video. Conventional use of *sleazy* in other contexts indicate that it is usually used with a male referent,[4] and its contexts of use suggest that it contributes to a discourse of male promiscuity. The keyword *scantily* describes the women in the video as part of the two-word cluster *scantily clad*, which is also conventionally reserved for describing female bodies in everyday usage (Kilgarriff, Baisa, Bušta, Jakubíček, Kovář, Michelfeit, Rychlý & Suchomel 2014). Repeated use of these words therefore helps to normalise the idea that men are motivated by sexual desire. The fact that women are described as "sexualised" by the men in the video arguably implies that women are not ordinarily perceived as desiring subjects in the same way, which also contributes to this constructed gender difference. The gender exclusivity of terms like *sleazy* and *scantily clad* also helps to solidify the assumption that it is only men who objectify women, and not vice versa, which is a necessarily heterosexist ideology, from a queer perspective.

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4. For example, out of 50 randomly sampled concordances of "sleazy" in the English Web 13 corpus using Sketch Engine, only 3 (0.06%) had a female referent, but 16 (32%) specified a male referent (Kilgarriff et al. 2014).

4.1.2   *Unequal power relations*

In the media furore surrounding *Blurred Lines* after its release, the director Diane Martel defended the song against accusations of sexism. In discussing the video, she argued that the female dancers gave a "funny and subtly ridiculing" performance, and that it was the women rather than the men who exerted the power; "the girls [...] look into the camera, this is very intentional and they do it most of the time; they are in the power position" (Makarechi 2013).

However, most of the participants seemed to reject this idea of the women having a powerful, subversive role. For example, Joe observes that: "the women are wearing very little, are gyrating … whereas the guys will be singing … and they will be you know sort of the ones who are clearly exercising the power in that situation". The presence of keywords indicating a feminist interpretive repertoire such as *empowered/empowering, patriarchal* and *submissive* also contribute to the assumption of a perceived power differential between the men and women in the video to *Blurred Lines*.

Seven participants referred to an imbalance of power between the men and women in the video as exemplified by the presence or absence of clothes; they interpreted the women's (near) nakedness as indicative of their passive role, in contrast to the way in which the men's clothes reinforced their dominant role in the video. Looking at concordance lines for *women* shows that the women in the video are predominantly referred to in terms of their physical appearance, indicated by phrases such as *scantily clad women* and *beautiful women*. Calculating the collocates of *women* and *men* also revealed this contrast between women's perceived passivity and men's agency: the strongest collocate of WOMAN is *scantily* ($MI = 6.631$), while the highest ranking collocate of MAN is "clothed" ($MI = 8.161$). Other frequent collocates of WOMAN also relate to women's physical appearance: *beautiful, young, look*. The saliency of clothing in the interviewee's evaluation of the video to *Blurred Lines* is also indicated by the presence of keywords serving as adjectival descriptions (see Table 1).

In addition to the absence of clothing, the lack of women's voices in the song is also noted by participants who linked their silence in comparison to the men with an unequal balance of power. One participant, Jenny, noted that "the men have the voice in this … they're the only ones speaking whereas the women are just silent at the side". This issue of silence and subjugation evokes historical feminist concerns about the repression of women's voices. One participant described the women in the video to *Blurred Lines* as looking "comfortable" and "confident" and therefore felt that the music video was unproblematic, and accepting of the position put forward by Martel (Makarechi 2013). However, four participants described the women as *submissive*, noting their lack of agency in compari-

son to the men. This is also reflected in the collocation analysis: verbal collocates of WOMAN include *doing, said and talking*; looking at the contexts in which these occur indicates how much agency the participants perceive women to have in relation to *Blurred Lines.* The concordance list of *doing* reveals its use in terms of women's perceived lack of agency in the video for *Blurred Lines.* For example, Rosie states that: "for me it is not a display of equal sexual practices between men and women, it is men doing things to women, so I have an issue with the fact he is brushing her hair like that because I think it's quite a childlike thing to do and then it's become sexualised." Here the participant comments on male agency, in which the women in the video are cast as the recipients of male action. Another participant, Jenny, notes that: "they're not participating in anything apart from occasionally to illustrate like this woman here is doing she's sort of got a coy look on her face, so she's kind of you know in the most basic way illustrating <laughs> the lyrics." This assessment emphasises women's lack of agency in a purely "illustrative" role, i.e. as an object of the "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975).

4.1.3   *Rape culture*

Discourses around rape culture and sexual consent were invoked by all nine participants in relation to *Blurred Lines.* Instances where participants used the phrase *rape culture* or the word *rapey* was used can be viewed as linguistic "traces" (Sunderland 2004) for these discourses, since this word can be used as "an adjectival form of 'rape culture'" (Brinkley 2013). Indeed, both *rapey* and *rape* appear as high-ranking keywords in the interview data (see Table 4 in Appendix). Most participants (seven out of nine) stated they felt that the song lyrics were indicative of rape culture and male entitlement to heterosexual sex, as indicated by individual instances of the terms rape, *rapey* and *rape culture*:

Table 3. Frequencies of RAPE and 'rape culture' in interview responses

Participant	Frequencies of *rape, rapey* and *rape culture*	
	Raw freq.	Relative freq. (%)
Jenny	7	7
Sam	7	7
Robyn	29	27
Rosie	6	6
Joe	19	18
Anna	1	1
Paul	15	14
Megan	15	14
Chloe	8	7

One participant – Joe – felt that the song contained "an implicit endorsement of rape" because "it doesn't allow for any kind of dialogue to take place, it is essentially saying … I know what these women want … and I am going to give it to them". The word *rapey* has become widely used by individuals in describing sexually intimidating behaviours, and which can be seen to index rape culture; it was a term often used in the mass media to debate *Blurred Lines* (see Lai 2013; Romano 2013).

Despite the perceived utility of the word *rapey* as a shorthand for referring to rape culture, in our earlier study (Handforth et al. 2017), we identified considerable discomfort amongst participants with the word *rapey* and its connotations. The majority of respondents to the original questionnaire suggested that the word trivialised rape. Yet in the interviews, participants mostly held the opinion that because *rapey* was a term in common usage it thus enabled a shared understanding of examples of rape culture. One participant, Robyn, highlighted that the word *rapey* could be used by younger women who had been in situations where they felt vulnerable in order to minimise the significance of their experience. *Rapey* was used by three participants in describing their interpretations of *Blurred Lines*. These participants observed that it could be interpreted as a useful word for individuals to use to indicate that they felt something was "not right" with a situation. The utility of the term *rapey* was not made without mitigation, however: as Robyn indicates, "it kind of sounds like it almost trivialises it doesn't it … going like 'oh bit rapey' like, how can you be a bit rapey … but then erm maybe it is useful in terms of being able to articulate the problems with stuff like this". Here, the participant moves between different feminist subject positions that reject the term as "trivialising rape" outright (a more "radical" feminist position), and a more sympathetic ("postfeminist") position ("maybe it's useful in terms of being able to articulate the problems with stuff like this").

As highlighted in our earlier paper (Handforth et al. 2017), there are multiple possible interpretations of *Blurred Lines*. There was no consensus between participants as to whether or not the artists intended to make the link between "blurred lines" and sexual consent. One participant expressed scepticism in relation to this: "I can't believe that they could twin those lyrics with that title and not be fully aware that the song suggests that they are talking about the blurred lines of consent". However, another was uncertain as to whether the performers had thought about this issue at all and considered that they could have been ignorant of the connection that others would make between the phrase and sexual consent.

Despite this lack of consensus regarding the consent-based reading of *Blurred Lines*, five participants expressed concerns about the impact of the implicit messages in the song on younger women who might be more susceptible to pressure in relation to their sexual behaviour. One participant, Rosie, directly linked one

of the most famous lines from the song with a woman's right to say no to sex: "it's important for younger women to know that, they shouldn't feel pressured just because somebody's saying 'Oh I know you want to I know you want it."

The thematic analysis complemented by corpus analytical techniques in this section has revealed evidence of a network of discourses that together point to an overall negative stance towards *Blurred Lines* underpinned by (Western) feminist ideology. Participants construct negative evaluations of women's representation in the video informed by overarching discourses of objectification and unequal power relations, and all participants made some kind of link between the song/video and rape culture, aligning with the consent-based reading. Participants commented on a disparity in terms of degree of agency afforded to the male artists and female actors in the video, traced through visual indices including the presence or absence of clothes (4.1.3). However, there was also evidence of alternative readings to the consent-based subject position, with assertions that the female actors were "empowered" (4.1.4).

4.2   Narrative analysis

While in one sense research interviews can be seen as narratives in that they require people to form accounts of their experiences, what is pertinent to this discussion is the participants' construction of embedded, naturally-occurring personal narratives in their responses, what Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) term "small stories". According to Bamberg (2009: 139), the analysis of small stories is useful for observing "the locus where identities are continuously practiced and tested out" in everyday conversation. Even though the stories shared by participants in the interviews are not strictly "everyday conversations" in that the topics and overall format of the interaction is constrained, the specific stylistic choices that participants make in giving their responses are not, so the propensity for interviewees to relay personal experiences in constructing their accounts of *Blurred Lines* is worthy of closer analysis.

Five participants shared stories of when they had encountered the song in public or private spaces and used these narratives to highlight their particular stance to the song. Although these are individual narratives told by single narrators and not collaborative or competing "tellings" of the same "tale" (Thornborrow 2014) in a stretch of conversation, the participants are being asked to talk about the same phenomenon. Therefore, it is interesting to observe patterns in storytelling across the dataset to see if individual storytellers are drawing on the same linguistic resources, which might be an indication of how participants understand and negotiate the semiotic potential of *Blurred Lines*. These narratives depict how participants linked the broader issues raised by the song to

their own personal experiences. The ways in which participants seamlessly embed their own personal narratives into their discussions of *Blurred Lines* allows insight into the particular issues which they feel the song raises. As such, they link the "personal" and the "political"; the analysis of narratives provides insight into how individuals experience discourses of sexism in everyday life.

4.2.1   *Retelling memories of Blurred Lines*

Interview participants used the cognitive verb *remember* as a "generic framing device" (Bauman 2004: 6) for triggering memories. Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008) argue that memories are a particular kind of personal narrative, since recounting memories implies temporal distance between the speaker and the memory. Memories are also interesting for analysis because they are not objective retellings of events, but narrators weave sequences of events that serve to, for example, justify actions and attitudes (Edwards & Middleton 1986; Riessman 2005). The interactional construction of memories is also therefore a social (as opposed to private) activity that relies on discourses made available in interaction (Edwards & Potter 1992).

The cognitive process *remember* occurs as a keyword when the interviews are compared with the whole of the BNC; there are 32 instances in the data, and closer investigation of the concordance lines for "remember" shows that eight out of the nine participants recount memories of the first time they heard the song or came across the artists as a way of relaying their initial reactions to *Blurred Lines*. In some cases, these initial reactions were different from the ways they reported feeling about the song/video at the time of interview, or which highlighted the conflict they initially felt about the song. For example, Jenny recounts the first time she heard *Blurred Lines* as a way of summarising her views:

(1)
1   *Just that I hate that, erm I actually have quite a nice memory attached to 'Blurred*
2   *Lines', because the first time I heard it it was at my sister's hen do and it's a good*
3   *hook <laughs> erm and that was obviously like (xxx) through tinny little iphone*
4   *speakers-*
5   *this is nothing to do with your research I don't know why I'm telling you this when*
6   *the recorder's on, erm,*
7   *but it's just I do hear people saying how it's very annoying because it's actually a*
8   *well-constructed pop song, and the video is very, sort of aesthetically it's glossy, and*
9   *I think it's pleasing and that troubles me, that a message like this <looking at lyrics>*
10 *kind of you know, it's not even a conversation is it cos they're just <disgusted*
11 *noise> erm it's not like you can have much dialogue with people who won't discuss*
12 *it back with you, erm*
13 *but yeah that troubles me that it's a lovely pop song that's a great, great hook,*
14 *lovely video, not lovely video, like horrible video, but, you know glossy and it it looks*

15 *good it's aesthetically pleasing, erm and that just troubles me that it's sort of slipped*
16 *by almost*

Her response starts with a retelling of a memory of the first time she heard the song (1–3) to emphasise her evaluation of the song as "troubling" because of its "glossy" aesthetics that hide the negative message of the song (7–9). It is through the retelling of her memory of *Blurred Lines* which encapsulates her assessment of the contradictory elements of the song, which she elaborates on in lines 13–16. However, this "small story" is evaluated by the speaker as lacking relevance to her account of her opinions about *Blurred Lines* (5–6); this serves to distance her from the kind of "radical feminist" subject position that might reject the song outright, a position which is underscored by the start of her next assertion "but it's just that I do hear people saying…". Rather than claiming this position for herself, Jenny adopts a third person perspective. However, she then aligns herself with this position ("and I think it's pleasing and that troubles me"). This highlights the complex process of stance-making for participants in their accounts of *Blurred Lines*.

As well as retelling first encounters with *Blurred Lines,* memories also functioned to emphasise participants' perceptions of the prevalence of unequal gender relations in the music industry and the media more widely. Other participants, in their discussions of the gendered dynamics of *Blurred Lines,* highlighted particular instances from their youth where they encountered negative representations of women in the media. In highlighting what she perceived as the objectification of women in *Blurred Lines,* Anna drew on her memories of other artists who had used female nudity to promote their music. She observed the violent connotations of one particular album cover which her mother had highlighted as being sexist at the time:

(2)
1   *There is that sense of the half-naked attractive young woman*
2   *as an accessory immediately in the first shot,*
3   *even if it was static, and you just showed me ((clicks fingers))*
4   *the first shot just an image you can decode it in seconds.*
5   *I had so many album covers in the 1970s Brian Ferry, erm …*
6   *other bands where there would be a guy in a suit, and lots of semi-naked girls.*
7   *I even had, I can't remember the name of the band now …*
8   *I had one and I can remember it because my mother pointed out to me it was sexist*
9   *and she wasn't exactly a feminist.*
10 *Because there was a guy basically*
11 *raping a girl in the shower on the front cover and I hadn't actually noticed.*
12 *Do you know I hadn't actually noticed as a sort of 15 / 16-year-old …*
13 *it was called Force It."*

Here, Anna uses her memory of this album cover to make parallels with *Blurred Lines* as a similar product of "rape culture". The idea that this album cover must have been sexist because her mother pointed out the sexist meaning and she "wasn't exactly a feminist" implies that ordinarily, it is only feminists who have the ability to identify sexism. What this understanding of sexist meanings assumes is that semiotic resources have meaning independent of their reception; this is also underscored by her assertion that she "hadn't noticed" the sexism of this particular album cover. Here the contrast between clothes ("guy in a suit") and nudity ("lots of semi-naked girls") indexes sexism and unequal power relations. Interestingly, her use of modal adverb *actually* ("I hadn't actually noticed") implies that identifying rape (as a product of sexism and misogyny) should be obvious – there should be no *blurred lines*.

These examples highlight how participants we interviewed drew on specific memories in order to discuss their views of *Blurred Lines*. Nearly all interviewees recounted their first encounter with the song, whilst others recalled other cultural phenomena in relation to *Blurred Lines*. These memories related to individual's personal experiences of sexism in popular culture, and often linked to wider 'big stories' (cf. Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008: 381) of objectification and rape culture.

4.2.2 *Public and social spaces*

Three participants told stories about hearing the song in a situation where they were not in control of what music was being played: for example, at a children's birthday party, a hen party and at a public event. These stories elicited particular reactions or reflections from individual participants, all of which were negative. One participant, Megan, who worked in a community-based role, told of hearing *Blurred Lines* at an event celebrating equality and diversity: "There was an event in the city centre, a few weeks ago a LGBT event that played the song, and I made a point of going up and complaining because I felt it was a family day as well I just felt this is totally inappropriate this is an event to celebrate diversity, to celebrate equality, to bring families together and to have a song like that where you're talking about basically well using words that rapists are known to use it is just totally inappropriate".

This story highlights how the participant felt that the song contains damaging messages which conflict with the inclusive ethos of an event which aimed to celebrate LGBT individuals. Wider discourses of sexual consent and rape culture are invoked in her personal experience of hearing the song being played in a public place. Another participant, Chloe, told of her encounters with *Blurred Lines* as a parent of a small child. She reflected on hearing the song being played at children's birthday parties she had attended and though she had felt "sick" looking at

little girls dancing along to it, she admitted that she had felt unable to talk to other parents about her feelings, or to complain about it being played:

(3)

1 *Blurred Lines is one of the ones they deem you know fun dance along one for the*
2 *toddlers … I was really (laughing) angry and kind of ugh in horror watching these little*
3 *particularly I was focusing on the little girls I think dancing around to this song*
4 *thinking 'that is just horrible' and I guess in a way there was no harm done because*
5 *they didn't know what the lyrics meant they and they were just dancing along to it but*
6 *then then I don't know then then this video is out there presumably the parents knew*
7 *about it I dunno it still made me feel quite sick even though at that – I knew there*
8 *wasn't actually any harm being done to the children at that kind of moment but it did*
9 *it just felt really wrong (laughs) but but in fact I didn't talk about what I would do*
10 *about I didn't do anything other than fume to myself I almost spoke to the other*
11 *parents but I didn't want to look like a nutter (laughs) so I didn't cos yeah (laughing)*
12 *I've got to kind of be in other social situations with these parents so. I've kind of*
13 *picked up on sexism a little bit with the other parents there was one a different party*
14 *where there was a children's entertainer who was being quite sexist about saying*
15 *things about what the little girls would like and what little boys would like and saying*
16 *like little girls being princesses and that so then I do try I did step in a bit there was*
17 *saying … kind of unhappy sarcastic comments to the other mothers but with the*
18 *Blurred Lines thing I haven't dared broach that because it seems so entrenched*
19 *doesn't it that it's OK and it's it's just a song.*

Here Chloe positions the child characters in this story as innocent bystanders, signalled linguistically via stance marker *just* ("they were just dancing to it"), and she takes pains to assert her own negative evaluation of the song in contrast to this naive ignorance. Even though she aligns with a feminist subject position, her concession that she "didn't want to look like a nutter" serves to acknowledge, and distance herself from, this feminist position, for fear of social exclusion. This stance positions the other parents as unsympathetic to feminist concerns with *Blurred Lines* and other forms of sexism (the fact that she goes on to say that she has "picked up on sexism" on other occasions involving her children at parties implies that she does indeed consider *Blurred Lines* to be sexist, which explicitly frames her response within feminist discourse). At the end of the narrative similar strategies are used to distance herself from accusations of militant feminism: "but with the *Blurred Lines* thing I haven't dared broach because that seems so entrenched doesn't it that it's OK and it's it's just a song". What is implied here, via lexical verb *entrenched*, is the normalisation of a post-feminist position (see, for example, McRobbie 2007) that would reject the consent-based reading of *Blurred Lines*. In citing examples of sexist stereotyping this participant has witnessed on other social occasions, she connects *Blurred Lines* to a broader "gender differences" discourse, but it is seen to go beyond more explicit forms of sexist stereotyping ("I

haven't dared broach that") because of an accepted public opinion of *Blurred Lines* as "just a song".

5.   Conclusion

Our thematic analysis highlighted particular discourses of heterosexism in interview responses to *Blurred Lines* and how participants experience and negotiate these discourses in their everyday life. Through an integrated approach to conducting discourse analysis via thematic coding and corpus linguistic analysis, we have identified four salient discourses of sexism within participants' responses: negative representations of women in the media, unequal power relations, objectification, and rape culture. This combined approach to the analysis also helped us to identify a series of personal narratives that serve as rhetorical vehicles for constructing stances that draw on wider discourses of sexism and heteronormative relations. Participants' "small stories" (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou 2008) function as mechanisms for encapsulating opinions, conflicting feelings, and links made between *Blurred Lines* and wider cultural issues such as victim-blaming, rape culture and gender inequality in popular music. They therefore provide a bridge between the "personal" and the "political", and allow insight into how individuals experience discourses of sexism in their everyday lives. In combining qualitative thematic analysis with corpus linguistic tools, our study also provides further support for the usefulness of combining these approaches for the analysis of discourses of gender and sexuality.

Viewing participants' responses through a queer lens foregrounds the ways in which *Blurred Lines* can be understood as normalising a form of heterosexuality that is based on a power differential between men and women. Where feminist approaches to sexuality are sometimes left out of the queer debate, we contend that combining feminist and queer linguistic perspectives is useful for deconstructing discursive practices that reproduce limiting gender roles and sexual scripts. While queer approaches are sometimes perceived as apolitical in rejecting fixed, essentialist identity categories, as Motschenbacher (2010:18) notes: "[q]uestioning essentialist notions of identity categories like 'woman' and 'man' does not imply one has to give up one's political motivation". For example, repeated lexical patterns in the way that interviewees talk about *men* and *women* in the video to *Blurred Lines*, such as describing exclusively men as *sleazy* and exclusively women as *sexualise*d, demonstrates the linguistic performativity (Butler 1990) of both gender and sexuality, since these descriptions help to consolidate sexual promiscuity as an expected masculine norm, and women as objects of an exclusively "male gaze" (Mulvey 1975). Gender-exclusive patterns in the data also underscore the

saliency of a "gender differences" discourse (Sunderland 2004) in understandings of *Blurred Lines* and popular music more broadly, which is based upon a presupposed universal heterosexuality. The narrative analysis also revealed participants' oscillation between conflicting feminist and post-feminist subject positions, often centred around a constructed binary between public and private responses. The stories participants tell are also inflected by a perceived opposition between the "sexist" lyrics and "catchy" music or "glossy" video; for these participants, reading *Blurred Lines* as explicitly and undeniably sexist is therefore mitigated by the fact that it is often viewed as "just a song". The multi-modal nature of music clearly influences listener-viewers' interpretations, to the extent that the line between "direct" and "indirect" forms of sexism (Mills 2008) has become blurred in a text like *Blurred Lines*. For us, this highlights the importance of giving critical attention to popular music as a semiotic resource, with the potential to influence young people's attitudes towards sexuality and gender relations.

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Appendix

Table 4. Top 20 keywords in the interviews' corpus compared with the BNC spoken section (2014 edition)

Rank	Word	Texts	Keyness score
1	LYRICS	9	954.27
2	VIDEO	9	910.10
3	WOMEN	9	883.23
4	KIND	9	847.03
5	SONG	9	752.63
6	RAPEY	8	400.23
7	MUSIC	8	399.06
8	RAPE	8	385.95
9	LIKE	9	333.29
10	VIDEOS	8	291.53
11	THINK	9	277.17
12	BLURRED	8	235.82
13	THICKE	6	217.26
14	MEN	8	206.10
15	OK	9	202.92
16	CULTURE	7	194.32
17	KNOW	9	187.77
18	SEXUAL	6	181.78
19	PARODY	2	164.05
20	SORT	9	150.32

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