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# Moralization and classification struggles over gentrification and the hipster figure in austerity Britain

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the role of moralization processes and classification struggles over gentrification. Focusing on representations in news media, the paper examines recent public reactions centering on a “hipster café” in London’s East End. The analysis shows that the hipster, typically associated with trendy, youthful middle-class people, is a contested figure who some actors attempt to cast as a folk devil blamed for the increasing social polarization and displacement of working-class people following gentrification. But largely misrecognized in this debate is the intensification of neoliberal policies in contributing to these processes. Moreover, dominant representations portray the hipster figure as contributing to the vibrancy and economic development of gentrified districts. Lastly, it is argued that the public contestations over gentrification and the hipster figure involve forms of class politics about the moral hegemony to legitimate particular narratives about who has the right to the city.

## Introduction

In the last decades, gentrification has become a widely discussed and controversial public issue, often inviting critical responses. Popular protest and resistance against gentrification has particularly proliferated in the years following the 2008 financial crisis and the Arab Spring (Lees et al., 2018). In such public contestations, media representations play a significant role by framing how gentrification processes are perceived in society. Researchers have critiqued mainstream media for being biased toward the interests of elite or middle-class groupings, and promoting or encouraging development projects in gentrifying areas whilst down-playing or ignoring their potential negative consequences (Gin & Taylor, 2010; Lavy et al., 2016; Smith, 1996). Similarly, anti-gentrification movements may encounter critique or find it difficult to get media coverage for policy frames that counter elite interests (Gin & Taylor, 2010).

Yet, research also shows that media representations of gentrification are increasingly critical (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011). In critical frames, gentrification is associated with the spatial and cultural displacement or marginalization of long-term working-class or minority residents (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011; Hyde, 2014; Zukin et al., 2017). Some media institutions also address the views and experiences of those who are displaced or excluded in the wake of gentrification (Gin & Taylor, 2010; Modan & Wells, 2015). However, critical media accounts can underplay the role of policy makers and market actors in gentrification by portraying the latter as a “natural” process (Gin & Taylor, 2010; Hyde, 2014; Modan & Wells, 2015). This paper examines the role of moralization processes and classification struggles in public contestations over gentrification and how they are represented by the media. By exploring the public reactions centering on a “hipster

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café” in London’s East End, I particularly focus on representations of commercial gentrification and on how the hipster figure features in such representations.

Moralization is a surprisingly neglected and undertheorized topic in gentrification research. A few studies of gentrification have deployed the terms *moral panics* or *moral regulation* to interpret the policing of marginalized groups, including sex workers (Sanders-McDonagh et al., 2016), squatters (Pruijt, 2013) and young people (Rogers & Coaffee, 2005). However, the conceptual frames connected to the respective term remain either implicit or are only partially applied in these studies. To this end, I will in this paper make a case for more fully incorporating moralization as an interpretative frame to study public contestations over gentrification. Moralizing societal reactions usually emerge in a context of widespread anxiety rooted in social transformation and uncertainty (Cohen, 1972/2002; Young, 2009). In Britain, there is a climate of precarity and urban social polarization that can be traced to the 2008 credit crunch and an intensification of neoliberal housing and welfare policies, including forms of state-led gentrification (Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013; Slater, 2016). As part of these developments, London and other areas have seen increasing anti-gentrification activism (see Watt & Minton, 2016). Relatedly, a number of moralizing public reactions have recently emerged over the establishment of “hipster” businesses in gentrifying areas of London. In Hackney, The Advisory bar opened in what was formerly the Asian Women’s Advisory Center. In Deptford, The Job Center bar took its name and logo from the job center which used to house the same premises. What caused moral indignation (see, e.g., Elliot, 2014; Frizzell, 2013) was that references to social institutions, one catering for the unemployed and the other for minority women, which operated in two of the most deprived boroughs of London, were used ironically by hipster entrepreneurs to create symbolic value for their enterprises.

The present study explores a related case, namely the moralizing media reactions centering on the Cereal Killer Cafe, located on Brick Lane in London’s East End. Following events in December 2014 and September 2015 respectively, the café received wide media coverage which focused on the role of hipster entrepreneurs in gentrification. The cultural practices associated with the hipster signifies the increasing legitimacy of “emerging” forms of cultural capital rooted in popular culture, youthfulness, and a logic of trendiness (see le Grand, 2020). The hipster has become a rather common figure in current gentrification research, and cast as contributing to the popularity and trendiness of gentrifying areas (le Grand, 2020; Pratt, 2018; Zukin, 2010; Zukin et al., 2017), but also represented as causing the displacement of working-class residents due to rising rents and property prices (Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011; Langegger, 2016). Whilst hipsters are often portrayed as consumers, they are represented in some recent studies as cultural producers involved in artisanal and micro entrepreneurial ventures (le Grand, 2020; Hubbard, 2017; Scott, 2017; Wallace, 2019). In this way, the hipster is associated with the cultural intermediaries (le Grand, 2020; Scott, 2017), which is a middle-class fraction whose often younger members work with symbolic goods in fields such as advertising and fashion (Bourdieu, 1979/1984). However, there is a dearth of research on the role of hipsters as cultural producers in gentrification processes. There seem to be clear parallels between the cultural work associated with the hipster figure and commercial gentrification. The gentrification of the retail landscape entails processes of what Zukin et al. (2009) call “boutiquing,” namely the establishment of specialized shops and services which, following Bourdieu, function as a mode of distinction vis-à-vis mass-market taste and chain stores (see also Bridge & Dowling, 2001). The current proliferation of boutiques and their role in commercial gentrification reflects a turn in post-industrial economies toward niche markets (Zukin et al., 2009; cf. Schroeder, 2020, on the craft beer scene in Berlin). This is very much in line with the forms of micro-entrepreneurship characterizing what Scott (2017) calls “hipster capitalism.”

Influenced by Bourdieu’s analysis of class distinction and capital forms, studies have explored how boutiquing changes the esthetics of the built environment and thus entails the generation of objectified cultural capital into gentrifying areas (Bridge & Dowling, 2001; Zukin et al., 2009). A related source of distinction and cultural capital for these new establishments is being associated with the “authentic” and “gritty” working-class culture of a district (Hyde, 2014). This may involve

the commodification of pre-gentrification culture (Burnett, 2014) as gentrifying retailers fabricate a sense of authenticity that draws on elements of the local working-class or minority culture (Wallace, 2019; Zukin, 2010; Zukin et al., 2009).

Boutiquing may contribute to an area becoming hip and edgy, which, in turn, serves to benefit those establishments (Parker, 2018). But it also often leads to capital investment from bigger corporations, that is, the influx of corporate retail capital and the entrance of chains to the district (Zukin et al., 2009). Critical scholarship has here analyzed commercial gentrification as part of a global neoliberal strategy or “third wave” of gentrification (Smith, 2002) in which the concentration of new retail capital, especially by large global chains, plays an important role (Mermet, 2017). The state is also a highly influential actor in gentrification processes, e.g., through zoning laws and other forms of regulation to displace undesirable amenities and replace them with desirable ones (Benediktsson et al., 2016).

New establishments can create new spaces of sociability and generate social capital for the urban middle-classes, particularly those broadly conceived as “creative” (Lloyd, 2006/2010; Shaker & Rath, 2019). But the displacement of establishments run by pre-gentrifiers in the wake of commercial gentrification leads to a “symbolic eviction” of pre-gentrification culture. This may serve to exclude and alienate those pre-gentrifiers who feel that such amenities are “not for them” or too expensive (Deener, 2007; Monroe Sullivan & Shaw, 2011). A changing retail landscape may lead to increased social divisions and polarization in gentrifying districts between pre-gentrifiers and gentrifiers (Butler & Robson, 2003). Yet, research also suggests how some gentrifiers may gain cultural distinction by supporting amenities run by pre-gentrifiers, thus helping them keep in business (Riely, 2019).

A few studies explore how social media and news media play an important part in creating value and buzz around the establishment of new retail operations in gentrifying neighborhoods (Hyde, 2014, p. 345; Zukin, 2010; Zukin et al., 2017). But there is little research on public contestations over commercial gentrification including the role of the media in such processes, hence why I address these topics in the present paper. Moreover, studies influenced by Bourdieu on the cultural dimensions of commercial gentrification are valuable, but somewhat lack a critical dimension evident in Bourdieu’s own work, and thus fail to fully account for the role of symbolic power, hierarchy and inequality in gentrification processes (cf. Riely, 2019). As elaborated in the next section, I thereby attempt to extend gentrification research by drawing on Bourdieu’s work on classification struggles and the sociology of moralization. Deploying these analytic frames enable us to explore how moralizing public reactions over gentrification involve classification struggles and forms of class politics between societal groupings over recognition, value, and who has the right to the city.

## **Classification struggles and moralization**

Bourdieu’s notions of class distinction and capital, whilst established in gentrification research, are in this paper extended and conceived within his wider analysis of classification struggles. To Bourdieu (1979/1984, 1985, 1991), forms of classification, such as those produced through media representations, are bound up with struggles for symbolic domination between differentially positioned societal groupings over meaning, value, and recognition. Symbolic domination is attained when classifications inhering from members of a social grouping are recognized as legitimate by members of other groupings, who, in so doing, misrecognize that these classifications are rooted in socio-symbolic struggles. Gentrification research has, to my mind, largely ignored these critical dimensions of Bourdieu’s work. At the same time, his own research on physical space is very sparse (Savage, 2011). In particularly his later work (Savage, 2011), struggles for symbolic domination and unequal access to capital between classes in social space are seen as homologous to and therefore often embedded in physical space (Bourdieu, 2018). Thus, processes of class distinction and their (mis) recognition are reflected in the hierarchical differentiation within and between territorial units. Deploying this analytical frame enables us to conceive of gentrification processes as not only bound

up with socio-spatial struggles over the access to urban spaces (Smith, 1996), but also classification struggles about the identities and meanings of such spaces as well as of gentrification as a process. Thus, I treat media representations of gentrification—explored here through a study of the public reaction to the Cereal Killer Cafe in East London—as sites for classification struggles between different sections of society for the symbolic domination to legitimize and (mis)recognize certain narratives of gentrification and simultaneously delegitimize certain other narratives.

In the present paper, I explore how such symbolic struggles are bound up with forms of moralization. Moral panics and other moralization processes involve the formation of moralizing discourses and practices directed against a group or category of individuals who become the object of certain measures of moral governance or social control (Hier, 2011; Hunt, 2011). The empirical analysis of the public reaction to the Cereal Killer Cafe will focus on the outbreak of two volatile episodes of moralization. I will argue that these episodes display elements of moral panic, which are alarmist, sudden societal reactions that typically emerge during times of change and insecurity, where the moralizers project their anxieties, fears and resentments onto the moralized who are cast as a “folk devil” threatening fundamental societal values (Cohen, 1972/2002; Young, 2009). To this end, I explore how the hipster and other actors are involved in such attempts at folk deviling during the two episodes. The middle-class hipster is conceived as a social figure, i.e. a publicly imagined social identity (see le Grand, 2019) who is both shaped by and shaping moralizing public contestations and socio-symbolic struggles over gentrification in austerity Britain.

Moralization projects are hegemonic in so far as moralizers attempt to impose their values on the moral social order (Ben-Yehuda, 2009; Hunt, 2011). Thus, they “are about struggles for moral hegemony over interpretations of the legitimacy (or not) of prevailing social arrangements and material interests” (Ben-Yehuda, 2009, p. 3). Linking moralization and classification, I interpret the hegemonic role of moralization as part of a struggle for symbolic domination. In this way, I explore how moralizing public reactions over the Cereal Killer Cafe involve classification struggles between social groups over the symbolic domination or moral hegemony to legitimize certain narratives about gentrification in austerity Britain. These symbolic and moral struggles over urban space involve, I will argue, forms of (mis)recognition which reflect a politics of class about which groups have the right to the city. Lastly, deploying moralization and classification as an interpretive frame also enables the analysis of the wider socio-historical context of public contestations over gentrification, to which we now turn.

## **Gentrification, revanchism, and the UK housing crisis**

Volatile forms of moralization typically emerge during times of social anxiety and resentment (Cohen, 1972/2002; Young, 2009). I will argue that the public contestations over gentrification and the hipster figure explored in the present study, are largely rooted in the anxieties and resentments over the crisis in housing and increasing urban social inequality. These processes can to an important extent be traced to forms of neoliberal urbanism in austerity Britain. In the UK, neoliberal restructuring in tandem with deindustrialization goes back four decades, and has been particularly profound in London as the capital has transformed into a post-industrial global city (see Hall, 1998, pp. 888–931). Neoliberal housing and welfare policies have also intensified under the last Coalition and Conservative governments (Slater, 2016). Under neoliberalism, “Gentrification is seen as a positive result of a healthy real estate market, and ‘the market’ is always understood as the solution, not a problem” (Lees et al., 2008, p. 165). This involves not only a “rolling back” of the state as in classical liberalism, but crucially a “rolling out” of the state through forms of regulation and governance enabling the smooth running of markets and financialization (Hodkinson, 2011).

It has been argued that the intensification of neoliberal policies in the UK have a “revanchist” character (Slater, 2016). *Revanchism* was coined by Smith (1996) to capture forms of class politics where middle-class groupings, through regeneration or other strategies of urban development, retake parts of the city by displacing and excluding the working-class and other marginalized groupings

occupying them (Rogers & Coaffee, 2005). In the UK revanchism has taken the form of state-led gentrification (Lees et al., 2008; Watt, 2009). This entails, firstly, the stock-transfer of council housing to registered social landlords (RSL) (Watt, 2009). It is estimated that in London alone “55,000 homes were transferred in 15 boroughs from 1998 to 2007” (Watt, 2009, pp. 219–220). Another strategy is to recategorize council estate land as “brown-field land,” that is, as polluted former commercial or industrial property in need of sanitization and regeneration (Elmer & Dening, 2016). State-led gentrification is also carried out through the regeneration of public infrastructure and services such as hospital and school via the private finance initiative (PFI), which involves the private management of public bodies. Other policy measures include increased caps on housing benefits and the introduction of a bedroom tax often enacted through a range of punitive measures (Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013).

The consequences of these policies and measures have been, among other things, a dramatic shortage of affordable housing and an increase in homelessness, temporary accommodation (Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013; Hodkinson et al., 2013; Slater, 2016) and forced evictions, with “upwards of 150,000 people” evicted during 2013–2015 (Elmer & Dening, 2016, p. 272).

As mentioned, these developments have led to increasing resistance and activism to gentrification as well as the hipster figure, especially in London. Moreover, I argued earlier that processes of commercial gentrification that change the retail and commercial landscape are bound up forms of exclusion and displacement which also contribute to residential gentrification. Thus, “by institutionalizing the consumption practices of more affluent and highly educated men and women in place of stores that serve the poor, it challenges the ‘right to the city’ of low-income residents” (Zukin et al., 2009, p. 48).

## Methodology

The analysis primarily draws on media accounts written in connection to two episodes centering on the Cereal Killer Cafe, which took place on December 10, 2014, and September 26, 2015, respectively. To this end, this paper does not directly examine audiences’ interpretations of the episodes. Nor does it account for the lived experiences of those actors who were involved in the events portrayed by the media. However, as suggested earlier, media representations play a significant role in framing how public issues such as gentrification are perceived (cf. Brown-Saracino & Rumpf, 2011; Gin & Taylor, 2010). Similarly, news media is a key institution in shaping moral panics and other moralization processes (cf. Critcher, 2003; Warner, 2013). Lastly, as I attempt to show in this paper, media representations of the hipster figure and gentrification are important to study as they are topics of symbolic struggle between different social groupings (cf. le Grand, 2020; Threadgold, 2018).

The selection and framing of issues, not the least during moralization processes (Critcher, 2003), often varies between left-leaning and right-leaning newspapers, as well as between “quality” broadsheets and tabloids. Different newspaper types also differ regarding their target audiences (e.g., in terms of readers’ social class background and age-cohort) (Baker et al., 2013). To consider these factors, the sample includes a mixture of tabloids, middle-market newspapers and broadsheets, as well as both left-leaning and right-leaning papers in each of these categories. The sample includes articles from nine of the top-selling and most widely distributed national UK newspapers: the *Daily Mail*, the *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Express*, the *Financial Times*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, the *Daily Mirror*, *The Sun* and *The Times*. In addition, articles published in *The London Evening Standard*, the London based newspaper with the highest circulation, have been analyzed. To capture reporting in conjunction with the two episodes involving the Cereal Killer Cafe, I chose to analyze newspaper articles published during December 9, 2014–October 8, 2015. A Lexis Nexis database search of “Cereal Killer” during this period identified in total 142 newspaper articles in the selected newspapers.

After an initial reading or “pre-coding” (Layder, 1998) of all articles, I conducted open coding on each article to organize and identify distinctions in the material. I then compared and contrasted the

codes and contents of articles to identify more over-arching themes in the two episodes centering on the hipster figure and gentrification. Coding and analysis was a largely open-ended, “inductive-iterative” (O’Reilly, 2005) process in which I moved back and forth between data and theory. That is to say, I identified codes and patterns in the articles in dialogue with concepts, emerging theoretical frames, and previous research. Concepts and frames, including distinction, gentrification, (mis)recognition, cultural capital, and moral panic, were deployed as heuristic tools or “orienting concepts” (Layder, 1998) to guide the interpretation of the material. During this process, I gradually developed the theoretical framework of the study through synthesizing concepts and frames developed in Bourdieu’s work with those in the sociology of moralization, and applied them to interpret gentrification processes. This practice of “theorizing from data” by reorienting and extending theoretical constructs characterizes abductive inference (see Swedberg, 2012). Lastly, the writing of analytical reflections or memos (see Charmaz, 2006, pp. 72–95) played an important role in examining the relationships between patterns in the data and theoretical frames.

## Brick Lane

Brick Lane is an iconic street situated in London’s East End and the borough of Tower Hamlets. The borough ranks among the poorest in Britain. Brick Lane is located in a part of the East End that has undergone significant gentrification since at least the 1990s. Traditionally a working-class neighborhood, it is today well-known for its Bangladeshi community and sometimes called Banglatown. During the late 1990s the influx of “creative” middle-class professionals and artists (Pratt, 2018), as well as the establishment of trendy retail establishments catering to the latter (Oakley & Pratt, 2010), led to increased rents and property prices. According to the UK Census, occupations in the creative industries increased with 50% in Tower Hamlets between 2001 and 2011. The rent increases resulting from gentrification means that Bangladeshi curry houses and many other retail businesses have forced to close (Mavrommatis, 2010). The area has, therefore, undergone a decline in local retail capital and a simultaneous increase in what Zukin et al. (2009) call “new entrepreneurial” retail capital. While retail and housing gentrification have long had its course on Brick Lane, the street is, as Pratt (2018) notes, located on a “fault line” in proximity to both the poverty of Tower Hamlets and the affluence of the City of London. It is now time to discuss the public social reaction to the Cereal Killer Cafe.

## Gentrification, the hipster figure, and the Cereal Killer Cafe

On December 10 in 2014 identical twins Alan and Gary Keery opened the Cereal Killer Cafe to plenty of media coverage even weeks before opening. The *Financial Times* described the café as “quirky” and suitable for people “looking for an experience” (Shubber, 2014). To *The Guardian* it gave cereals a “hipster makeover” and represented “a shrine to the 1980s,” and added: “Transvision Vamp on the stereo; paintings of fictional serial killers made out of cereal alongside novelty cereal packets from the 1980s or early 90s” (Jeffreys, 2014). In many newspaper reports the twins were classified as hipsters, and pictures featured both of them sporting beards and short sleeved shirts with cartoon prints; one of them also displaying heavily tattooed arms. Media representations, then, of the Keery twins and their café display elements from popular culture that are typically associated with the hipster figure and function as markers of cultural distinction (le Grand, 2020). Similarly, as a symbol of commercial gentrification, the café can be identified as an almost paradigmatic case of a boutique and hipster enterprise, that is, a venture which receives significant media attention (Zukin et al., 2009) and sells trendy and niche goods or services (Scott, 2017).

Days after opening, a moralizing public reaction was sparked following a Channel 4 interview with Gary Keery (Channel 4, 2014). During the interview Keery was pressed by the Channel 4 reporter about the price of cereals, to which he responded: “I think it’s cheap for the area, really,” adding that the cereals were imported from the U.S. When told by the reporter that Tower Hamlets

is “one of the poorest parts of London,” Keery seemed unaware of this, saying: “This is isn’t one of the poorest areas there is, is it?” The reporter then asked: “Do you think local people will be able to afford £3.20 cereal?” “If they’re poor, probably not then,” Keery answered and added: “Can we stop this interview because I don’t like the questions you’re asking me?” The interview went viral and caused moral indignation and mockery in news and social media. As an *Observer* article put it: “The tensions of gentrification ... created an unlikely flashpoint in the hipster heartland of east London” (Cowburn, 2014). Moreover, Keery was mocked in the *Daily Mail* (Linning, 2014) as “the out-of-touch hipster” who “didn’t know he was working in a poor area” and “even claimed that the niche café ... was cheap.” In addition, news media highlighted the poverty in Tower Hamlets, e.g., that child poverty has risen from 42 to 49% (Hughes in the *Daily Mirror*, 2014) and that “the average annual salary is just over £11,000” (Hardgrave in the *Sunday Times*, 2015). But some papers pointed out that the borough also housed “some of the highest paid people in London, working in the financial district of Canary Wharf” (Linning, 2014). A commentator in *The Times* concluded that “in a country witnessing a return to Victorian-era social division, the opening of a hipster café in east London selling nothing but cereals looks ... provocative” (Moran, 2014).

Thus, during the outbreak of this public reaction, Keery was initially moralized as a privileged gentrifier ignorant of his role in contributing to gentrification. Yet, these moralizing classifications were soon strongly challenged. The *Evening Standard* wrote that the interview “sparked criticism from viewers,” one of whom was quoted saying that “Regardless of the area, £3.20 for a bowl of cereal is a rip off, it doesn’t even get you drunk” (Blundy, 2014). Yet, among the online comments to the article, only a few readers criticized the café. In fact, many more commentators supported the twins’ venture, pointing out that the markup for a bowl of cereals is comparable to those of other niche establishments or big chains like Starbucks (see Blundy, 2014).

Gary Keery then responded in a widely quoted open letter to Channel 4 and the reporter (Keery, 2014) that “I am from one of the most deprived areas in Belfast, so me and my family know all about poverty,” adding: “I have been taught a great work ethic and have made it this far without blaming small business owners trying to better themselves and make a future for themselves.” He also wrote that he was planning to work with charities to offer free breakfasts to disadvantaged children in the area, and that he had to have a certain markup on his products to be able to pay the rent and the 12 employees who helped run the café. In the classificatory struggles over the narrative of this episode, then, Keery positioned himself as a morally righteous and respectable person overcoming social disadvantages to start an entrepreneurial venture by virtue of his hard labor.

Subsequent media commentators supported Keery’s narrative. In his weekly *Daily Telegraph* column, London Mayor Boris Johnson defended the twins, describing them as “a gentle pair of bearded hipsters” unfairly “monstered” by the Channel 4 reporter for “pretensions to gentrify the area” (Johnson, 2014). He also lauded the Keery twins as entrepreneurs and “wealth creators” arguing that “It is a great thing to want to open a place of work in one of the poorest boroughs in Britain” (Johnson, 2014). By classifying the twins and other hipsters as beneficial for the economy of disadvantaged areas, he provided a moral narrative to legitimize the commercial gentrification of urban space by hipster entrepreneurs. An article in the *Independent* (Friedman, 2014) presented similar arguments, writing that “we should be applauding the entrepreneurship of the Cereal Killer Café” and that hipsters moving into Brick Lane “keeps this most eclectic of areas vibrant.” The article also described the socio-demographic change Brick Lane has undergone throughout its history, simply in terms of: “Areas change, and so do the people living there,” hence producing a narrative that fails to acknowledge and thus misrecognizes the processes through which young hipsters and other middle-class incomers replace pre-gentrifiers from working-class or minority groups during gentrification.

Meanwhile, an article in left-leaning *The Guardian* (Moore, 2014) critical of gentrification argued that the social reaction was “overblown” and the hipster café the wrong target. The café was “just a symptom of gentrification, not the cause.” Rather, “People are priced out of an area by rising rents



and invisible landlords who will not be interviewed on television.” In the classification struggles over the meanings of gentrification in this episode, the article stands out in identifying landlords as agents in gentrification.

Following the extensive media coverage, media reported about long queues outside the café and in 2015 business boomed. During that year the Keery twins opened a second branch in Camden and published a cookbook. They subsequently opened branches in Birmingham (though it closed in 2018), Dubai and Kuwait City, as well as launched their own brand of cereals called Unicorn Poop.

How do we interpret this public reaction? I discussed earlier how there is a context of precarity linked to issues of urban social polarization and exclusion in the wake of the UK housing crisis and the credit crunch in 2008. I would suggest that this context gave rise to social anxiety, resentment and uncertainty among urban dwellers, which found an easily identifiable target in the Keery twins and the Cereal Killer Cafe. Due to the conspicuous style of the twins and their niche venture—beards, tattoos, quirky novelty product, ironic references to retro popular culture, location on Brick Lane etc.—they were classified as more than just certain individuals, but as representing the figure of the middle-class hipster. This is a contested figure whose practices are represented as markers of distinction which may function as an emerging form of cultural capital. Yet the role of the hipster as a gentrifier is controversial and has come under public critique (le Grand, 2020). Gary Keery’s seeming ignorance about the rampant social inequality in the area where the café was located, became a trigger for unleashing a moralizing public reaction (Young, 2009) in which some media commentators initially tried to position the Keery twins and the hipster figure as a folk devil, who is both a symbol and cause of the urban polarization following gentrification.

However, in the classificatory struggles for symbolic domination and moral hegemony over the meanings of gentrification and the hipster figure, the folk deviling of the Keery twins largely failed. Rather, what became the dominant narrative was of hipsters as creative entrepreneurs and “wealth creators” who contribute to the vibrancy, development and growth of otherwise impoverished and underdeveloped neighborhoods. In such classifications, the hipster entrepreneur has heroic connotations (see Klapp, 1954, pp. 57–58) and gentrification implicitly or explicitly portrayed as desirable. The relatively high prestige and distinction conferred to hipster culture (le Grand, 2020; Michael, 2015), and the fact that the Keery twins managed to position themselves as respectable, is likely to have contributed to the legitimation of the dominant narrative. The prevalence of classifications of the hipster figure as positive for economic development, can be related to recent studies which demonstrate that mainstream media frames tend to support growth agendas in urban districts (Gin & Taylor, 2010; Lavy et al., 2016). Moreover, heroic representations of the hipster entrepreneur can be linked to the influential notion in academic, policy and public discourse that the existence of a large “creative class” are fundamental drivers of economic growth and urban regeneration Florida (2002/2012). Another link is to the longstanding symbolic and cultural significance of Britain as a “nation of shopkeepers.” The shopkeeper has increasingly become imagined, particularly in Conservative political rhetoric, as a respectable entrepreneur (Bramall, 2020). The present analysis suggests that representations of the Keery twins and the hipster figure draw on a similar imagery of the respectable British shopkeeper.

But the public debate lacked any extensive discussion of, and thus misrecognized, some key processes and actors involved in gentrification (cf. Modan & Wells, 2015). In the context of London (see Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013; Slater, 2016; Watt & Minton, 2016), this includes the role of private developers, local councilors and neoliberal housing policies in contributing to a shortage of affordable housing, displacement of pre-gentrifiers and social polarization in gentrifying neighborhoods. These processes were in some respects more at the foreground during a second episode of moralization to be discussed next.

## Class War: Anti-gentrification activists as folk devils

The second moralizing social reaction centering on gentrification and the hipster figure emerged following events on September 26, 2015, when the Cereal Killer Cafe was targeted during an anti-gentrification protest in East London. The protest march was called Fuck Parade and organized by Class War, a group that started as an anarchist newspaper in 1982. Thus, the classificatory struggles over the meanings of gentrification during this second episode involved an identifiable moral entrepreneur (Becker, 1966; Cohen, 1972/2002) who engaged in anti-gentrification activism and strived for the recognition of working-class interests. Not the least was this indicated by how the event was announced on different web forums:

Stand up to gentrification!

Our communities are being ripped apart—by Russian oligarchs, Saudi Sheiks, Israeli scumbag property developers, Texan oil-money twats and our own home-grown Eton toffs. We don't want luxury flats that no one can afford, we want genuinely affordable housing. We don't want pop-up gin bars or brioche buns—we want community.

Soon this City will be an unrecognisable, bland, yuppie infested wasteland with no room for normal (and not so normal) people like us. ... Working class people are being forced out of our homes but we won't go out without a fight. (Rabble, 2015)

Following the protest march, the protest group became the target of a moralizing media reaction. Right-leaning media, in particular, used an alarmist vocabulary to report the incident involving the protest group and the café. As the *Daily Mail* reported: “Families hid in terror as the Cereal Killer Cafe was attacked by hundreds of masked marauders armed with flaming torches and pigs' heads” (Greenwood & Lamden, 2015). The protesters were also called “Alcohol-swilling Class War jobs” and “left-wing thugs” by the *Sunday Express* (Wheeler & Fielding, 2015), and “thugs masquerading as political activists” by *The Sun* (2015).

Moreover, right-leaning newspapers portrayed the protesters as claiming to speak for the working-class, despite being privileged middle-class people. As a *Daily Mail* columnist put it: “I'll wager that for the most part they're tedious middle-class wannabe revolutionaries, most of whom don't have any experience of inner-city life, let alone poverty” (Vine, 2015). Similarly, articles in *The Times* (Brown, 2015) and the *Daily Telegraph* (Walden, 2015) entitled “Middle-class academics led the attack on hipster café” and “Class War 'poets' show their true colours” respectively, identified two participants as middle-class academics. Articles in left-leaning *The Guardian* expressed sympathy for Class War's concern over gentrification but criticized the attack on the café. Thus, in their moral crusade Gusfield (1963/1986) against gentrification, Class War were themselves moralized by large parts of news media, which classified them as folk devils who were threats to public safety and respectable values.

Whilst the protesters were folk deviled, the Keery twins received widespread media support. Echoing earlier classifications of hipsters as “wealth creators” in disadvantaged neighborhoods, the *Daily Telegraph* (Hartley-Brewer, 2015) wrote: “The Cereal Killer cafe is a perfect example of how 'hipsters' improve an area for everyone,” adding: “If the good people of Shoreditch have any sense, they won't protest outside the Cereal Killer Cafe, they'll set up business alongside them.” A commentary in left-leaning *Daily Mirror* concurred: “Businesses are good for communities. ... Opening a shop and employing people in a formerly horribly rundown area is a positive move, whether they're selling cereal or dog food. ... It's not gentrification, it's improvement.” (McGriffin, 2015). In this sense, media representations during the second public reaction showed an even heavier bias, which was particularly evident among right-leaning newspapers, toward classifications of the hipster figure as a heroic wealth creator who contributes positively to the social and economic development in gentrified districts. Similarly, in one of many interviews following the incident, Alan Keery also argued for the social and economic benefits of ventures by hipsters and small entrepreneurs like himself:

hipsters—whatever that means—are driving the flat-white economy, which helps independent shops ... Do we want high streets with just Tesco, Starbucks and H&M on every corner? ... People don't want identical high streets, they are looking for different experiences. That's all we're offering, it's just supposed to be a little, slightly unusual, treat. (Scott-Moncrieff in *The Times*, 2015)

Thus, big chains were cast as making the highstreets homogenous, while hipster-run small businesses were seen to provide an “experience” for consumers. Interestingly, Keery links small entrepreneurial operations like his own with the flat white economy. This notion was recently popularized in a book in which the digitally driven creative industries are conceived as a key business sector for growth and innovation (see McWilliams, 2015).

But like in the previous social reaction, news media expressed concern over poverty and inequality in the wake of gentrification. For instance, the *Daily Mail* wrote: “The café has become a symbol of inequality because of its location in Brick Lane, a popular destination for affluent so-called hipsters. Although house prices in the area have soared it has some of the highest deprivation levels in the capital” (Greenwood & Lamden, 2015). In accounts such as this, the Keery twins and hipsters were refrained from blame, and like in the first episode of moralization, no clear agent or cause for the increase in urban poverty and social inequality was identified. Yet, a few commentators critical of gentrification countered dominant media representations and blamed developers, landlords, and local councilors for polarization and displacement following gentrification. They also classified hipsters as, ultimately, victims in this process. Particularly a *Guardian* article (Hancox, 2015) was unusual explicit in highlighting these aspects. It argued that the prestige and trendiness attached to hipsters—here identified as young, bearded “creatives”—makes their presence in urban neighborhoods a source of value which is used by those who seek to invest and carry out development projects in these neighborhoods. This sets in motion a process where hipsters are eventually priced out. Thus, the article concluded:

Hipsters are the honeytrap, the property industry's stimulus package; that doesn't mean they get to eat all the honey. That sticky privilege belongs to landlords, to property developers, to local councillors moving seamlessly into well-paid jobs in “development consultancy”—in the end, not to young white men with beards, but middle-aged white men in suits.

Dominant media representations here associate the hipster figure with trendy and youthful cultural practices which generate symbolic value and contribute to reputational change in a neighborhood (cf. le Grand, 2020; Pratt, 2018). As discussed earlier, these practices can be interpreted as a form of emerging cultural capital rooted in popular culture (le Grand, 2020).

But the creation of cultural distinction and cultural capital in gentrified neighborhoods can be monetized by developers. In this way, boutiqueing serves to create “buzz” and valorize gentrifying neighborhoods in a similar way as the activities of artists who are often early gentrifiers or pre-gentrifiers. According to this analysis artists become victims of gentrification as they are eventually priced out of the areas which they contributed to gentrify (Ley, 2003; Pratt, 2009, 2018).

Contemporary moral panics often entail the public involvement of the folk devils themselves (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995) and the case of Class War is not an exception. Some participants in the protest march were interviewed by news media. They principally attributed blame to developers and landlords for causing gentrification. As one participant wrote in a letter to *The Guardian*:

Some 49% of the children in the borough live below the poverty line. Property developers and private landlords are making millions forcing these children and families out of their homes, often through violent evictions, and they are regularly moved into inadequate temporary accommodation and sometimes on to the streets. Many parents in the area suffer the indignity of relying on food banks to feed their children while the new Shoreditch residents can make a successful business selling children's cereal for £5 a bowl. (Harvey, 2015)

Moreover, the *Financial Times* reported that “Campaign group ‘Fuck Parade’ said it did not target Cereal Killer [Cafe] and that protesters ended up outside by chance during confrontations with police.” Nevertheless, some protesters justified their actions, including the attack. One participant was quoted saying: “Yes, hipster businesses aren't the actual problem—capitalism and landlords are

—but it is certainly a good thing that these people were made to feel unwelcome” (Mance, 2015). Again, the protester seemed to argue that the primary causes of gentrification processes are beyond the Cereal Killer Cafe. However, another member interviewed by the *Daily Mail*, said: “The cereal cafe wouldn’t be there if there weren’t people who could afford, and have the inclination, to spend £4 on a bowl of cereal. The cafe isn’t just a cultural symbol of gentrification, it’s an instrument of the economic colonisation of the area” (Malone & Greenhill, 2015). But such portrayal of gentrification as oppressive and the café as directly involved in it, is an exception in media representations of the Cereal Killer Cafe and the hipster figure. Indeed, Class War’s aim to give voice to and represent working-class interests was either ignored or cast as hypocritical. And throughout both episodes, one can note the lack of recognition to voices from the working-class and minority groups in media accounts. Similarly, it can be noted that Class War’s other anti-gentrification interventions got very little media attention. For instance, the group spent 10 months protesting outside the luxury housing development on 1 Commercial Street, which is located nearby the café and is known for its separate entrances, “poor doors,” for affordable housing tenants (Walker, 2015). This echoes Gin and Taylor’s (2010) observations that social movements find it difficult to get coverage for policy frames critical of gentrification. Thus, when covered by the media following the incident with Cereal Killer Cafe, the protesters were, as we have seen, typically classified in highly negative terms.

Harmful consequences of gentrification, then, were recognized to a greater extent during the second episode. But dominant classifications still centered, like in the first episode, around the hipster, gentrification, and growth as largely beneficial for urban districts. Again, this can be linked to the prevalence of consensus frames around growth in media representations (Gin & Taylor, 2010; Lavy et al., 2016; Smith, 1996). Also, the processes and actors behind the negative effects of gentrification, although more visible compared with the first social reaction, were rarely acknowledged in media accounts. Thus, the classification struggles in the second episode resulted in the symbolic domination of narratives implicitly or explicitly supporting and legitimizing gentrification, and particularly the role of small businesses in the latter.

## Conclusion

This paper has contributed to gentrification studies by exploring the role of moralization processes and classification struggles in media representations of gentrification. To this end, I have examined the moralizing media reactions following two episodes centering on the Cereal Killer Café and the hipster figure. While gentrification has long gone its course on Brick Lane, I have suggested that the recent public contestations over gentrification and the hipster figure in the area, can be traced to a widespread social anxiety and resentment experienced over issues of urban social inequality and precarity following an intensification of neoliberal policy-making and the 2008 financial crisis. The analysis shows that these anxieties and resentments were projected onto the Keery twins and Class War respectively, who in different ways became the object of moralizing discourses and practices. In the first social reaction, moralizers initially tried to classify the Keery twins and the hipster figure as a middle-class folk devil, who is both symbol of and responsible for wider social problems, such as increasing poverty and social polarization resulting from gentrification. These attempts at folk deviling largely failed due to the respectability conferred to the twins and the relative prestige of the hipster figure who was cast as a wealth creator of gentrified neighborhoods. In the second episode, the anti-gentrification activists, *qua* moral entrepreneurs, engaged in moralizing practices by attacking the Cereal Killer Cafe. As a consequence, the activists were in turn moralized by the media and positioned as folk devils who threaten respectable values and public safety.

A central argument of this paper is that the media contestations over gentrification and the hipster figure involve classification struggles over meaning, value and recognition. These struggles, I suggest, are bound up with forms of class politics, that is, the socio-spatial processes of gentrification in which middle-class incomers replace working-class pre-gentrifiers, as well as the classificatory struggles over the symbolic domination and moral hegemony to legitimate a particular narrative

about gentrification. What is ultimately at stake here is who have the moral right to the city. The present study shows that dominant media representations cast gentrification and hipsters as beneficial for the social and economic development of neighborhoods. This can be linked to the prominent research and policy agenda built on the argument that the existence of a creative class is key to a thriving economy and social life in urban districts Florida (2002/2012). Yet, such vision of “creative cities” excludes those who don’t belong to the sections of the middle-class who are taken to make up the creative class (McRobbie, 2016). The present study indicates, then, that the dominant classifications of gentrification and the hipster figure are biased toward the interests and recognition of middle-class groups. This analysis can also be linked to Gin and Taylor’s (2010) argument that due to their greater symbolic capital, “The media’s ‘consensus’ frame around development erases discussion of dissent over growth, opting instead to cover these issues from the perspective of business interests.” (p. 80).

Yet, the paper shows that even in classifications of gentrification as a positive process, concern was expressed over its allegedly negative consequences. In a few critical media frames developers, landlords and councilors were portrayed as agents of gentrification and hipsters cast as victims who are eventually priced out of the neighborhoods they helped gentrify. But the analysis suggests that the role of political and economic elites in contributing to the negative effects of gentrification was generally misrecognized. Particularly unacknowledged was the integral role of revanchist, neoliberal housing and welfare policies in contributing to the current structural crisis in housing and urban social polarization (Hodkinson & Robbins, 2013; Hodkinson et al., 2013; Slater, 2016). One can also note the unsurprising lack of recognition of those principally affected by gentrification—the poor and displaced—in public discourse. Relatedly, while Brick Lane is known for its Bangladeshi community and ethnic diversity, there was an apparent silence on questions of “race” or diversity in media discussions on gentrification. Thus, it can be noted that the voices of working-class and minority pre-gentrifiers were largely misrecognized in media accounts during both episodes.

Lastly, the analysis demonstrated that the hipster figure is represented as a source of value for gentrified urban districts. The paper here contributes to gentrification research by addressing the role of emerging forms of cultural capital in gentrifying districts. I have suggested that the presence of hipsters, and commercial gentrification in the form of boutiques, can generate emerging cultural capital into a district. Contra traditional highbrow cultural capital, this type of capital is based on the reflexive appropriation of popular culture and being up-to-date with cultural currents (le Grand, 2020). The accumulation of emerging cultural capital may change the place identity in a district by creating an atmosphere of creative cultural distinction and new spaces for sociality or social capital (cf. le Grand, 2020; Zukin et al., 2009). In this sense, it could be argued that the role of hipsters is similar to that of artists, about whom Ley writes: “to blame artists for the gentrification that so often follows their residency in a district is a misplaced charge; it is the societal valorization of the cultural competencies of the artist that brings followers richer in economic capital” (Ley, 2003, p. 2541). In Ley’s account, however, artists are depicted as somewhat passive agents in gentrification (though see Pratt, 2009). By contrast, my analysis suggests that the hipster figure as a retail entrepreneur may play a more active role as a cultural producer in gentrified districts. The case of the Cereal Killer Cafe indicates that the esthetic elements or emerging cultural capital associated with the hipster figure can be strategically deployed through investments of new entrepreneurial retail capital (cf. Zukin et al., 2009) in gentrifying neighborhoods, by hipster entrepreneurs and others.

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