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U Ok Hun?: The digital commodification of white woman style

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Abstract

Sociolinguistic research has increasingly explored the ways in which semiotic features are variably recruited to stylistically perform enregistered social personae. In this paper, I add to this body of work by exploring the emergence of a stereotypically feminine style and persona that is widespread in British social media. Specifically, I examine the prevalence of non-standard spellings (e.g., <dallyn> *darling*, <gawjus> *gorgeous*), discourse features (e.g., *hun*, *babe*, *u ok hun?*), and characterological tropes (e.g., the life motto ‘*live, love, laugh*’) as indexical representations of a particular type of classed, gendered, and ethnic identity in a corpus of Instagram memes. I demonstrate that these features have become enregistered as a characterological figure of a British working-class White woman—the Hun—that is stylistically deployed as a digital commodity register. Concluding, I emphasise the need for research to engage more fully with stylisation and commodification in social and digital media interaction.

KEYWORDS

digital culture, identity, LGBTQ+, memes, social media, stylisation

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1 | INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms offer users a range of semiotic resources through which they can perform aspects of their identity including photographs and selfies (Mendelson & Papacharissi, 2010; Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz, 2015), geotagged locations (Saker, 2017; Schwartz & Halegoua, 2015), and internet memes (Eschler & Menking, 2018; N. Gal et al., 2015; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). A large body of sociolinguistic research has also explored the ways in which language is implicated in the performance of digital identities (see inter alia Androutsopoulos, 2007; Bamman et al., 2014; Georgakopoulou, 2011; Herring & Paolillo, 2006; Herring, 2000; Tagg, 2016). More recently, research has investigated how users stylistically adopt linguistic features to construct and perform ‘enregistered’ (Agha, 2003, 2007; Johnstone, 2016) personae in digital contexts (e.g., Barrett, 2017; Bogetić, 2020; Ilbury, 2020).

In this paper, I explore the emergence of a digital style that is ideologically associated with a particular type of identity—the ‘Hun’. Specifically, I examine the ways in which this figure and its related linguistic style have become commodified within British digital culture as a stylistic identity. To do this, I analyse 1000 memes extracted from two Instagram accounts that contribute towards the enregisterment and circulation of this persona. I focus on the ways in which non-standard spellings (e.g., <dallyn> *darling*, <yew> *you*, <friggin’> *friggin*), ideologically feminine discourse features (e.g., *hun*, *babe*, *hubby*), and stereotypically classed tastes and dispositions (e.g., a penchant for the budget wine, Echo Falls) are variably recruited to construct a prototypical figure of womanhood that is imbued with classed, ethnic, and gendered stereotypes.

By deconstructing this persona, I argue that the Hun and its related style emerges as a collective mediated representation of a specific type of White British working-class women. And whilst this style may have originated in a specific internet community, I argue that it has become more widely appropriated as a digital ‘commodity register’ (Agha, 2011) that is deployed for social interactional purposes.

Beyond an analysis of the Hun persona, this paper articulates three main arguments that have implications for sociolinguistics more generally. First, I argue for the analytical potential of internet memes in interrogating the social meaning of linguistic variation. Specifically, I will argue that internet memes can help us understand processes of metapragmatic typification that link speech repertoires and social practice with person types. In making this argument, I emphasise the role of social and digital media in the development and circulation of enregistered person types or ‘characterological figures’ (Agha, 2003, 2007) by focussing on a specific meme genre. Second, the analysis adds to a limited body of ethnographic research on digital communities and in doing so, demonstrates the need for research to explore how users’ digital interactions are embedded in broader systems of stylistic practice (c.f. Bamman et al., 2014; Eisenstein, 2015). Finally, this paper argues for the utility of an intersectional approach in examining linguistic variation and identity online. Specifically, I demonstrate that users appropriate ideological stances and styles that reference multiple and intersecting systems of social categorisation—in this case prevalent (offline) stereotypes of a specific classed, gendered, and ethnic identity. I therefore argue that research on digital communication should consider not only how prevalent ideologies influence and shape users’ digital interactions but also how these mediated practices (re-)circulate and reinforce such ideologies.

In the next section, I discuss the concepts of style and stylisation before theorising internet memes and social meaning. I then go onto describe my methodology, after which I present an analysis of a corpus of Hun memes. Finally, I conclude by considering the processes of enregisterment and commodification in online interaction.

2 | STYLISATION

Sociolinguistic research has increasingly examined how language is implicated in the performance of social personae. Within this line of inquiry, scholars have explored how social signs—linguistic, aesthetic, and otherwise—become culturally ‘enregistered’ as stereotypic characteristics of person types (Agha, 2003, 2007).

What makes enregisterment possible is that linguistic features do not exist in isolation but rather ‘bundle’ together as distinct linguistic styles (Eckert, 2003, 2012). Styles are indexically (re-)configured as speakers identify and attribute particular features with contexts and types of people (Agha, 2003, 2007; Gal, 2019; Johnstone, 2016). These images of personhood are valorised as ‘characterological figures’—embodied characters who are stereotyped as the ‘users’ of a given register (Agha, 2003: 243). Thus, in using a particular linguistic form, the speaker not only evokes the social meanings associated with that feature, but also the imagined characters—or social personae—who are stereotypically linked with its use.

Within this vein, an outpouring of research has examined how individuals stylistically deploy linguistic features to construct personae and perform stance in everyday conversation (e.g., Coupland, 2001, 2007; Rampton, 1995). This includes research which has analysed those ‘stylised’ interactions in which there is a ‘knowing deployment of culturally familiar styles and identities that are marked as deviating from those predictably associated with the current speaking context’ (Coupland, 2001, p. 345).

Stylisation has most often been associated with Bakhtin’s (1981) literary concept of ‘heteroglossia’, alluding to the multiplicity and coexistence of voices within a single language or text. For Bakhtin, language is not original but is imbued with the historical and cultural legacies of those who have used it before. Thus, when speakers stylise, they access the polyphony (i.e., many voices) of language, invoking the genres and identities associated with that style—what Bakhtin refers to as ‘double-voicing’. This ‘ventriloquation’ occurs when the speaker uses the voice of another, simultaneously articulating their own identity and the social meaning(s) associated with the stylised identity. Stylised performances can occur in response to the perceived social norms of the speech context or to align oneself with the identity of the habitual user (‘uni-directional’). Alternatively, they can parody or subvert the appropriated voice or identity (‘vari-directional’).

As a form of social practice, stylization is often recruited in everyday conversation to achieve certain interactional and social ends. For instance, in Rampton’s (1995) now seminal study of language ‘crossing’ in a British secondary school, he shows that multi-ethnic adolescents stylistically experiment with non-habitual speech styles to manage cross-ethnic friendships and undermine authority figures. These practices are inherently ideological. In stylised interactions, speakers draw on semiotic registers stereotypically associated with person types to exploit the indexical meanings of that feature or register. In Rampton’s (1995) study, the young people stylised aspects of British Asian English to perform a stereotyped persona of the ‘babu’—an image developed during British colonial occupation in India.

A particularly relevant discussion to the persona described in this paper is Slobe’s discussion of the vari-directional voicing of ‘Mock White Girl’. In her analysis, Slobe explores how linguistic features—creaky voice, uptalk, diminutives—are combined with other semiotic markers—blondeness, a proclivity for Starbucks—to perform a persona that is imbued with essentialised notions of womanhood. Mock performances of the middle class White American female, Slobe argues, emerge in relation to ‘pervasive anxieties surrounding girls’ linguistic and social practices’ (2018, p. 543), such as concerns about the use of creaky voice—or ‘vocal fry’.

2.1 | Stylisation in digital contexts

Although most scholars have analysed stylisation in spoken interaction, research has started to explore how linguistic features and related social personae become stylistically appropriated in and through digital media (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2007; Barrett, 2017; Bogetić, 2020; Stæhr, 2014; Ilbury, 2020). Arguably, digital and social media are particularly fruitful contexts to examine stylisation as users are seen to recruit a variety of semiotic resources in constructing their digital identities. A case in point is Tagg's (2016) analysis of the text-messaging practices of a middle-class woman, Laura. In that analysis, Tagg demonstrates that Laura stylistically uses forms typically associated with the genre of SMS communication (e.g., <c> for *see*, <u> for *you*) to index 'informal' and 'casual' social meanings to construct what Laura refers to as a 'fragmented identity' (2016, p. 78).

Although these practices are often idiosyncratic and relate to the lived experiences of the individual (e.g., Tagg, 2016), in the 'networked public' of social media (boyd, 2010), features can be enregistered as elements of broader 'digital styles'. These styles can become indexically associated with specific communities and collective identities, with their use regulated by prevailing norms and grammars (see also Gnach, 2017; Witten, 2014). For instance, in research on 'LOLspeak', Gawne and Vaughan (2012) argue that users stylistically deploy aspects of the variety (e.g., 'I can haz', 'cheezburger') to index their alignment with and appreciation of the original 'LOLcat' meme. By using elements of LOLspeak, the user not only evokes the indexical meanings of these features (e.g., language play) but also they align with the internet subculture(s) who recognise and value this style. In this sense, features and their related styles could be conceptualised as digital 'commodity registers' (Agha, 2011), used by individuals to index their affiliation with some community or identity.

However, isolating and describing variable patterns of language use in digital and social media is not straightforward. Given the limitations of orthography, it is possible that features could index multiple social meanings, often simultaneously. As in spoken interaction, the 'bivalent' (Cotter & Valentinsson, 2018) or even 'multivalent' indexicalities of features complicate the degree to which we can detect the intended meanings and stances conveyed by users. To address these issues, I argue that we need to look beyond isolated contexts of digital interaction (c.f. Bamman et al., 2014; Eisenstein, 2015) to the wider digital contexts in which these features are used to examine how they are invested in broader systems of stylistic practice.

3 | MEMES AND SOCIAL MEANING

One particularly fruitful way of exploring the social meanings of variable patterns of language in digital contexts, I argue, is by examining those videos, images, and other elements of digital content that are circulated as 'internet memes'. As ubiquitous forms of digital culture that are spread widely across social and digital media platforms, memes carry symbolic cultural or semiotic meaning by depicting some social phenomenon. They often encode recognisable stances and/or themes and are spread from user-to-user through means of imitation and remixing. As highly valued artefacts of 'participatory culture', the propagation and diffusion of a given meme is dependent on the user's ability to recognise the cultural code of the image/video and its intended meaning (Sobande, 2019; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). Often, memes contain niche cultural references that are intended to be familiar to specific users. Hence, genres of memes—and their stylistic components—often become recruited as ingroup markers in the construction and performance of digital communities and identities (e.g., Eschler & Menking, 2018; Gawne & Vaughan, 2012; N. Gal et al., 2015).

Whilst on the surface memes appear relatively innocuous and are often considered humorous (e.g., Yus, 2021), memes often encode some ideological or stereotypical presupposition about the subject(s). Through memetic (re-)production and sharing, these meanings become recursively associated with individuals, communities, and social identities (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). Thus, through circulation, internet memes—like other types of traditional media (see Agha, 2007; S. Gal, 2018, 2019)—can project cultural stereotypes that become socially enregistered with people and their (perceived) activities. A case in point is Eschler and Menking's (2018) media analysis of 'starter pack' memes on Reddit. In that paper, they contend that memes encode '*prototypes* of social identities' (2018, p. 1, emphasis original) that contain essentialised messages of race, ethnicity, and gender. These representations, they argue, often transcend digital contexts of use and can potentially harm marginalised and minority communities by creating erroneous links between social categories and practices/beliefs.

Nevertheless, whilst media research has long acknowledged that 'internet memes may help us decipher contemporary political, cultural, and social processes' (Shifman, 2014, p. 172), the analytical potential of memes in exploring patterns of sociolinguistic differentiation remains largely untapped. Existing sociolinguistic approaches have instead examined the multimodal and discursive properties of memes (e.g., Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Dynel, 2020; Yus, 2019, 2021), as opposed to the stances, personae, and language that are encoded in memes in reference to broader processes of sociolinguistic differentiation. However, since memes encode social identity prototypes (Eschler & Menking, 2018), I argue that these resources are likely to be extremely valuable in decoding prevalent 'metapragmatic stereotypes' that define linguistic styles and their speakers (Agha, 2007, p. 148).

An early application of the approach I outline here is found in Ilbury (2020). In that analysis, I explore the stylistic appropriation of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) features in tweets posted by Gay White British men on Twitter. I argue that a subset of AAVE features have acquired a type of linguistic and symbolic capital that, when stylistically deployed, evoke stances and attitudes that are ideologically associated with Blackness. Through an analysis of memes that depict Black subjects, I argue Black women are memetically reified as 'fierce' and 'sassy'. Thus, AAVE features are stylistically recruited by the men to deploy a persona that is 'sassy' and 'fierce'—qualities that are valued in mainstream gay culture.

In what follows, I develop this approach by exploring a memetic genre that contributes to the enregisterment of a style that is ideologically associated with an intersectional identity—that of a White British working-class woman. I first turn to a discussion of my methodology.

4 | METHODS

The analysis examines content extracted from the social media platform, Instagram. The platform is one of the most popular social media sites for youth and young adults (ages 13–34). In March 2021, Instagram had over 30.4 million registered users in the United Kingdom (Statista, 2021). As an 'image-first' mobile application, Instagram's primary affordance is that users can upload images and videos as 'stories' or 'posts' to their accounts. Users can 'follow' other accounts, with updates algorithmically organised into a stream on their homepage. In addition to individual users, the platform also hosts business and media accounts. Generally, these channels are professionally curated to maximise post impressions and increase advertising revenue.

The data that I analyse in this paper are extracted from two of the most well-known accounts that contribute to so-called 'Hun culture', 'hunsnet' (194k followers, 4700+ posts) and 'loveofhuns' (626k followers, 1400+ posts). The Hun cultural orientation that I describe originated on British Twitter in late 2012 (Ewens, 2019), when the account 'uokhun' posted 'some people are just not worth it. They

know who they are!!!!!!—a message written in the discursive style that I analyse in this paper. Yet whilst this community may have emerged on Twitter, it is Instagram in which this cultural orientation is most prevalent based on the number of followers and posts. For instance, on Twitter, hunsnet is followed by just 1,577 users and posts are generally retweets.


To collect data, I used a simple python code (InstaLoader, 2021) to scrape the entire profile of the two accounts. Scraping is a technique that enables researchers to download digital information (text, images, etc.) directly from the HTML code of the webpage. Before describing the methodology in more detail, it is necessary to acknowledge that scraping is controversial. Many social media platforms have implemented restrictions on scraping and the method remains debated in academia (e.g., Fiesler et al., 2020; Landers et al., 2016). The main issue is that scraping involves making several ‘calls’ to the server where the webpage is hosted. Repeated calls can eventually crash the website. Accordingly, social media platforms often prohibit scraping, crawling, and other automated means of data collection and Instagram actively blocks and/or restricts IP addresses from where calls are made. A second issue is that there are privacy issues associated with scraping, given that it is possible to download information from protected accounts.

Nevertheless, scraping has become commonplace in digital research and scholars have developed approaches to address the apparent methodological issues (see Bainotti et al., 2021). In the current analysis, I address these issues through the study design. First to account for rate limitations of the platform, I use the python package ‘Instaloder’ which has a logic to keep track of call requests to obey the rate limits set by Instagram. Second, to address the potential privacy issues associated with scraping, I extract and analyse publicly available data taken from professionally curated entertainment channels. Therefore, the only data that I analyse already exist in the public domain. No personal or private data from individual user profiles (e.g., comments, images) were extracted or analysed in this study. This approach, I contend, not only accounts for the practical and ethical challenges of scraping Instagram data but also facilitates the collection of a large corpus of posts and related metadata that could not be practically extracted using manual methods (c.f. Yus, 2019). Similarly, given that it is Instagram in which this culture primarily circulates, I would argue that, following Fiesler and colleagues (2020), an analysis of this data is warranted to examine the phenomenon under study. Thus, I align with Venturini and Rogers (2019, pp. 536–537) who contend that scraping is a ‘necessary evil’ which is extremely valuable in social scientific research if performed responsibly.

In total, I scraped 5135 posts from the two accounts. The posts span a range of 4 years, from January 2017 until February 2021. I consider only those posts which are uploaded to the homepage of the channel. Whilst the accounts also upload to stories, the ‘IGTV’ channel, and ‘reels’, I do not analyse this content. Along with the image or video content, post metadata were also extracted. This includes post information such as its URL, the number of likes it attained, its caption, and its publication date.

To enable manual coding and analysis of the data, I randomly sampled 500 posts from each of the two accounts. The dataset was then cleaned and inspected. I then manually trawled the corpus and annotated the posts with descriptions of the content. This included information about the gender and ethnicity of the meme subject, the types of stances encoded by the meme, and any text on the image that was not automatically extracted. To facilitate content analysis, memes were assigned to one of nine meme subtypes. Analytical categories were developed organically, in relation to the prevalent themes in the data (e.g., fitness and health, jobs/roles; see Table 1). Memes were categorised according to the main thematic content of the image/video, considering the caption, location, and the image/video content in combination (see also Eschler & Menking, 2018). Finally, to enable a discussion of the linguistic characteristics of Huns memes, I identified and coded the data for a variety of non-standard orthographic features present in the caption and/or meme text (e.g., <bbz> for *babes*). Features were

TABLE 1 Meme categories of Huns memes

Meme category	N	total (%)	Example: Meme description	Example: Meme text/caption
Mundane experiences and emotions	396	39.6	Cheryl (Tweedy) crying	When you ask your hubby to go to the shop to get sum bickies and he brings back garry baldys #ragingisanunderstatement
(Digital) cultural references	228	22.8	'David's dead' (Big Brother) meme	4 years since the most iconic moment in British television happened x #davidisdead
Partying, smoking, or drinking	104	10.4	Denise Welch drinking from a bottle of wine	FRIDAY XO
Fashion	100	10.0	Girls Aloud at the Brit awards	Kimberley's low rise gold skirt. That's all.
Other	61	6.1	Black Lives Matter Blackout	Black lives matter. See website in bio for some useful links and information of how you can help, educate yourselves and donate #blackouttuesday
Unusual photos/videos	44	4.4	Girls Aloud participating in an egg and spoon race	Just a little something non virus related. . . Girls Aloud doing an egg & spoon race. You're welcome x
Fitness and health	31	3.1	Nikki Grahame walking and moaning	Live footage of me forcing myself to go on my 1 hour of exercise a day so my mental health doesn't deteriorate #mwah
Jobs/roles	28	2.8	Naomi Campbell giving evidence	Me being asked to go back to the office once a week after six months of sitting on my arse 
Media	8	0.8	Article of Lauren Goodyear stepping over a puddle	3 years today since the Daily Mail covered the most iconic piece of news to date

first identified through an automated spell-check and then categorised into subtypes of orthographic variation (e.g., dialect respellings; eye dialect).

Unlike multimodal approaches to memes (e.g., Dancygier & Vandelanotte, 2017; Dynel, 2020; Yus, 2019), my analysis does not apportion equal consideration to different representational modes of meaning. Rather, my focus here is on the creation and dissemination of a linguistic style and persona that is primarily articulated through specific types of orthographic and discursive features. I discuss other semiotic channels of meaning (e.g., colour, images, gesture) in reference to this style, but I do not claim to be taking a multimodal approach per se (also see Slobe, 2018). These methodological decisions are related to the aims of this paper. First, the approach facilitates quantification of the patterns (linguistic and otherwise) that typify Huns memes. Second, the approach enables me to account for the use of this style in other text-based social and digital media (e.g., Twitter, WhatsApp).

Before introducing the data, it is necessary to specify my positionality in this analysis. I am a gay British millennial immersed in (queer) digital culture. My positionality as the target demographic of these accounts is important in my interpretation of the persona I describe. Over the past 5 or so years, I have seen this style develop in broader online/offline LGBTQ+ cultures of practice and I have witnessed the emergence of a distinct ‘Hun culture’. In mainstream gay culture today, the Hun is celebrated in themed club nights and festivals, and the persona is often stylised in face-to-face interactions amongst members of the community. And whilst this cultural orientation is now ubiquitous in offline contexts, it is social media in which this style first became popular. As hunsnet (2021) remark on their website, ‘what started as cutla silly piccies with a tackehhhhh caption on insta soon became a social media cultural phenomenon’. Thus, whilst my analysis is based on a sample of 1000 Instagram posts, my arguments are ethnographically informed and grounded in an emic understanding of the British queer digital subcultures in which this style first emerged.

5 | ANALYSIS

5.1 | The thematic content of Hun memes

In this section of this analysis, I explore the thematic content of Huns memes. Although loveofhuns and hunsnet are independently run, both accounts can be seen to adopt more general styles and practices that typify the meme genre. Once the image or video has been lifted from some external source, some text is added (e.g., a caption) that reframes the context of the original image (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). An example is found in Figure 1 where an image of ‘The Only Way is Essex’ (TOWIE) reality

That moment when you finally become the sole beneficiary on your Sugar Daddy's will! Ker-Ching hunnay



Caption:

When your hard work finally pays off hunnay @gemmacollins @boohoo #boohooGC #gay #scruff #scruffgay #grindrgay #grindr #grindrfail #grindrguy #scruff #gayuk #gayunderwear #gayfit #hun #hunnay #huns #hunny #instagay #gaytravel #dailymeme #meme #fashion #tv



Caption:

Remember in 2014 when Kim Kardashian broke the internet? Well it's 2017 hunni and Gemma Just did @gemmacollins1

FIGURE 1 Memes of TOWIE reality TV star, Gemma Collins, posing. Posts by hunsnet (L) and loveofhuns (R)

TV star, Gemma Collins, has been remixed differently by the two accounts.

As in Figure 1, Huns memes resonate with a British collective. Unlike other forms of memetic genres which attain international recognition (e.g., LOLspeak: Gawne & Vaughan, 2012; Starter-pack memes: Eschler & Menking, 2018), hunsnet and loveofhuns remediate and remix graphical content that intertextually references events, celebrities, and products, that are deeply ingrained in mainstream British popular culture. Often, the accounts remix content from British TV and music, such as niche videos of competitors on the television music contest 'XFactor', clips from the soap opera 'Coronation Street', and photos of nostalgic British pop-bands, such as 'the Spice Girls' and 'Atomic Kitten'. As elements which typify this meme genre, they are recursively referenced in Huns memes. For instance, just over 12% ($n = 124/1000$) of the data references scenes and/or actors from the long-running British television soap opera, 'EastEnders'. Thus, the posts uploaded to the accounts are carefully curated to target the 'imagined audience' (Marwick & boyd, 2011) of users who can read and recognise the intended meaning of the post as well as identify the origin of the remixed image or video.

The target demographic of these accounts can largely be inferred through the meme content. Across both accounts, posts appear to be designed for an audience of British followers, more specifically women and gay men. Both loveofhuns and hunsnet regularly post advertisements for LGBTQ+ events, including pride events and gay club nights, and several memes include hashtags and search terms that explicitly refer to the gay community (e.g., #gay, #dragqueen). Female followers are referenced in those posts which mention this demographic directly, such as those posts on 'breast cancer awareness', where hunsnet appeals to the '76% of followers who are female' to consider the importance of breast screening. The dual orientation of Huns culture, then, reflects the long-established involvement of straight women in gay culture and the shared cultural norms and practices between the communities (e.g., Cruz & Dolby, 2007).

However, whilst the accounts attract female followers, the Hun memetic style appears to have emerged in mainstream gay (male) culture and is still largely rooted in this orientation. Many Huns accounts—including those analysed here—were established by and continue to be run by gay men (Ewens, 2019; O'Neill, 2021). This alignment can be seen in the content of Huns memes, such as those posts include niche references to the gay dating apps 'Scruff' and 'Grindr', and quotes from episodes of 'RuPaul's Drag Race' prior to its mainstream popularity.

Nevertheless, regardless of this subcultural orientation, Huns memes speak to a broader collective of users as they often remediate nostalgic videos and images that are familiar to many British millennials. For instance, the accounts remix clips from early 2000s British television shows including 'Big Brother' and 'How Clean is Your House?', while other memes reference aesthetics (e.g., animal print suitcases), technologies (e.g., Nokia 7373 mobile phone), and clothes (e.g., Paul's Boutique handbags) that were once the height of early 2000s British fashion. Many of these memes are rooted in a British collective experience. For instance, Figure 2 depicts a shopping bag from the now defunct British clothing retailer, Jane Norman. The appended text, 'The official school PE kit bag x', refers to a trend in the United Kingdom during the late 1990s/early 2000s where schoolgirls would often carry their PE (gym) kit in a Jane Norman branded bag. In the context of Huns memes, these references are ironically remixed to parody the now 'outdated' and 'tacky' (or camp) styles of the time. Thus, these accounts are shaped by and also shape contemporary British millennial culture (see also Sobande, 2019 on British politics).

These cultural references occur alongside images and videos of well-known British celebrities. For instance, the subject of Figure 1, Gemma Collins—or more accurately her alter-ego the 'GC'—popularly known for her extravagant lifestyle and 'diva' persona, features in 72 different memes across the two accounts. In fact, a select number of 'iconic' celebrities are recursively enregistered as memetic subjects of the Hun genre. This includes the English Irish pop girl group and winners of music talent show, 'Popstar: The Rivals', Girls Aloud (38 memes); television personality Kim Woodburn

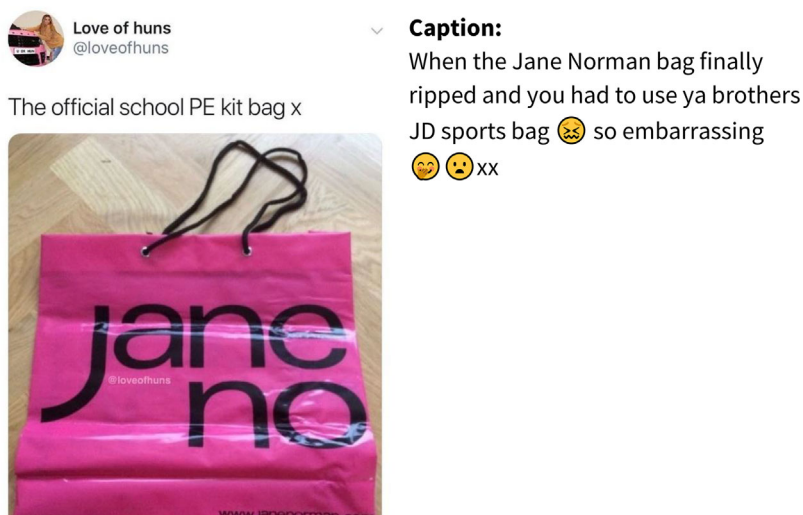


FIGURE 2 Meme of a Jane Norman bag (loveofhuns)

(16 memes); and the fictional *EastEnders* character Shirley Carter (seven memes). Overwhelmingly, the subjects are White women. Of the 1000 memes analysed, 829 depict female presenting subjects either independently or in a single-sex group. The remaining 171 memes are as follows: objects ($n = 103$), mixed-sex groups ($n = 40$), or male presenting subjects ($n = 28$). Of the 829 female presenting subjects, 777 are also White. As I go on to argue, gender and ethnicity are relevant not just in relation to the visual presentation of the subject, but also through the selection of linguistic features and social tropes which are ideologically associated with femininity and Whiteness.

Like other genres of internet memes (Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019), Huns memes are intended to be read as humorous. Their meanings are not intended to be taken at face value. Rather, they are intentionally ironic. Humour is often generated through the incongruent juxtaposition of the original image and the remixed memetic interpretation. This is achieved by appropriating the stance of the original image/video (e.g., Naomi Campbell giving evidence at a tribunal that she does not wish to be at) as a relatable event ('asked to go back to the office once a week after six months of sitting on my arse')—a style of humour that is typical of internet memes more generally (see Yus, 2021).

Table 1 presents the quantitative findings of the content analysis. Overwhelmingly, Huns memes depict the mundane ($N = 396$). That is, they reference thoughts, feelings, and experiences that are 'everyday' and are relatable, at least in the sense that they can be recognised as reflecting some (abstract) social reality. Typically, these activities centre on the experiences of women. For instance, heteronormative relationships are referenced in memes such as 'when your 'hubby' (husband) gets the wrong 'bickies' (biscuits) from the shop' or 'when your ex logs you out of their Netflix account so you have to pay for your own'. These quotidian representations occur alongside indirect references to practices, tastes, and dispositions that are ideologically associated with women, including clothes shopping, drinking rosé wine, and dieting (partying $N = 104$, fashion $N = 100$, fitness and health $N = 31$, jobs $N = 28$). Other memes intertextually reference aspects of British (popular) culture ($N = 228$, unusual photos/videos = 44, media $N = 8$), such as the viral Scottish YouTube video that was circulated as the 'DISGUSTANG' meme (Know Your Meme, 2013).

Finally, although most posts contribute to the construction of the identity I describe in this paper, the accounts also post event advertisements and participate in broader digital trends that do not directly

contribute to this genre (other N = 61). For instance, both accounts supported the ‘Black Out Tuesday’ campaign by uploading a solid black square to their newsfeeds to raise awareness of racism and police brutality in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests. Nevertheless, as can be seen in Table 1, the accounts mainly post memes centred on Hun culture and it is this orientation that I focus on here.

5.2 | Language of Huns memes

Having discussed their thematic content, I now turn to a discussion of the language of Huns memes. The data I consider here are from two sources: (1) the caption of the meme and (2) any text that has been appended to the image/video. I first explore the orthographic strategies used in Huns memes, before discussing the discursive style of the genre. To quantify their distribution, I provide counts for individual features as many memes include multiple strategies.

5.2.1 | Orthographic variation

The first type of orthographic feature that I examine are those spellings which attempt to emulate some spoken language feature of a regional or social dialect (Androutsopoulos, 2000; Jaffe, 2012). These forms typically target phonological variation. In Huns memes, orthographic variants are often employed to emulate features of British English (BrE). This includes the absence of post-vocalic /ɹ/ (e.g., <stunnah > *stunner*, <neva > *never*), and variable pronunciations, such as the use of [n] in place of the velar nasal [ŋ] (ING) in spellings such as <fumin’> *fuming* (see Lindsey, 2019, p. 73; Nini et al., 2020). Other common orthographic strategies represent features that are socially marked in varieties spoken in the North of England. For instance, word-final /i/ is variably represented as <eh > as in <partehh > *party* and <choppehhh > *choppy*, to emulate the pronunciation of this vowel as [ɛ̃] (i.e., HAPPY-laxing)—a characteristic feature of Northern English working-class varieties (Beal, 2004; Nini et al., 2020; Stoddart et al., 1999). Similarly, in words where /a:/ is orthographically represented as <ar>, the working-class Northern pronunciation [a] is represented as <al> (see Beal, 2004, pp. 14–15), giving rise to forms such as <dallin> and <dallyn> *darling*. Finally, the word *look* is represented as <lewk>, reflecting the Northern pronunciation of this word, [lu:k]. Table 2 presents a summary of the main subtypes of dialect respellings.

Although a range of features are represented, dialect respellings tend to be limited to a limited set of environments that are emblematic of the target variety. For instance, (ING) is variably represented as both <ing> and <in> in comparable contexts (e.g., <dancin’>, <dancing>) and <o> for <u> to emulate the pronunciation of /ʌ/ as [ɔ:] is restricted to <hon> which is also <hun>. This suggests that the authors are not trying to authentically represent dialect, but rather are selectively referencing a subset of features that are found in traditional (i.e., White working-class) varieties of Northern BrE.

Further evidence for this argument is found in the case of ‘eye dialect’ spellings which emulate the modality of spoken language. Eye dialect forms include <woz> for *was* and <pix> for *pics*, as well as ‘allegro’ forms such as <gonna> for *going to* and <kinda > for *kind of* (see Jaffe, 2012). Eye dialect adds to the overall effect of the message by destabilising the ‘standardness’ of the text (Sebba, 2007) and are used to represent features of vernacular speech. This strategy is particularly common in digital interactions (e.g., Ilbury, 2020; Tagliamonte, 2016; Tagg, 2016).

Table 3 reports the eye dialect features used in Huns memes. The most frequent strategy are ‘word-clippings’ (N = 677), where words like *honey*, *cocktails*, and *definitely* are abbreviated (or ‘clipped’)

TABLE 2 Dialect respellings in Huns memes

Orthographic feature	Examples	N
(ING)	<dancin'> <i>dancing</i> , <fumin'> <i>fuming</i> <friggin'> <i>frigging</i>	493
[a]	<dallyn>, <dallin> <i>darling</i>	484
/i/ → [eɪ]	<hunnaɪ> <i>honey</i>	363
/ʌ/ → [ɔ:]	<hon> <i>hon</i>	71
/i/ → [ɛ]	<partehh> <i>party</i> , <fancehhhh> <i>fancy</i> , <choppehhh> <i>choppy</i> , <meh> <i>me</i>	22
TH/DH fronting, stopping or deletion	<fank> <i>thank</i> , <da> <i>the</i> , <wiv> <i>with</i> , <i>them</i> , <den> <i>then</i> , <muvva> <i>mother</i>	9
R-lessness	<stunnah> <i>stunner</i> , <neva> <i>never</i> , <troopa> <i>trooper</i> , <muvva> <i>mother</i>	5
H-dropping	<'ere> <i>here</i> , <'arsh> <i>harsh</i>	3
/ʊ/ → [u:]	<lewk> <i>look</i>	3
Total		1453

TABLE 3 Eye dialect in Huns memes

Orthographic feature	Examples	N
Word-clippings	<hun> <i>honey</i> , <cocky t's> <i>cocktails</i> , <vaccy c> <i>COVID-19</i> <i>vaccination</i> , <panny D> <i>pandemic</i> , <deffo> <i>definitely</i> , <sanny> <i>sanitiser</i> , <hubby> <i>husband</i> , <'scuse> <i>excuse</i> , <'secco> <i>prosecco</i> , <'specially> <i>especially</i>	677
Connected speech processes	<wanna> <wunna> <i>want to</i> , <gonna> <gunna> <i>going to</i> , <n> <i>and</i> , <cutla> <i>couple of</i> , <loadsa> <i>loads of</i> , <ya> <i>you</i>	92
Representation of vowels and consonants	<yew> <i>you</i> , <yewself> <i>yourself</i> , <fewmin> <i>fuming</i> , <mewd> <i>mood</i> , <luv> <i>love</i> , <gawjus> <i>gorgeous</i> , <drynks> <i>drinks</i> , <namastay> <i>namaste</i> , <dun> <i>done</i> , <bon jaw> <i>bonjour</i> , <machoor> <i>mature</i> , <keenwa> <i>quinoa</i>	60
Total		829

to <hun>, <cocky t's>, and <deffo>. Another particularly common feature is the representation of connected speech processes (N = 66). For instance, *going to* /gəʊɪŋ tu:/ is represented as <gonna> reflecting the pronunciation of this phrase as [gənə], and *couple of* /kʌpəl əv/ which is sometimes [kʌtlə] in casual speech is represented as <cutla>. Finally, <aw> and <u> are used to signify the vowels /ɔ:/ and /ʌ/ respectively, as in <gawjus> *gorgeous* and <dun> *done*, and <ch> orthographically represents the pronunciation of the affricate /tʃ/, as in <machoor> *mature*.

As with dialect respellings, eye dialect features are not used with any apparent systematicity. Rather, comparable words and phrases are variably represented. For instance, *you* is represented both as <yew> and <you>, and *want to* is variably spelled as <wanna>, <wunna>, and <want to>. These spellings appear to be symbolically restricted to a subset of words. For example, the orthographic representation of /ɔ:/ as <aw> is limited to <gawjus> *gorgeous* and <bon jaw> *bonjour* and <u> is used for /ʌ/ only in a few words in this lexical set (*done*, *love*). Again, this suggests that the authors are not attempting to faithfully replicate a target variety but rather are strategically and selectively representing emblematic aspects of some non-standard variety.

The final type of variable spellings that I analyse are those ‘homophone spellings’ that are not related to pronunciation (Androustopoulos, 2000; Jaffe, 2012), such as those lexical (e.g., <u> for *you*) and graphemic substitutions (e.g., <boyz> for *boys*). Homophone spellings are typically associated with digital interaction (e.g., Georgakopoulou, 2011; Tagg, 2016), having become stereotypical features of so-called ‘txtspeak’ (e.g., Crystal, 2004). However, whilst homophone spellings are comparatively rare in contemporary forms of digital communication (see Tagliamonte, 2016), these spellings can often be used stylistically by users to perform identity and convey interactional stance (Sebba, 2007; Tagg, 2016). This orthographic style, however, is used much less than other non-standard spellings, and is mainly confined to a subset of lexical items: <bbz> *babes*, <w8> *wait*, <tbn> *to be honest*, <2> *to*, <4> *four*, and <u> *you* (N = 24). The inclusion of homophone spellings therefore appears to be symbolic, in this case to exploit the ‘casual’ and ‘informal’ indexical meanings of ‘txtspeak’.

When analysed collectively, the non-standard orthographic features in Huns memes appear to be recruited to evoke the heteroglossic connotations of the ‘voice’ of the imagined author. This voice is articulated through spellings which are associated with White working-class Northern varieties of English, *allegro* forms that reflect non-standard features of spoken English, and homophone spellings that reference styles of digital interaction that are now considered to be ‘outdated’ or ‘illiterate’. However, these features are not neutral (see also Tagg, 2016). Rather, curators of Huns memes selectively and strategically deploy specific types of non-standard orthographic variants to simultaneously express the imagined voice of the persona and evoke the ideological typifications of the *types* of people who are assumed to use them (see also Jaffe & Walton, 2000; Sebba, 2007). For instance, spellings which emulate features of Northern varieties of English are utilised for their symbolic association with class—through the long-standing association of the North of England with working-class communities—and also ethnicity—through the use of features typically found in varieties spoken by White speakers.

5.2.2 | The Hun discursive style

In addition to the creative use of non-standard orthographic features, Huns memes adopt an interactional register that is ideologically associated with a particular demographic—in this case, White working-class women. The style is characterised by stereotypically gendered discourse features including overt expressions of emotionality, feminine lexis, and stylistic preferences (c.f. Coates, 2015; Lakoff, 1975). Elements of this style are found in Figure 3 which depicts the popstar, Geri Horner (née Halliwell), standing in a wooden box. The meme reimagines the original image as a ‘coffin shopping trip’, with the designer-outlet ‘Bicester Village’ tagged as the location.

The caption which accompanies the image includes references to the cultural tastes (‘neon pink plush lining with hand sewn diamanté’s’) of the inferred identity that are ideologically coded as ‘working-class’ and ‘feminine’ (see Hopkinson, 2021; Nicholls, 2019, p. 191). The imagined voice of the author is articulated through the variant orthographic strategic discussed earlier, in this case the *allegro* form, <ya> *you*. These semiotic markers co-occur with discourse features that are stereotypically associated with women’s (digital) interactions: the use of the diminutive ‘girlies’, the expressive <!> to signal excitement, and <xx> with ‘kisses’ as a sign off (Herring, 1996; Georgakopoulou, 2011; Murphy & Farr, 2012).

Other stereotypically feminine discourse features that typify this style are found in Figure 4. In this image, the official government ‘COVID-19 advice’ graphic has been reimagined by loveofhuns as social aspirations of the imagined author. In this meme, level 5 denotes ‘Drinking Blossom Hill White Zinfandel alone in my room’, whilst level 1 signifies ‘Having absolutely stunning drinkies in a beer garden with my girlies’. Above the image, the text reads ‘Almost halfway girlies’. The image has been

**Caption:**

Coffin shopping today with the girlies
 😊 I might upgrade to the Executive© package which includes neon pink plush lining with hand sewn diamanté's. If ya gonna die at least do it in style! Kisses xx

Location:

Bicester Village

FIGURE 3 Meme of Geri Horner coffin shopping (loveofhuns)



Loveofhuns x
 @loveofhuns

Almost half way girlies

Caption:

Can almost taste the fag ash that's fallen in to my glass of vino 🍷

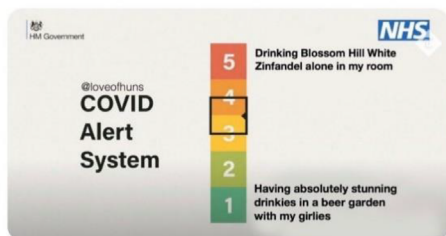


FIGURE 4 Meme of COVID-19 alert system (loveofhuns)

cross posted and remediated from the loveofhuns Twitter account where it first was uploaded. As in Figure 3, gendered address terms (<girlies>), tropes of personhood (a penchant for the budget wine brand, Blossom Hill), and a discursive style associated with White women ('*absolutely stunning*') are simultaneously exploited to evoke the imagined voice of the hypothetical author.

In other memes, the gender of the author is evoked through the use of feminine address terms ('*hun*', '*hunny*', '*hunnay*' N = 1963; '*darling*' N = 484; '*girlies*' N = 19; '*babe*' n = 8) including pejorative labels ('*slag*' N = 26, '*bitch*' N = 8, '*slut*' N = 2), stereotypically feminine lexis (diminutives: '*drinkies*', '*biccies*', '*kiddies*', '*girlies*' N = 24; '*icon(ic)*' N = 17, '*stunning*' N = 4), and emojis (💕/❤️/💖/💗 N=9, 😊 N=4, 🍷 N=3).

Many of these features are recurrent across Huns memes where they become enregistered as characteristic features of this style. This is the case for the message-final kiss <x> and its variants (e.g., <xo>, <xx>) which have become emblematic of Hun culture. Not only does this convention feature in the Instagram bio of 'Loveofhuns x', but it is used 95 times in the corpus. Whilst we might be tempted to interpret <x> as a relatively 'neutral' feature of text messaging and digital interactions (e.g., Tagg, 2016), in this context the message final kiss takes on new meanings. Here,

“Anyway bbz, I’m fucking
fewwwwwmin, PM me dallyn,
can’t talk on ‘ere too many
snacks”



Caption:

Snacks not 🐍s bbz #gay #scruff
#scruffgay #grindrgay #grindr #grindrfail
#grindr guy #gayuk #gayunderwear
#gayfit #hun #hunnay #huns #hunny
#instagay #gaytravel #dailymeme
#meme #tv #fashion #drag #draghumour
#dragqueen #rupaulsdragrace #travel
#instadaily #igers #food #burberry

FIGURE 5 Meme of snacks/snakes (hunsnet)

it is used specifically to evoke the ‘gentle’ and ‘affectionate’ indexicalities that are stereotypically associated with women. When used in interaction, it can signal irony or distance from the message (e.g., Ewens, 2019). Thus, Huns memes do not only appropriate a specific linguistic style, but they also exploit the social meanings (i.e., the stances, social personae, and roles) associated with that style.

This is further illustrated in Figure 5. The meme is a screenshot of a tweet posted by hunsnet, written in a register that is stereotypically associated with women’s disagreements on British social media. The meme evokes a stance that could be read as the ‘independent diva’ which is humorously and ironically deployed as a response to an image of a variety of classic British snacks. The humour is generated through the similarity of the word ‘snacks’ and ‘snakes’—with the latter a pejorative term used to describe someone who is deceitful. As with the examples examined thus far, the imagined voice of the author is overtly stylised through the combination of multiple semiotic resources: non-standard orthographic features (e.g., <fewwwwwmin> *fuming*, <bbz> *babes*, <‘ere> *here*), stereotypically feminine discourse features (e.g., <dallyn> *darling*, wordplay in ‘*too many snakes*’), and a discursive style that is associated with a very particular type of female-to-female digital interaction.

However, as noted, these stances—and indeed the persona evoked—are not intended to reference *all* types of women. Rather, the Hun style evokes the heteroglossic connotations of a specific *type* of female identity—that of WHITE WORKING-CLASS women. A feature which illustrates this point most succinctly is the recursive use of the phrase ‘*u ok hun?*’ which is referenced in 10 memes. The phrase has become emblematic of the Hun genre such that other well-known accounts that contribute to this cultural orientation reference ‘*u ok hun?*’ in their username (e.g., @uokhunofficial, @uokhun_clubnight) whilst others sell mugs, t-shirts, and other merchandise emblazoned with the ubiquitous catchphrase. Although this phrase may have once been a typical style of digital (SMS) communication, it has since acquired a more specific type of social meaning that is associated with the interactional practices of a specific demographic of women. For instance, Alderton (2016, para. 3) suggests that the phrase has become ‘shorthand for a disingenuous public display of concern’ that parodies the interactional style of working-class women, whilst the crowd-sourced online dictionary for ‘slang’, Urban Dictionary, defines the catchphrase as the ‘standard response from a lower-class British female on Facebook to a friend of the same ilk, usually in response to an attention-seeking/ambiguous

statement' (Urban Dictionary, 2018). Thus, I argue that curators of Huns memes are not attempting to emulate a more general female style, but rather are strategically cultivating a very specific type of persona that emerges at the intersection of specific types of gendered, classed, and ethnic stereotypes.

6 | THE HUN DIGITAL STYLE

The analysis presented here demonstrates that particular types of linguistic, social, and aesthetic features have become enregistered (Agha, 2003, 2007; Johnstone, 2016) as indexical components of a metaphorical persona—the Hun. In Agha's (2003) terms, the Hun is a 'characterological figure' that embodies prevalent British social stereotypes of class, ethnicity, and gender. A strategically inauthentic style (Coupland, 2007), the Hun is not deployed systematically or consistently but rather it is selectively and strategically evoked by variably deploying the social and linguistic tropes that have become enregistered qualities of this persona.

At the linguistic level, the Hun is deployed through variant spellings (e.g., <dallyn> *darling*, <u ok> *you ok?*) and specific types of discourse features (e.g., *Thank you for the mems x, too many snakes*) that orthographically articulate the imagined voice of the Hun. As a type of vari-directional voicing (Bakhtin, 1981), these features evoke the heteroglossic connotations of the *types* of social actors that are perceived to use these forms. In the construction of the Hun, creative orthographic strategies are variably recruited to not only realise the heteroglossia of others' voices but also to appropriate the social meanings that these forms have accrued (see also Tagg, 2016). Stereotypically feminine features are recruited to evoke feminine stances (e.g., 'emotionality') ideologically associated with White women, whilst non-standard spellings that emulate features of varieties of Northern BrE (e.g., <eh> for /i/ as in <partehhh>, <funkehhh>, <literalehhh>) are exploited for their association with White working-class speakers. Finally, features and phrases that were once considered characteristic of 'digital communication' (Squires, 2010; Tagg, 2016) such as <u ok hun?> and <bbz> are ideologically elaborated as indices of education and social class.

These linguistic ideologies coalesce with tropes of personhood. Through the careful curation of images, subjects, and content, the memes multimodally enregister specific social practices with the Hun. Many of these social practices (directly or indirectly) reference tropes that are deeply ingrained in observations of British classed, gendered, and ethnic social dynamics. And among the acculturated imagined audience, there is a collective appreciation of the tastes and dispositions of this identity: The Hun is a woman who enjoys a bottle of the cheap alcoholic beverage Lambrini, flies with budget airline Ryanair flight to the popular Greek tourist resort of 'Zante' for a holiday (or 'holibobs'), and socialises in the no-frills bar and restaurant, All Bar One (see Figure 6, for example). She adorns her home with framed 'inspirational quotes' such as the mantra 'live, love, laugh' and decorates her lounge in silver crushed velvet furniture—cultural tastes and practices that are associated with the so-called 'Nouveau Working Class' (Hopkinson, 2021). That is, she is more economically mobile than the traditional working-class, but her tastes and dispositions are still coded as working-class. Through memetic remixing and (re-)circulation, these tropes become construed as a 'social prototype' (Eschler & Menking, 2018) of a White British working-class woman.¹

Nevertheless, whilst the Hun is figurative, she is reified through the glorification (or 'stanning') of female celebrities and public figures who are seen to variably embody aspects of this persona. Notably, this style (and persona) is most often associated with the White working-class² reality TV show personality, the 'GC' who has often been labelled the 'iconic British Hun' in popular discourse—an identity which she herself aligns with and profits from (Levine, 2020).

Don't even think of calling yourself a "Hun on her Hollibobs" unless you are checking these bad boys in at Luton airport for a Ryanair flight to Zante...



Caption:

Facts are facts hon #gay #scruff
 #scruffgay #grindrgay #grindr #grindrfail
 #grindrguy #gayuk #gayunderwear
 #gayfit #hun #hunnay #huns #hunny
 #instagay #gaytravel #dailymeme
 #meme #tv #fashion #drag #draghumour
 #dragqueen #rupaulsdragrace #travel
 #instadaily #igers #food #burberry
 #brexit

Location: London Luton Airport

FIGURE 6 Meme of 'juicy couture' suitcases (hunsnet)

Instagram accounts which contribute to the Hun memetic genre therefore play a key role in the enregisterment of this style by (re-)circulating metapragmatic discourses that recursively link person types with certain types of linguistic and social practice (see Agha, 2003, 2007). In S. Gal's (2018, 2019) terms, Instagram accounts which contribute to this cultural orientation operate as 'authorities' that create coherent linguistic and social registers that typify the persona. And through the interdiscursive activity of circulation, the Hun style is variably appropriated by users who are able to recognise and appreciate its characterological indices.

The outcome of this process can be seen in the extent to which this persona is embodied by users both within Instagram and in broader (digital) contexts of interaction. Follower responses to memes posted by hunsnet and loveofhuns, for instance, are written in the Hun style, whilst hunsnet maintains a 'dict-hun-ary' of terms on their website. Similarly, in other (text-based) social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook), the Hun is evoked through the use of emblematic phrases and other orthographic features that are enregistered components of the persona. Thus, whilst this persona may have emerged within a niche online gay subculture, the Hun appears to have acquired broader symbolic and cultural capital where it has been appropriated as a digital 'commodity register' (Agha, 2011).

Nevertheless, although the persona is not intended to be taken at face value—it is a parody—the Hun could be read as a classist and misogynistic trope. Huns memes have the potential to create erroneous and essentialised associations between types of language, tastes, dispositions, and the social identity that this persona references (see also Eschler & Menking, 2018; Ilbury, 2020; Shifman, 2014; Wiggins, 2019). Arguably, however, the purpose is not to offend those who the Hun parodies. Rather, it is intended to be a collective appreciation of a 'relatable' identity—a persona we all recognise and embody to some extent. The brash, unapologetic, and independent stances that she personifies as are evaluated as positive personal attributes, whilst her camp tastes and social habits—drinking Echo Falls, crushed velvet decor, partying, and so on—are celebrated as qualities of a desirable carefree and extroverted lifestyle. To some degree then, the Hun's iconic status could be related to a rejection of other more mainstream (digital) ideals, such as the hyper-polished profiles and self-presentation styles of so-called 'influencers', with the Hun a more relatable—more authentically real—identity. As the creator of loveofhuns remarks, 'I can't relate to Instagram models sitting on a beach in Bora Bora drinking coconut water and nibbling on hair gummies (vitamin pastilles designed to support hair health) [...] [but I can relate to Daniela Westbrook (a British celebrity) leaving Greggs (a British bakery chain) with a steak bake (a beef pastry) and not a care in the world x' (Ewens, 2019, para 10). However, to

what extent this intention is successful is debatable given that those who participate in Hun culture are unlikely to be White working-class Women—or even working-class—given that the demographics of Instagram tend to be skewed towards the upper-end of the class spectrum (Statista, 2018) and the origins of this style in the gay community.

Finally, though we may be tempted to view this persona as a progression of more general female stereotypes such as the ‘basic bitch’—an American term condescendingly used to refer to a woman who displays cliché or predictable character traits—the Hun appears to have developed from different, albeit related, ideologies of womanhood. First, the Hun is articulated through cultural and linguistic signifiers that are deeply rooted in the British psyche. Second, unlike the (heteronormative) regulatory discourses of other female stereotypes (e.g., MWG: Slobe, 2018), the Hun cannot be straightforwardly read as a pejorative imagining of womanhood but rather, it is (intended to be) a depiction of a relatable high-camp identity that is appreciated by both (straight) women and gay men as form of shared cultural capital (c.f. Slobe, 2018).

7 | CONCLUSION

This paper has described the digital commodification and circulation of a British persona—the Hun. By examining the aesthetic, social, and linguistic characteristics of this persona in internet memes posted to Instagram, I have argued that the Hun is reified as a social prototype (Eschler & Menking, 2018) or, more accurately, a characterological figure (Agha, 2003), which is stylistically appropriated by users. In digital communication, the Hun is strategically evoked through the use of enregistered linguistic features (e.g., <u ok > *you ok?*, <girlies>) and references to tastes and dispositions (e.g., a preference for echo falls wine) that are ideologically linked with White British working-class women.

Beyond a description of the Hun persona, the analysis makes a number of arguments that have implications for other sociolinguistic analyses of digital media. First, this paper has demonstrated the utility of intersectional approach in exploring social patterns of digital interaction. In the current paper, I have argued that the Hun persona cannot be understood in relation to a single social frame such as ‘woman’ or even ‘British woman’ (c.f. Bamman et al., 2014; Eisenstein, 2015), but rather emerges as an interaction between specific classed, gendered, and ethnic stereotypes. Second, this paper emphasises the analytical potential of internet memes in exploring the social meaning of linguistic variation across the online–offline nexus. Specifically, I have argued for the durability of prevalent (offline) ideologies in the construction of digital identities. Third, by focussing on a specific subcultural orientation, I have demonstrated that digital communities play a central role in the circulation of metapragmatic discourses. Whilst others have long acknowledged the role of media in processes of enregisterment (Agha, 2007; S. Gal, 2018, 2019), this analysis demonstrates the need to consider how online communities and users contribute to and participate in this process. In this case, Hun culture not only reinforces existing stereotypes of a specific demographic of women but also, through their circulation, Huns memes create new indexical and ideological links between the inferred person type and the linguistic styles, tastes, and social habits of White British working-class women. Consequently, I argue that if we are to fully explicate variable patterns of language online, then we must look beyond isolated conversations and interactions (c.f. Bamman et al., 2014; Eisenstein, 2015; Goel et al., 2016) to broader digital contexts of use to explore how features are enregistered, appropriated, and commodified as ‘digital styles’.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Middle-class, non-White, and/or male subjects are sometimes labelled Huns. However, they are only referred to as such as when they are seen to adopt stereotypically classed, gendered, and/or ethnic stances or habits associated with White working-class women or gayness. For instance, the flamboyantly camp Black British TV chef Ainsley Harriot is often seen to feature in Huns memes. As noted, only 26/1000 memes depict a male presenting subject. Finally, the age and regional background of the Hun is intentionally underspecified. There is variation in both the age and background of the meme subjects (e.g., Cheryl, Newcastle, 38 vs. Kim Woodburn, Portsmouth, 79).

² Although Gemma Collins may now be considered lower middle-class by virtue of her fame, she is a self-made celebrity having appeared on reality TV programme, *TOWIE*, which documented life in a working-class community in Essex (see Woods, 2014). Note also that the ‘GC’ aligns with Hun culture and has profited from adopting this identity, as evidenced by merchandise available on her website emblazoned with ‘hun’ and other catchphrases.

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