The Internet's "Transnational" Boyfriend: Digital (Re)presentations of Celebrity Men

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Abstract

This article explores online (re)presentations of famous men and masculinities, and the surrounding concept of "the internet's boyfriend". The work examines how such discourse is shaped by global dynamics, structural racism, an "economy of visibility", and demand for depictions of "difference." Drawing on studies of celebrity, masculinities, marketing, and digital culture, I analyse how three famous men who are publicly desired and/or admired are (re)presented in digital spheres—memes, videos, articles, and accumulative discourse. Focusing on (re)presentations of Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho, I scrutinise how famous men are transnationally remediated in ways that can reinforce, resist, and rupture Anglo-Western normative notions of desirable masculinity. Culturally specific and hybridised ideas, identities, and ideologies that are projected onto such men online reveal the entanglements of issues concerning sexuality, (non)whiteness, exoticisation, nationality, masculinity, celebrity, and global media. Although "the internet's boyfriend" is not always white, he is often someone who grew up in, identifies with, and is praised within, Western cultures. This article explicates how and why online (re)presentations of famous men in a transnational media landscape are couched in common narratives which include them being claimed as an (inter)national treasure, attractive to Anglophiles, and (re)presented as eccentric and exoticised Others.

Keywords: celebrity, digital, fandom, masculinity, race, the internet's boyfriend

Introduction

  This work explores online depictions and discourses of celebrity masculinities within a transnational landscape of connectivity which includes "media networks, commodity circuits, migratory and diasporic movements" (Simidele Dosekun 2015, 965), among other

transnational linkages. In the insightful words of Simidele Dosekun (2015, 965), the term

"transnational" can "refer to a critical mode of thinking across borders and thus thinking

across multiple intersections, forms, and sites of difference at once." I focus on

(re)presentations of Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho in memes, videos and

articles to examine the transnational nature of "the internet's boyfriend" and related

similarities and differences between famous men who are referred to as such. This involves

consideration and critique of how geopolitics, the hegemony of whiteness, and

Anglocentrism impacts the popular culture construction of "the internet's boyfriend".

Individuals going online to express their affection for famous men is nothing new. In

fact, such activity is part of the digital furniture of the virtual "home" called the internet. For

decades, people have been posting—and panting—online about their favourite popular culture

icons, and forging para-social relationships with celebrities (Catherine Grant and Kate

Random Love 2019; Jonathan Gray, Cornel Sandvoss, and Lee Harrington 2017; Su Holmes

and Sean Redmond 2006; Elana Levine 2015, Rukmini Pande 2018, Kristen J. Warner 2015).

Still, in recent years, increasingly blurred boundaries between so-called "user-generated

content" on social media and mainstream media output has changed how conversations and

conventions concerning celebrity and masculinity manifest in society.

Accordingly, I study online images of famous men and surrounding narratives of

masculinity, including the capacious concept of "the internet's boyfriend"—all shaped by

global dynamics, structural racism, an "economy of visibility" (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018, 2)

and demand for depictions of gendered and racialised "difference." Despite being prominent

in contemporary popular and digital culture, the socially constructed concept of "the

internet's boyfriend" has barely been considered in media and cultural studies scholarship, let

alone in ways that attend to how whiteness operates as part of it. In order to explore

associated issues, including transnational dimensions of online (re)presentations of famous men, first, I offer a brief history of "the internet's boyfriend."

The "brief history of the internet's boyfriend" section outlines significant cultural contributions that have seeded and steered connected commentaries, such as Danielle Henderson's (2012) creation of *Feminist Ryan Gosling*, and the emergence of the culturally impactful podcast *Thirst Aid Kit*—developed and co-hosted by Bim Adewunmi and Nichole Perkins—which deals with "the various ways women express their thirst, asking: Why do we desire who we desire?" (Thirst Aid Kit 2020). Next, I outline the methodological approach at the centre of this article, which involves a critical discursive analysis of online (re)presentations of Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba and Bong Joon-ho. Finally, observing "shifting formations of power" (Radha S. Hegde 2011, 1) around the world, I elucidate how and why online (re)presentations of famous men in a transnational media landscape are couched in common narratives which include them being claimed as an (inter)national treasure, attractive to Anglophiles, and (re)presented as eccentric and exoticised Others.

A brief history of "the internet's boyfriend" and his predecessors

Before investigating *who* has been publicly framed as "the internet's boyfriend", and who is alluded to as embodying the internet, it is vital to unpack what "the internet's boyfriend" *is*—a popular culture concept which symbolises certain present-day issues to do with gender and sexuality, online experiences and fandom, the politics of how and why celebrities are admired, and the changing nature of how celebrity is constructed and functions.

From feminist Ryan Gosling to "the internet's boyfriend"

What predates current discussions of "the internet's boyfriend" and online content virality includes the creation of *Feminist Ryan Gosling* memes by Danielle Henderson (2012). Such memes blended "tongue-in-cheek" popular culture humour with accessible academic theorising pertaining to gender and feminism. Just as Henderson mixed aspects of gender and feminist theory with popular culture, individuals around the world continue to toy with and remix the boundaries of celebrity, masculinities, social media, and critical online commentaries. Put briefly, *Feminist Ryan Gosling* (Henderson 2012) walked, so that "the internet's boyfriend" could run—and go viral.

Now, "the internet's boyfriend" are three words that capture and connote issues regarding idealised masculinity, fame, digital culture, and the market for humorous content that caters to the romantic, sexual and intimate desires of individuals who are attracted to men. To use the words of Sarah Grossbart (2018) for *E! News*:

> Maintaining Internet boyfriend status is a commitment. One must possess the requisite charm, maturity and authenticity with just the right amount of humility. Despite being a part of the "it" show/movie/album of the moment, they have to be accessible and while it's not necessarily mandatory that they be single, it helps to have an air of mystery surrounding their love life.

An *Insider* article—"Where are they now: 21 of the internet's favourite boyfriends" (Angélica Acevedo 2019)—signals the relatively temporary nature of many famous men's status as an "internet's boyfriend", which is consistent with an attention economy (José van Dijck 2013) that involves the media swiftly shifting its focus from one famous person to another. Whether it is using Twitter to express their adoration of the signature tresses of American and French actor Timothée Chalamet, or making memes to pay homage to the idiosyncrasies of South

Korean filmmaker Bong Joon-ho, people are (re)presenting famous men online in ways that reveal much about the transnational interconnections of media, desirability, sexual politics, and contemporary depictions and discourses of celebrity masculinities.

Taking heed of Lorraine York's (2018) scholarship, I regard celebrity as being "the phenomenon by which certain individuals develop a hyper-visible social persona" (York 2018, 1). The term "the internet's boyfriend" is typically used in reference to high-profile men who are a source of desire—broadly defined—which is extensively expressed online, including across social media and content-sharing platforms such as Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, as well as in articles and output produced by media organisations. Even a cursory internet search can quickly yield results that point to how the concept of "the internet's boyfriend" is as much about race as it is about gender and sexuality. Gabe Bergado's (2019) *Teen Vogue* piece—"Twitter's White Boy of the Month Meme is a Match Made in Heaven Between Celebrity and Internet Culture"—provides an incisive account of how famous, young, white, American men are embraced online and positioned as being "the quintessential boy next door for the age of memes." Relatedly, examination of "the internet's boyfriend" in my work can aid scholarly understandings of the impact of white supremacy on celebrity culture, including the entrenchment of whiteness as a norm that bolsters who is regarded as desirable.

From the whiteness of "the boy next door" to the cultural significance of Thirst Aid Kit

As Bergado (2019) highlights, the meme-ified celebrity "boy next door" whose image goes viral, is almost always a young, white, cisgender, heterosexual man. The familiarity and locality that such men are (re)presented as embodying when they are claimed to be "the boy next door" and/or "the internet's boyfriend", is often a direct result of the socio-cultural dominance of their identities and a structurally white gaze that associates whiteness with

safety and home. In other words, who is announced as being "the internet's boyfriend", or identified using the inextricably linked label, "white boy of the month", is suggestive of which types of men tend to be societally deemed as comforting, yet sexy, dependable, yet roguish—in ways that are inherently sculpted by the overlapping arches of race, gender, class and sexuality.

A key argument that underpins this article is that the concept of "the internet's boyfriend" is commonly mobilised in ways that promote desirability politics rooted in the dominance of whiteness and Anglocentrism. Although the construct of "the internet's boyfriend" may appear to transcend national borders online, it does not transcend white supremacy and geopolitical influences. Exploring related discourse concerning Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho helps to illustrate the transnational politics and racial dynamics of this genre of fandom.

Since the term "the internet's boyfriend" entered the zeitgeist it has been discussed at length online—"Keanu Reeves, mystery of the internet's boyfriend" (Peggy Drexler 2019), "A Complete Guide to 2019's Internet Boyfriends" (Christopher Rosa 2019), "If Noah Centineo Was The Internet's Boyfriend, Jordan Fisher is Its Husband" (Alex Zaragoza 2020), "Internet Boyfriends Vs. Internet Husbands: Where Your Famous Bae Fits In" (Emily Tannenbaum 2018), "Why are we so obsessed with making famous men our #internetboyfriend?" (Juliana Piskorz 2020). However, many discussions about "the internet's boyfriend", and adjacent expressions, do not examine how hierarchical global relations, white supremacy, and the transnational nature of media landscapes impact who is regarded as "the internet's boyfriend", why they are, and how their status as such forms.

Among those who *do* delve into the intricacies of the relationship between desire, celebrity, masculinity, and digital culture, in ways that attend to the type of power relationships analysed in this article, are Bim Adewunmi and Nichole Perkins. Adewunmi

and Perkins developed and co-hosted the podcast *Thirst Aid Kit*—which premiered in November 2017 (Mattie Kahn 2017), was produced by Buzzfeed until January 2019, and was picked up by Slate later that year (Sydney Scott 2019). *Thirst Aid Kit*, which garnered a strong and expanding following and profile, has been central to key current conversations about desire, sexuality, masculinity, celebrity, and digital culture.

Thirst Aid Kit offered its audience the chance to delight in simultaneously learning more about their celebrity crushes and the details of desire, while laughing along with Adewunmi and Perkins who served up commentary that was equal parts fun and sexual politics analysis. Thus, to examine transnational dimensions of "the internet's boyfriend" and digital (re)presentations of celebrity masculinities, I draw on the work of Adewunmi and Perkins. Additionally, I build upon online articles about "the internet's boyfriend" and generative research on "an economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 2), "the gendered politics of visibility in the context of globalization" (Hegde 2011, 1), "gender and relatability in digital culture" (Akane Kanai 2018), and various feminist media studies which deal with the interlocking qualities of issues regarding race, gender and "the deeply political and contradictory cultural logics of globalization" (Dosekun 2015, 926).

Critical discourse analysis of "the internet's boyfriend"

Focusing on the selective inclusion of "difference" in relation to "the internet's boyfriend" is crucial for understanding how whiteness and Westernness operates as a norm, even when certain differing men are held up as "boyfriend material." My approach to this topic is also informed by the crucial work of Safiya Umoja Noble (2018) which highlights how intersecting oppressions such as racism, sexism, misogyny, and antiblackness are reinforced via search engine algorithms and different types of online depictions and

visibilities, as well as Ruha Benjamin's (2019, 17) work which examines "how different forms of coded inequity take shape" amid the design and use of digital technologies.

An article such as this one could have focused on (re)presentations of many different famous men, in a quest to further understandings of how "the internet's boyfriend" works. However, the three men whose online (re)presentation is the focus of this work were chosen to disentangle transnational dimensions of "the internet's boyfriend", along with interconnected racial dynamics. Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho encompass a range of racial, ethnic, and national identities, in addition to varying degrees of stardom, and different ages—from twenties to fifties. Hence, examining how images of these men (Table 1.) and ideas about them circulate in relation to the construct of "the internet's boyfriend" presents ample opportunity to scrutinise aspects of this popular culture concept that are seldom studied in detail. The texts that were gathered and analysed include editorial pieces, social media comments and hashtags, videos, and digitally remixed content such as memes which relate to these famous men.

Name	Age	Nationality	More About
Timothée Chalamet	24	American and French (Dual)	Chalamet is an actor who gained recognition for his portrayal of Elio Perlman in Luca Guadagnino's film *Call Me by Your Name* (2017).
Idris Elba	48	British (also granted honorary citizenship in Sierra Leone in 2019)	Elba is an actor, writer, producer and musician who is particularly known for playing roles such as Stringer Bell in the HBO series *The Wire* (2002–2008), as well as DCI John Luther in the BBC One series *Luther* (2010–2019).
Bong Joon-ho	51	South Korean	Joon-ho is a South Korean filmmaker who gained recognition for films such as *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013) and *Parasite* (2019).

Table 1. Details about Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho.

Having been personally and professionally interested in the notion of "the internet's boyfriend" since it became a popular culture buzz term, especially from 2018 onwards (Bergado 2019), I have closely followed who is marked and marketed as "the internet's boyfriend of the month" on the pages of magazines, as well as who is praised as such amid social media and content-sharing sites. As a result, I am interested in how "the politics of authenticity on a transnational scale" (Anikó Imre , Katarzyna Marciniak and Áine O'Healy 2009) plays out as part of discourse on "the internet's boyfriend", such as in the form of ideas about perceived Frenchness (Chalamet), Britishness (Elba), and South Koreanness (Joon-ho).

As has been established, the concept of "the internet's boyfriend" and the myriad of editorial writing that relates to it is premised on the implied collective gaze and desires of people online who are attracted to men, yet, the concept of "the internet's boyfriend" is strongly linked to "feminine targeted cultural texts and practices" (Kristen Warner 2019, 169). As Figure 1. suggests, far from being a unified and fixed text that can be easily discerned, "the internet's boyfriend" is best understood as an assemblage of depictions and discourses that are continually constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed across digital terrains. Consequently, efforts to analyse "the internet's boyfriend" may considerably vary in approach—from examining online content and commentaries, to interviewing individuals about their thoughts and experiences of "the internet's boyfriend."
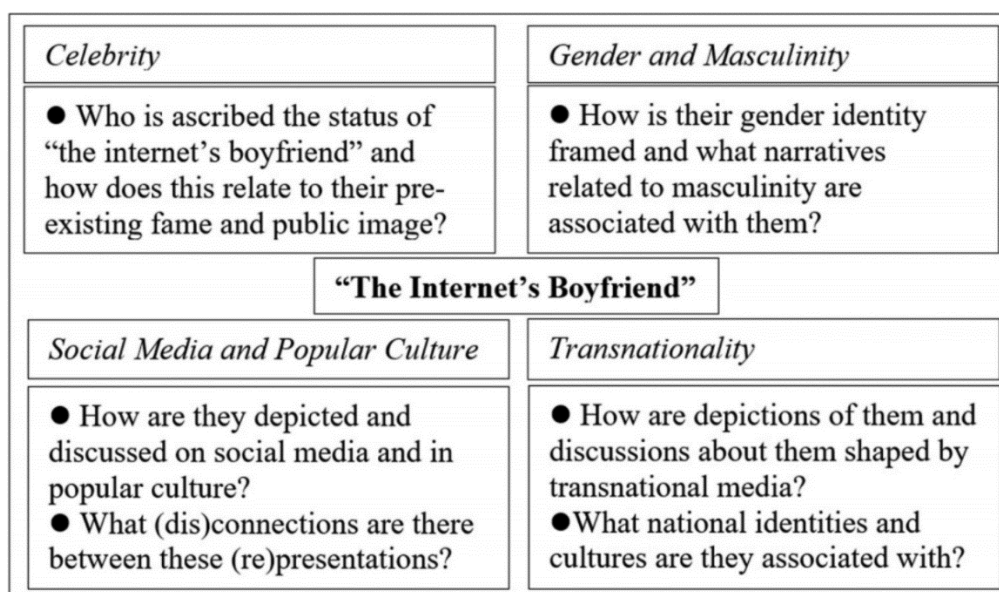
Celebrity	*Gender and Masculinity*
● Who is ascribed the status of "the internet's boyfriend" and how does this relate to their pre-existing fame and public image?	● How is their gender identity framed and what narratives related to masculinity are associated with them?

"The Internet's Boyfriend"

Social Media and Popular Culture	*Transnationality*
● How are they depicted and discussed on social media and in popular culture? ● What (dis)connections are there between these (re)presentations?	● How are depictions of them and discussions about them shaped by transnational media? ●What national identities and cultures are they associated with?

Figure 1. "The internet's boyfriend" assemblage

Due to my focus on online narratives that surround different famous men who have been ascribed the title of "the internet's boyfriend", and my interest in how such narratives connect to certain ideologies, this article is rooted in critical discourse analysis which can facilitate the study of celebrity and public perspectives of different gender identities and their visibility. This approach involves interpretive analysis of online material explicitly related to "the internet's boyfriend", and material that is specifically to do with online (re)presentations of each of the three men who are focused on in this work—Timothée Chalamet, Idris Elba, and Bong Joon-ho. The critical discursive analytic approach at the centre of this article is influenced by accounts of narratology. More precisely, it is shaped by Sarah Kozloff's (1993, 69) outline of how "we learn from narrative theory that every narrative can be split into two parts: the *story*, that is, 'what happens to whom," and the *discourse*, that is, 'how the story is told.'"

Cognisant of Kozloff's (1993) words, I also keep in mind that such a distinction between the story and discourse is "an artificial or 'theoretical' distinction" (Kozloff 1993, 69). Although narrative theory moulds how critical discourse analysis occurs in this article, I eschew a methodological approach solely based on narrative theory because due to how narrative theory often "concentrates on the text itself, it leaves to other critical methods questions about where the story comes from" (Kozloff 1993, 68) and its ideological premise. Given my equal concern with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when,* and *why* questions, I explore transnational dimensions of "the internet's boyfriend" via a critical discursive analytic lens which is attuned to ideological aspects of storytelling.

As is asserted by Mimi White (1993, 163), "[i]deological analysis is based on the assumption that cultural artifacts—literature, film, television, and so forth—are produced in specific historical contexts, by and for specific social groups. It aims to understand culture as a form of social expression." Treating "the internet's boyfriend"—and its many digital fragmented parts—as an ever-changing cultural text, I explore beliefs, values, and ideas at its core. I also account for how digital remix culture which involves people remixing, repurposing, and reframing digital content and commentaries (Francesca Sobande 2019), shapes the ongoing construction and deconstruction of "the internet's boyfriend".

Narratives surrounding "the internet's boyfriend"

"It's whatever you like": Timothée Chalamet as the (inter)national treasure

Where the words "the internet's boyfriend" feature, Timothée Chalamet's name and face often follow. Chalamet has spoken publicly about issues concerning masculinity on many occasions, such as in an *i-D* (2018) interview with singer and songwriter, Harry Styles, for an issue which Chalamet graces the cover of—accompanied by the words "mad about the boy".

Boyhood is a thematic thread that is woven through many of the films that Chalamet is known for, including Felix Van Groeningen's *Beautiful Boy* (2019)—based on Nicolas Sheff's experience of drug addiction, as well as Luca Guadagnino's *Call Me By Your Name* (2017), "an instant object of cultish admiration" (Daniel Riley 2020), based on André Aciman's book which charts the development of an intimate relationship between a 17 year-old American-Italian Jewish boy (Elio Perlman) and a 24 year-old American Jewish scholar (Oliver) who spends the summer with him and his family.

Notably, since playing the part of Elio in *Call Me By Your Name*, who experiences heartbreak after his short-lived relationship with Oliver ends, Chalamet's masculinity has been the subject of a lot of writing, such as the article, "How Timothée Chalamet is ushering in a new era for masculinity" (Douglas Greenwood 2019), as well as "The Making (and Remaking) of Timothée Chalamet" (Riley 2020) which refers to Chalamet as having "been transformed into the rarest of pop confections—fawned over by younger women, older men, and every demographic in between".

In Chalamet's (2018) own words in his *i-D* interview with Harry Styles, "there isn't a specific notion, or jean size, or muscle shirt, or affectation, or eyebrow raise, or dissolution, or drug use that you have to take part in to be masculine." Chalamet has been ascribed an "emotional vulnerability" and praised for adorning clothes that are apparently a part of "gender-fluid fashion" (Greenwood 2019), despite his style often being anything but dramatically dissimilar to conventional luxury "menswear". At times, Chalamet's on-screen portrayal of teenage Elio exploring his sexuality during a 1980s summer in Italy is misinterpreted as reason enough to suggest that he embodies a non-traditional and non-heteronormative form of masculinity. Chalamet's assumed similarities to his on-screen character, Elio, are perhaps heightened due to the fact they are both connected to France and America, but beyond that there is little to suggest their similarity.

In addition to publicly speaking about matters regarding masculinity, Chalamet has addressed many questions pertaining to his French and American background, commonly with jest and humour. Ordinarily, "national treasure" is a term used to refer to someone or something that is identified as being a certain country's source of pride. In this article, I use the term "(inter)national treasure" in reference to Chalamet, to account for the combined effects of the transnational nature of media and his fandom, and his dual nationality (American and French).

A multitude of memes, videos, and articles convey how the 24 year-old actor's perceived Frenchness has been positioned by admirers online, globally, as attractive and a source of intrigue. Chalamet is marketed as being both the American hipster "boy next door" (Bergado 2019) and the emerging Hollywood icon who embodies a quintessentially French chicness. Such positioning in media is, at least partly, dependent on the marketability and dominance of whiteness and Anglo-Western identities in much of popular culture.

Chalamet is framed as being a comfortingly self-deprecating character who frequently makes time for fan photos, wherever he is, while also being positioned as alluringly "different" —arguably, partly due to how his dual nationality is depicted and discussed in ways that allude to him being a coveted "(inter)national treasure" that is perceived as embodying authentic markers of French sophistication and Europeanness. Chalamet's identity as American and French can be understood as a source of social capital that contributes to the construction of his unique celebrity image. This is not to suggest that Chalamet is societally exoticised, far from it. Rather, Chalamet cuts a familiar and normative shape in Hollywood, as a young, white, cisgender American man, while also being regarded as embodying a Frenchness and European sartorial flare that fixates the transnational media and fandom that follows him.

Chalamet has been captured on screen on many occasions while being asked what the correct pronunciation of his name is. When featuring on The Graham Norton Show in 2019, in response to Norton asking about how to pronounce "Timothée", with a smile, Chalamet replies "it's pronounced whatever you like", and the audience erupts into laughter. After Norton elaborates on his question and again offer's Chalamet his understanding of how to pronounce "Timothée", the actor agreeably says "it's supposed to be [pronounced like that] but you can say 'Doug', 'Alex', 'Rick', whatever works." Chalamet's whiteness shields him from the racist and xenophobic critique that racialised famous men may face when articulating the correct pronunciation of their name. Furthermore, Chalamet's flippant approach to whether people use the French pronunciation of his name, and the framing of his disinterest in this as charming, exemplifies the Anglocentrism that is often at the centre of admiration of famous men identified as "the internet's boyfriend".

Currently, a clip of the aforementioned British television moment on The Graham Norton YouTube channel has over 5 million views. The 1,026 comments beneath the video include many which suggest that, to some, part of Chalamet's charm is his dual French and American background, his fluency in French and his pride in where he is from, paired with his casualness concerning how people pronounce his distinctly French name. All of this is part of why he, and by extension his masculinity, is portrayed as being somewhat "different", regardless of the relatively normative nature of his social positionality and physical appearance.

Within an "economy of visibility" (Banet-Weiser 2018, 2) spurred on by demand for marketable depictions of "difference", especially depictions that do not disruptively deviate from established norms to a radical extent, Chalamet's stardom ascends. Chalamet is the knowable LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts alum, whose teenage rap "Statistics", dedicated to a teacher, has racked up over 6 million YouTube views. He is

also the high-profile, not quite all-American celebrity, at the centre of numerous YouTube videos of minutes to hours of footage of him speaking French. Moreover, Chalamet is a star whose sporadic social media use fosters an enigmatic quality, which is heightened by his friendship with elusive celebrities including singer, songwriter and producer, Frank Ocean. As is written in *i-D* (2018), "[t]he internet is obsessed with him. There are hashtags dedicated to documenting his every move; from #timotheechalametdoingthings to #timotheechalamethair."

For now, Chalamet's longevity as "the internet's boyfriend" shows no signs of ceasing, partly due to how he is (re)presented online as epitomising the nexus of Americanness, Frenchness, and a masculinity ambiguously marketed as modern and different without explicitly articulating or expressing a sense of queerness. Chalamet continues to be at the heart of articles such as "'The next Leonardo DiCaprio.' Inside the rise of the Internet's boyfriend, Timothée Chalamet" (Jessica Stavely 2020), which refers to his childhood in New York City's Hell's Kitchen, his paternal French background, and is peppered with statements such as "[t]he actor, who is fluent in English and French." Overall, Chalamet is an "(inter)national treasure", who has been celebrated in France, America and further afield. He is (re)presented as embodying a so-called "new masculinity, one that's sensitive, thoughtful, creative and unafraid" (*i-D* 2018), but also one which no matter its potential to challenge restrictive gender conventions—and which is very much yet to be determined—is an idealised masculinity located within the normativity of his whiteness.

"why dissect us any further…?": Idris Elba, Anglophilia and (trans)national Blackness
The racial dynamics of "the internet's boyfriend" are not solely constituted by the dominance of whiteness. Among the many "internet's boyfriends" who are not white is Idris Elba—a Black actor from England who has found global fame. Elba, who is 48 years-old, has been

the focus of digitally remixed content and social media threads around the world that communicate a sense of adoration for the actor, who is best known for his portrayal of Russell "Stringer" Bell—second-in-command to drug kingpin Avon Barksdale in the US HBO series *The Wire*. As well as being identified as "the internet's boyfriend" in articles such as "How the Internet Picks Its Boyfriends" (Sulagna Misra 2019), Elba has been referred to as being part of "the internet's husband" club—a category used to identify distinguished famous men who are already married and are understood to be one of several objects of the internet's collective affection. While many of Elba's traits have been highlighted as a source of attraction by people online, one of these is his British—more specifically, London—accent, which is a component of his overall transnational charm.

The "Anglophenia" section of the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) America website includes an article about Elba, titled "10 Idris Elba Moments that Rocked the Internet." The existence of such an article in this section of the website demonstrates how, for some, part of Elba's intrigue and appeal is embroiled in Anglophilic tendencies—people's admiration for England and its perceived culture. To acknowledge this is not to discount the wide range of reasons for people's attraction to Elba, including his acting skills, physical appearance, and personality. Instead, acknowledging how Elba's national identity, accent and proximity to England function as part of how he is held up as "the internet's boyfriend" and "husband", enables an understanding of the global dynamics of digital depictions and discourses of celebrity masculinities.

As "the concept of Britishness is often equated with experiences in England, with little to no connection to those in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, I choose to observe differences between the notion of being British and being in Britain" (Francesca Sobande 2020, 7). Further still, due to how Black identity is often "constituted as the mutual opposite of English and British identities" (Jacqueline Nassy Brown 1998, 291), Elba's Blackness

means that his identity may be perceived as differing from the archetypal Britishness that is commonly conveyed in various media and popular culture contexts. At times, Elba's Englishness is treated as a novelty, as is insinuated by the aforementioned "Anglophenia" article. Considering how Elba's specific identity as a Black man from Britain is deconstructed and reconstructed in this digital cultural context also facilitates examination of the interconnections of racial and global dynamics in relation to how "the internet's boyfriend" comes together and is picked apart.

In 2015, Elba was tipped to be one of several actors being considered for the role of James Bond/007 in forthcoming films. Although some delighted in this prospect, English novelist and screenwriter, Anthony Horowitz, critiqued the suggestion on the shoddy basis that he thought Elba would be "too street" to do the fictional part justice (Lanre Bakare 2015). Such comments rightly sparked criticism of Horowitz and the anti-Black notion that Elba was "too street". Referring to this moment as part of discussion of Elba's "internet boyfriend" status is important as it exemplifies how due to the legacy of colonialism, empire, and antiblackness (Kwesi Owusu 2020), Black identity is often societally constructed and communicated as existing in direct opposition to Britishness (Nassy Brown 1998; Sobande 2020), or in this specific case, Englishness.

As a Black man from Britain who has achieved a global level of fame, particularly as a result of his involvement in US movies and television shows, Elba's embodied and spectacularised identity is one that others may be quick to collapse the nuances of, and is an identity onto which they may project their perceptions of what constitutes so-called authentic Blackness, Englishness, and masculinity. After all, the dominance of "[a] biased imperialist white-supremacist patriarchal mass media" (bell hooks 2004, 27) results in an ongoing and overwhelming number of stereotypical, derogatory, and anti-Black media representations and narratives regarding Black masculinity.

In 2017, Idris Elba responded to actor Samuel L. Jackson accusing Hollywood of giving Black actors from Britain preferential treatment in comparison to Black American actors. Both Jackson's accusation and Elba's response illuminate the interrelated nature of some issues regarding nationality, Black identity, celebrity, and the employability and industry appeal of actors. Jackson's words on the matter include the statement: "Some things are universal, but everything ain't." Elba is cited as saying in response: "We are dissected as a people; why dissect us any further…" (Essence 2017). Such discussions and debate, regardless of the difference of opinions involved, reflect the difficulties that Black actors can face concerning their potential homogenisation within the industry. Put another way, when analysing discourses of celebrity men and masculinities, and accounting for how race factors into this, there is also a need to be alert to how other factors such as national and cultural identity complicate how famous men are represented and understood transnationally.

Having been appointed an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the 2016 New Year Honours for drama, Elba has been publicly recognised by, arguably, the most quintessentially British institution—the royal family. This illustrates how in addition to being praised in the US, he is regarded as some sort of "national treasure" in Britain. In a similar way to other actors from Britain such as Benedict Cumberbatch, David Tennant and James McAvoy, Elba's national identity is sometimes referred to as part of online accounts of people's attraction to him—highlighting how despite the term "the internet's boyfriend" lacking reference to specific nationalities and cultures, the national and cultural identity of the famous men identified as "the internet's boyfriend" may be part of their transnational appeal. Examples of this include how images of Idris Elba surface on social media accompanied by hashtags such as #Britishbae and #BlackBrit, as well as *Thirst Aid Kit's* (2020) use of the hashtag #ScottishBae in reference to James McAvoy.

Social media commentaries that communicate desire for Elba in a way that explicitly refers to both his Black identity and his British background, reveal how despite the term "the internet's boyfriend" implying the universal appeal of a person, the particularities of associated famous men's interlocking racial and cultural identities may be central to their attractiveness. How such a celebrity is (re)presented can reveal who is being framed as "the internet" and can involve "an invitation to mutual recognition" (Kanai 2018, 2) between people online, in ways connected to race, as well as "gender and relatability in digital culture" (Kanai, 2018).

In numerous memes depicting Elba, featured words hint at the intended audience of the content being a non-white one, and sometimes, specifically, a Black audience. One meme features a smouldering image of Elba and opens with the "Hey Girl…" line that was a signature of *Feminist Ryan Gosling* (Henderson 2012). The text on the meme continues as follows: "I'll massage that coconut oil into your scalp tonight. I just want you to be happy" (B. Wright 2014). In memes such as this one, which features as part of a blogpost about "Natural Hair Humour", the intended audience seems to be Black women. Although Elba continues to be referenced as part of myriad online articles about "the internet's boyfriend", and which do not tarry with who is being considered as "the internet", Black people are creating and sharing content online which does not simply suggest the universal appeal of famous men such as Elba. Instead, some of such content articulates his attractiveness in a way that also foregrounds desires that are tied to a Black gaze—alluding to the notion that not only is this "internet's boyfriend" Black, so too is "the internet" that gazes at him longingly. Consequently, such content challenges the normativity of digital whiteness (Hobson 2008) which undergirds much discourse concerning "the internet's boyfriend."

The scholarship of Radha S. Hegde (2011, 1) affirms how "the gendered subject of globalization, far from being self-evident or transparent as often assumed, has to be situated

within shifting formations of power." Such a statement is applicable to how Elba's identity as a Black man from Britain, and one of many men on an ongoing list of "the internet's boyfriend", is understood. Having found fame in the globally dominant US, where other Black men from Britain such as Daniel Kaluuya also have, Elba is an actor whose star image and its reception is affected by the structural power of Britain and the US, and connected "[g]lobal flows of media technologies, migration, and the unfettered mobility of capital' (Hegde 2011, 2) which "rework old logics of domination in new global forms" (ibid).

Certain perceptions of Elba's desirable masculinity as a Black man from London who has made it onto a world-wide celebrity stage, are infused with Anglophilic sentiments that are, at least, in part, a by-product of England's global power, and, I argue, "the special relationship that exists between these two countries" (Elke Weissmann 2012, 3) regarding the media industry, popular culture, and much more. Perhaps, were Elba a Black man neither from the US nor Britain, his status as "the internet's boyfriend", a title predominantly applied to men who grew up in North America or Europe, may never have surfaced.

"We stan a weird and talented king": Bong Joon-ho and eccentric and exoticised Others
Far from being an official title that is bestowed on an individual by a single institution, "the internet's boyfriend" are three words that have featured as part of claims about many famous men that people are attracted to. One person's choice of men worthy of the term "the internet's boyfriend" may drastically differ to another's. Even so, some famous men, especially those whose physical appearance corresponds with the white and Eurocentric standards of beauty that Hollywood upholds, have more commonly been claimed as "the internet's boyfriend" than others.

One name that has scarcely appeared alongside the words "the internet's boyfriend", but, has featured as part of discussion of an adjacent term, is Bong Joon-ho. The 51 year-old

South Korean filmmaker gained recognition for films such as *The Host* (2006), *Snowpiercer* (2013), and, most recently, *Parasite* (2019). Shortly after Joon-ho winning four Academy Awards for *Parasite* (2019) and participating in extensive global press activity accompanied by an interpreter (Sharon Choi), there was an abundance of online articles proclaiming Joon-ho's status as "the internet's new hero" (Nicole Gallucci 2020). Although "the internet's new hero" does not connote romantic and sexual desire with the same gusto as "the internet's boyfriend", it can be interpreted as a related concept rooted in online (re)presentations of celebrity masculinities, and the explicitly gendered notion of heroism (Francesca Sobande, Laetitia Mimoun, and Lez Trujillo Torres 2020).

Joon-ho's "internet's hero" status, and how it is devoid of the romantic and sexual sentiments of "the internet's boyfriend", may be impacted by the fact that as a 51 year-old South Korean man, he is far from being the typically white, and almost exclusively, Western, young "internet's boyfriend" archetype. Unlike the cute, and sometimes condescending, quirkiness that Joon-ho tends to be portrayed as embodying, some famous men of a similar age, who have also been portrayed online as quirky, have been depicted in ways that explicitly sexualise them and frame them as "the internet's boyfriend." Individuals such as 67 year-old American actor, Jeff Goldblum, and 48 year-old American actor and singer-songwriter, Jared Leto, have been referred to as "the internet's boyfriend" and have been (re)presented online as being both eccentric and sexy. Admittedly, unlike Joon-ho, who is social media averse, both Goldblum and Leto actively use social media as part of their self-representation, which may contribute to their visibility and control over their self-image in a way that aids their status as "the internet's boyfriend." Nevertheless, it is worth taking seriously the possibility that Joon-ho's exclusion from "the internet's boyfriend" club, and his inclusion in the adjacent category of "the internet's hero", is based on hierarchical global relations and the dominance of both whiteness and Anglocentrism.

The media framing of Joon-ho is, at times, shaped by Orientalism (Said 1978) which involves the production and consumption of discourses and depictions of people who are located outside of Western contexts, but in ways that ultimately uphold a Western gaze influenced by colonialism, imperialism, xenophobia, and racism. Many "[p]hotographs on digital platforms including Instagram or Facebook have been criticized for reproducing historical patterns of exoticization, exclusion and commodification of Otherness…after all, consumer culture is a site, source and outcome of racism and the impact of colonial legacies" (Francesca Sobande, Alice Schoonejans, Guillaume D. Johnson, Kevin D. Thomas, and Anthony Kwame Harrison 2020).

Joon-ho's humility, humour, and perceived eccentricity is touched on in articles about him being "the internet's hero": "People can't seem to get enough of the director's achievements, along with his humble, hilarious, and extremely chill personality" (Gallucci 2020), "we stan a weird and talented king" (Mashable Videos 2020). Joon-ho's allegedly weird idiosyncrasies have been discussed at length online, deconstructed in memes, and Joon-ho is cited as saying of himself "I'm just a very strange person." Claims of Joon-Ho's eccentricity may be warranted and partly spurred on by his own comments about himself, but it is imperative to recognise how when he is (re)presented via a structurally white and Western media organisation, Joon-Ho's image as eccentric may be inextricably linked to exoticising and Orientalist stereotypes, such as that of the inscrutable and odd non-Western Other who sparks the curiosity of Westerners (Said 1978).

Despite the term "the internet's boyfriend" implying the potentially universal nature of desire for the person who is referred to this way, and despite the transnational media landscape that images of famous men exist in, the notion of "the internet's boyfriend" is distinctly tied to Anglo-Western popular culture—within which prevailing perspectives of idealised masculinity and men's desirability are propelled by a structural penchant for

whiteness and Westernness. In sum, not all who are referred to as "the internet's boyfriend" are white, as is indicated by Idris Elba's inclusion, but most referred to as "the internet's boyfriend" grew up in, identify with, and are praised within, Western cultures. Therefore, in comparison to both Elba and Chalamet, individuals such as Joon-ho are much less likely to feature as part of digital discourse concerning "the internet's boyfriends", and instead, may be objectified and (re)presented as an exoticised and odd character that is a source of fascination.

Concluding discussion

This article explores the cultural politics of international fandom, global hierarchies of celebrity and the role whiteness plays in the discursive formation of "the internet's boyfriend". Such work offers analysis that relates to how elements of digital culture and the nature of global media flows might reproduce racist and Orientalist discourses (Benjamin 2019; Noble 2018), including in ways connected to the collective yet culturally contingent construction of "the internet's boyfriend".

The culturally specific background of famous men such as Timothée Chalamet and Idris Elba can considerably contribute to their celebrity appeal in different countries, as well as how (re)presentations of them circulate transnationally as part of discussions and depictions of "the internet's boyfriend". Amid aspects of the US media industry, including television drama activity, "the Anglophile discourses of the US cultural elite" (Weissmann 2012, 94) fuel the visibility and celebration of actors such as Elba—whose status as one of "the internet's boyfriends" transcends the borders of Britain and the US. Both Chalamet and Elba have been embraced as "the internet's boyfriend" in ways inherently tethered to what their identities are interpreted as embodying regarding masculinity—specifically, Black British masculinity in Elba's case, and an allegedly "modern" masculinity in Chalamet's—as

well as national and cultural identity. In different ways, both the celebrity image of Chalamet and Elba yield depictions of men, and narratives of masculinity, that cater to an "economy of visibility" (Sarah Banet-Weiser 2018, 2) and demand for images of gendered and racialised "difference."

The "Weird Crushes" deck of 55 "Hollywood Hunks" cards is a recent product implicitly tied to the notion of "the internet's boyfriend" and which is revealing regarding which famous men tend to be publicly desired. Of the 55 men who feature on the cards, only 7 do not seem to be white, 51 are North American and 2 are from Britain (England and Northern Ireland). While Elba's identity as a famous Black man from Britain departs from the overwhelming normativity of the whiteness of masculinities idealised in Hollywood, how it is often (re)presented involves an emphasis on his proximity to Englishness, which taps into the Anglophilic tendencies of globally influential US media, and may temper the potential of Elba being identified as disruptively and undesirably different to archetypal Hollywood heartthrobs. As a cisgender, able-bodied, heterosexual man, although Elba indeed faces anti-Black structural oppression, part of his appeal as one of "the internet's boyfriends" is that he does not deviate too far from the idealised masculinity script.

In a similar way to how Elba's celebrity image functions in relation to the notion of "the internet's boyfriend", although much online discussion depicts Chalamet as the face of a non-traditional "modern" masculinity, as a young, cisgender, able-bodied white man—who portrayed a character who is not heterosexual, but has not indicated that such a sexual identity is true of himself—Chalamet's identity is far from presenting a radical challenge to the masculinity status quo. However, partly due to how both Chalamet and Elba are portrayed as existing at the novel nexus of cultural backgrounds and influences—American and French, and British and American—their status as "the internet's boyfriend" may, to an extent, be

predicated on what they are thought to symbolise regarding globalisation and cultural hybridity.

To return to the words of Dosekun (2015, 965), "[r]elative to an all-encompassing notion of the global, the transnational implies asymmetries and incompleteness, flows not fixity, cross-cutting rather than uni-directional linkages". It is not only racist power dynamics that feed into who is identified as "the internet's boyfriend", there are also asymmetries pertaining to structural power between countries and cultures. The relatively globally dominant nature of Britain and the US translates into which types of famous men tend to be (re)presented as "the internet's boyfriend"— Timothée Chalamet and Idris Elba, and who tends to be excluded from such a category—Bong Joon-ho. It may be a reach to refer to the phenomenon of "the internet's boyfriend" as a form of soft international power, but, at the very least, the notion of "the internet's boyfriend" and who these words are used in reference to, may reveal as much about global and racist power relations, as it does about which famous men are flavour of the month.

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