The neoliberal university and the neurotic academic: A textual analysis of ITV Drama *Cheat.*

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Abstract

Through a textual analysis of four episodes comprising the ITV 1 psychological thriller *Cheat*, this paper explores depictions of the UK Higher Education [HE] landscape and of the lived experiences of being an academic in the television drama. We achieve this through a focus on the fictional HE institution where the drama is set – St. Helen's College – and the central character, university lecturer, Dr. Leah Dale, who is employed on a fixed-term contract. This paper engages with the following themes: Emotional labour; precarity of fixed-term contracts; and imposter syndrome. Insight gleaned through the textual analysis contributes to understanding of how academics might be navigating the neoliberal university. In particular, we highlight the implications of casualisation in HE and the fragility of identity which is experienced by some academics. As such, this paper goes some way towards remedying the deficit of scholarship on the lived experiences of being a contemporary academic.

Key words: Emotional labour; imposter syndrome; neoliberal university; precarity.

Introduction

The Higher Education [HE] environment has undergone seismic shifts in the last fifty years (Bruce, 2012). More changes are expected, as the Government's HE White Paper: *Success as a Knowledge Economy: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice*, redraws relationships between government, students, and research, which have contributed to the UK HE environment as we know it (Boxall, 2016). Through a textual analysis of four episodes comprising the ITV1 psychological thriller *Cheat*, this paper explores depictions of the current UK HE Landscape and of the lived experiences of being an academic in the television drama.

Cheat was broadcast on ITV 1 over four consecutive nights in March 2019. At the heart of the series is the toxic relationship between fixed-term university lecturer, Dr. Leah Dale, and final-year undergraduate student, Rose Vaughan, at St. Helen's College, a fictional institution, though filmed in Cambridge, UK, on the grounds of the prestigious HE institution: The University of Cambridge. The series begins poignantly, with Leah delivering a lecture to students on power and coercion. We quickly see the interaction between Leah and Rose as the latter is called into the former's office to discuss a case of academic fraud. Leah tells Rose that her dissertation feels *"different"* to her previous essays submitted in terms of content and style and asks Rose if she *"had some help"* in producing her dissertation. Rose quickly interprets this as an accusation of cheating. The series proceeds to track the relationship between lecturer and student as well as their families, blurring the lines between private and public spheres, before moving into a 'whodunit' type murder mystery – the fatality being Leah's husband.

Whilst the relationship between Leah and Rose is compelling and certainly deserving of academic inquiry, in this paper we focus on Leah, and her role as an academic navigating the so-called neoliberal university (the university as a market-driven system which employs modes of governance based on a corporate model; Enright, Alfrey & Rynne, 2017).

Though different in context and time, the last major serious (i.e. not comedy) work of film to focus on HE in the UK was – to the authors' knowledge – the 1983 film: *Educating Rita* (Gilbert, 1983), where a working-class Liverpudlian mature student (Rita) is assigned to an Open University supervisor (Dr. Frank Bryant – a long-time drunkard). During the film, the two central characters develop a close and complex relationship as they both struggle with imposter-like feelings – Rita amongst the younger, middle-class students, and Frank as a jaded academic unable to fulfil his wish to be a poet (for an academic analysis of working-class women as academics see Fraser, Michell, Beddoe, & Jarldorn, 2016).

As well as the relative absence of the HE environment in television documentaries, films and dramas, there is also "a striking dearth of work" (scholarship) on academic labour and the effects of the changes occurring in HE on academic staff (Baron, 2014; Gill, 2014, p. 12). There are notable recent exceptions however, such as Enright, Alfrey and Rynne (2017), who write on becoming an academic in the neoliberal university; and Loveday (2018a), on the idea of neurotic academics and modern university governance. *Cheat* therefore provides us with a rare opportunity to explore the current HE landscape, and how academics might be navigating this in a UK university setting. Our focus in this paper on the experiences of one academic is not problematic, since it has been widely documented that the experiences of academics have become increasingly individualised (Coate, Kandiko Howson & de St Croix, 2015; Gill, 2013; 2014).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, we provide an overview of the chang*ed* and chang*ing* UK HE landscape. We then outline our approach to the textual analysis of *Cheat*. In the substantive analytical section of this paper, we present findings around the themes of: Emotional labour; precarity of fixed-term contracts; and imposter syndrome. After a discussion of our findings, we conclude by arguing that insight gleaned through the textual analysis contributes to understandings of how academics might be navigating the neoliberal university. In particular, we highlight the implications of casualisation[1] in HE, and the potential fragility of academic selves.

The Chang*ed* and Chang*ing* UK HE Landscape

The UK HE system contains different types of university institutions known as (from oldest to newest): 'Ancient'; 'Nineteenth-Century'; 'Redbrick' or 'Civic'; 'Plateglass'; and 'Post-1992' universities. The majority follow a "Traditional" university constitution, which practice a greater degree of academic freedom, individual-led scholarship, and exclusivity of intake (especially true of 'Ancient' and 'Redbrick' universities). These are contrasted against 'Post-1992' universities, which are termed "New" and whose set-up and working practices are largely seen as more bureaucratic, more business-minded, and have intake from a wider section of the population, for example from different socio-economic backgrounds and ethnicities (Kok, Douglas, McClelland & Bryde, 2010, pp. 101-102; see also Huisman & Mampaey, 2016).

Long working hours, the intensification of workloads, the increase in expectation of academics to undertake greater pastoral and administrative responsibilities (Lawthom, 2015), and an exponential growth in student numbers (see Silverio, 2016) are common features of academia

[1] A move from a workforce employed on permanent contracts to one engaged on a short-term or casual basis.

as we now know it. All these aspects culminate in academia being "not a 9-5 job" (Sang, Powell, Finkel, & Richards, 2015, p. 235), though one that can constitute beneficial and productive working conditions (Siddiquee, Sixsmith, Lawthom, & Haworth, 2016). At odds with this, however, is the increasing uncertainty surrounding careers in HE, with 34% of UK academic employees working on fixed-term contracts (Loveday, 2018a), and direct funding to universities being dramatically decreased in favour of increased tuition fees paid directly by students (mostly through 'student loans' via Student Finance England; Bolton, 2019). The 'neoliberal university' is said to place greater interest in profit than intellectual concerns (Giroux, 2002). Further, it enforces universities, academics, other staff, and their students to be positively 'on brand' to meet the "relentless pressure to rise in ranking systems and to produce results that make them attractive for donors and businesses that want to cooperate with them" (Strenger, 2011, p. 148). There is evidence that the high-pressured nature of the HE environment can profoundly affect the wellbeing of staff, for instance resulting in stress and burnout (see Kinman & Wray, 2013).

The increased tuition fees, which came into effect for the September 2012 intake of students, following The Browne Review[2], meant all UK universities opted to charge fees at, or close to, £9,000 per annum (Browne, 2010). Emerging from the increased tuition fees is the "student consumer" (Naidoo & Williams, 2015, p. 208), protected by the Government's consumer protection law (see Competition & Markets Authority, 2015). With the increase in fees, prospective students have become increasingly savvy and compare educational providers on the student experience, university facilities, and graduate destinations, amongst other attributes, to ensure they receive the best value for money (Williams, 2013). The idea of "we're the customer – we pay the tuition" (Delucci & Korgen, 2002, p. 100) sees students demanding excellent products, exceptional customer service (Beaton, 2016), and top grades, or they will want to be compensated financially (Anderson, 2010). Other researchers (e.g. Bunce, Baird, & Jones, 2016; Lawthom, 2016) have documented that there is an expectation from students that lecturers must be increasingly available and respond promptly to student queries. There is also greater expectation in the quality of the lectures delivered, and lecturers are tasked with designing and delivering £135 lectures[3] (see Taylor, 2011).

The recent introduction by the Government of the Teaching Excellence Framework [TEF] in UK HE is related to the aforementioned increase in tuition fees, as institutions must now demonstrate they are offering students a high-quality education (Ashwin, 2017). The assessment criteria used to consider teaching quality include: Encouraging student engagement; the institution valuing teaching; ensuring courses involve rigour and stretch; and providing effective student feedback (Ashwin, 2017). With TEF, the UK Government aims to build a culture where teaching has equal status with research (Department for Business, Innovation & Skills, 2015). Pressures from both the Research Excellence Framework [REF] (the UK's system for assessing the excellence of research in HE institutions) and TEF, related to heavy workloads and increased administration, have contributed to stress and anxiety amongst HE lecturers (Darabi, Macaskill, & Reidy, 2017). This stress and anxiety may be heightened in situations of employment uncertainty.

[2] The Browne Review was a review to consider the future direction of higher education funding in England. It was launched in 9th November 2009 and published its findings on 12th October 2010.

[3] This is an approximate calculation from Taylor (2011) based on £9000 tuition fee, divided by the number of contact hours per week multiplied by the number of teaching weeks in a year, i.e. £9000 ÷ (No. Contact Hours × No. Teaching Weeks).

Whilst, as noted above, temporary employment is relatively common in academia (Waaijer *et al.*, 2017), precarious academic employment and gender have previously been discussed as going hand-in-hand by UK-based female academics (e.g. Crimmins, 2016; Stringer, Smith, Spronken-Smith, & Wilson, 2018). In this paper, we are particularly concerned with what Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen (2016) describe as the neoliberal production of anxiety in HE. Further, we explore Hall and Bowles' (2016, p. 33) description of university as an "anxiety machine" and consider whether the anxiety currently manifest in HE is "inherent in the design of a system driven by improving productivity and the potential for the accumulation of capital"; that is intentional, as opposed to an unfortunate by-product of marketisation.

Materials and Methods

In this study, we undertook a textual analysis of the four one-hour episodes comprising the series *Cheat*. To increase inter-rater reliability and the validity of the analysis, each episode was reviewed by all three researchers. Each episode was viewed as a unit of analysis (see also Carter, Bray, Keating, & Wilkinson, 2018; Wilkinson, Silverio, & Wilkinson, forthcoming for further examples of use of this analytical approach).

We used a coding grid to describe visual data and to record verbal data verbatim, documenting each episode number and the time of key moments. We produced a coding frame with two columns, the first 'the HE landscape' and the second 'academic self'. Abiding by this coding frame did not preclude "additional discovery-oriented work" within the episodes (Derry *et al.*, 2010, p. 16), as we noted any references which we did not consider to fit in the predetermined sections in a section headed 'Any other comments?'. There was a high degree of consistency between the researchers' observations. If there were any areas of discrepancy, the episode would have been viewed by the research team collectively as a means to guard against inherent bias, and to become reflexively more aware of any assumptions.

A brief note on positionality

Given the subjective nature of analysis of any kind, but particularly that involving a topic with which the researchers are embedded, we offer a brief note on our positionalities here (see Silverio's 2018, p. 39 discussion of his positionality as "a man in women's studies research"). The authorship team are all young (mid-late 20s) academics based at UK universities, comprising of two female Senior Lecturers at different 'Post-1992' ("New") universities on permanent contracts, and one male who is employed as a Research Assistant on a fixed-term contract at one 'Nineteenth-Century' university, but also holds an Honorary Research Fellowship at different 'Nineteenth-Century' university, and an Honorary Fellowship at a 'Redbrick' university – all of which follow a "Traditional" university model.. *Cheat* depicts an 'Ancient' ("Traditional") university. Each of the authorship team has current or prior experience of working on fixed-term contracts and the associated precarity.

Results

Herein, we present the results of a textual analysis of the series of *Cheat* around three key thematic areas, respectively: Emotional labour; precarity of fixed-term contracts; and imposter syndrome.

Emotional labour

Emotional labour refers to the management of feelings for the benefit of a successful service delivery (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004). Work intensification and emotional labour among

university lectures has been explored in existing research (e.g. Berry & Cassidy, 2013; Gibbs, 2004; Ogbonna & Harris, 2004) and was a theme in our analysis. For instance, in Episode 1, after a study session with students, Leah encourages students to contact her*: "with any thoughts, problems, questions"*. Here Leah can be seen to be playing to student expectations that lecturers must be increasingly available outside of taught sessions (Bunce, Baird & Jones, 2016; Lawthom, 2016). Further, this supports Barrett's (2004) argument that work associated with any given set of lectures or tutorials has additional, possibly out of hours, work attached to it.

Whilst one of the 'perks' of an academic career could be the ability to work from home for instance for marking, preparing lectures, and writing publications, this same flexibility can hold negative discourses (see Cloonan, 2004 for an unpacking of the notion of flexibility in UK HE). Throughout the series of *Cheat,* we see evidence of both Leah and her academic husband, Adam, taking work home with them; not just physically but also metaphorically, in terms of worries and concerns related to their work. Scenes include Leah and Adam discussing work and students at home; Leah and Adam sat on their sofas with their laptops out; Adam working on a grant application; and Leah with essays sprawled out over the sofa in the evening. Existing research has found that academics often work from home in non-labour time, such as evenings and weekends (e.g. Cannizzo & Osbaldiston, 2016). We also see that Adam and Leah have a dedicated home office (as well as offices at work). Barrett (2004) states the use of a home office further blurs the distinction between home and work. In Episode 2, we find out Leah is writing a book and has input in this from her father, a former academic (who recently retired from the same department and university where Leah now works). Interestingly, we only see Leah working on this book outside of the university setting (either at home or at her parents' home). This supports Cannizzo and Osbaldiston's (2016, p. 890) finding that pressure on academics to establish their credentials through quantifiable data, such as publications "causes notions of work/life balance to become porous". This also links to the haunting academic holy grail of "publish or perish" (Doyle & Cuthill, 2015).

Further, there is some evidence of Leah's social life suffering at the expense of her work; in Episode 2 we see Leah decline a lunch date with her friend, stating: *"I've got too much work on"*. Existing research has explored academic work/life balance (e.g. Cannizzo & Osbaldiston, 2016) and the idea that the flexibility of academia can lead to overwork and an academic being "on call 24:7" (Barrett, 2004, p. 99, see also Allmer, 2018). Kinman (2016), discussing overcommitment[4] in UK academics, finds that for academics, excessive involvement in the job role and a reluctance to disengage from it can threaten mental health.

In *Cheat,* we see evidence of Leah's mental health being pushed to its limit. Leah's husband, Adam, is aware that the pressure she is under has implications on their own relationship: *"can't you see you're projecting all your anxiety and stress onto this ridiculous argument"*; something which has been found to be a common occurrence across the UK HE landscape (Tytherleigh, Webb, Cooper & Ricketts, 2005). Further, we see Leah resorting to taking sleeping pills because she wants: *"Sleep… I just wanna sleep."*, thus, it could be seen that Leah is experiencing burnout (Kinman, Wray & Strange, 2011). Leah also visits her Doctor where an exchange of advice seeking and giving occurs:

> **Leah:** *I feel on edge all the time… errm… angry, yesterday I was so angry… I'm not usually like this.*

[4] Kinman (2016) draws on Siegrist's (2001, p. 55) definition of 'overcommitment' as: "a set of attitudes, behaviours and emotions that reflect excessive striving in combination with a strong desire of being approved and esteemed".

> **Doctor:** *You mentioned you were back on medication. Is that helping?*
>
> **Leah:** *No. Well… it's helping me to sleep, but, I-I don't know, I've only just started taking it so…*

The exchange continues with the doctor asking whether Leah had thought about couples' counselling, which she dismisses on the premise of her perception that *"Adam would never do it"*. The scene ends with Leah posing her Doctor somewhat of a rhetorical question:

> **Leah:** *I guess what I'm asking you is, if the person that you love keeps telling you that you're… neurotic… paranoid – at what point do you start to believe them?*

It is interesting that the use of the word neurotic is chosen by Leah (apparently afforded to her by her husband, although we do not see this exchange as viewers). We argue there are elements of Leah's character which do manifest as the "neurotic academic" (Loveday, 2018a, p. 154); that is, a figure who is governed through responses to the anxiety generated by employment uncertainly within an increasingly competitive sector (Loveday, 2018b), and thereby embody the contradictions at the heart of the UK's HE sector. Projection of Leah as irrational and insecure throughout the series of *Cheat* draws attention to the fragility of academic selves (Knights & Clarke, 2014).

Precarity of fixed-term contracts

In *Cheat*, Leah epitomises what Brechelmacher, Park, Ates, & Campbell (2015, p. 13) have described as "the rocky road to tenure". In Episode 1, Leah is approached by a male colleague, Stephan, who informs her that he would like to arrange a meeting soon for her probation appraisal:

> **Stephan:** *Nerve-wracking right? I remember that feeling*
>
> **Leah:** *Yeah, well I feel like I've been waiting for a permanent position for so long, I'm just really happy here.*

Later in the episode, Leah is seen discussing her position with her husband, Adam, and states: *"I've worked really hard to get here"*. It is worth noting that Leah appears to be of a similar age to Stephan, possibly older, and yet he talks about securing tenure as some time back. It is well-documented that women take longer to secure tenure than men (e.g. Blackmore, 2014; Kandiko Kowson, Coate and de St Croix, 2018).

Women in academia are reported to face many challenges to progress their careers, mainly related to gendered institutional cultures and practices (Howe-Walsh & Turnball, 2016), and more specifically an "elitist male and masculine academy" (Reay, 2004, p. 31). Some of these challenges are explored in *Cheat* through Leah, including that Leah and her husband Adam are trying for children later in life[5]. It transpires that Leah in fact does not know if she wants a child with Adam. Interestingly, King (2015), discussing female characters in horror and myth, notes older childless women are usually portrayed as bitter and resentful, but are usually seen as clever, for instance they hold some knowledge which is used against the main protagonist. In Episode 3, we learn that despite the confession of her uncertainty, Leah is pregnant. King (2015, p. 176) tells that "unwanted children" may be experienced as an "invasion". Yet we see evidence that not only women's, but also men's careers can be altered by childbirth (see also Sallee's 2014 discussion of tenure versus fatherhood). Adam, who has been working on a

[5] Although the age of the characters is not shared with viewers, Leah's character is played by actress Katherine Kelly, who is 39, and Adam's character is played by Tom Goodman-Hill, who is 50.

substantial grant which we hear about through the previous episodes, tells Leah: *"We got the grant… I turned it down because I want to be there for you and the baby".*

Throughout the series, the strain related to job insecurity is evident, particularly mentioned as a consequence of Leah's actions towards student Rose. For instance, in Episode 1, Leah is advised by her mum not to pursue her concern surrounding Leah's plagiarism for fear it may impact on her chances of a tenured position: *"Sweetheart, sweetheart, you are so close to securing this post… don't, don't rock the boat now. What's the point?"*. Other literature (e.g. Wilkinson, 2019) has also reflected on the fear of how negative feedback from students could halt opportunities for a permanent academic position. The reality of this comes to light in Episode 3 when we are told by Leah's colleague Stephan that discussions of making Leah's position permanent are being postponed owing to the ongoing situation with Rose:

> **Leah:** *What happens now, when will I hear about the permanent position?*
>
> **Stephan:** *We're going to have to delay talks about your position here in light of recent events surrounding Rose Vaughn.*

This brings to light issues of social rights and protections as well as continuity of employment, which are themes documented by other scholars researching in this area (see Laparra *et al.*, 2004; Lawthom, 2016), as well as, of course, the power students hold as consumers (Beaton, 2016; Naidoo & Williams, 2015) and resultantly academics' diminished agency.

Imposter syndrome

> **Rose:** *When you're on that podium where all those great people have been before you… you can just hear yourself talking. You're asking that question over and over again.*
>
> **Leah:** *What's that?*
>
> **Rose:** *Am I good enough? Do I deserve to be here?*
>
> **Leah:** *I know the answer to that question Rose. Do you?*

Imposter syndrome is a term coined in 1978 by psychologists Pauline Clance and Suzanne Imes in a discussion of high achieving women. It refers to a psychological phenomenon characterised by intense feelings of intellectual fraudulence and suggests that you believe your success was down to luck and that soon your lack of ability will be exposed (Clance & Imes, 1978). In Episode 1, Rose mocks Leah that she has only secured a position at the university as her father was an established academic who had previously taught at the institution: *"Do you really think it's a coincidence that you ended up teaching at the same university as your dad?"*. This idea of "luck, chance, and happenstance" has been reported as a perception of success amongst academics in UK HE (see Loveday, 2018c, p. 758).

Stage fright can be directly related to imposter syndrome, as it involves concerns about an individual's ability to deliver a performance convincingly (Marshall, 1994) and fear of being 'outed' for one's perceived incompetence (Scott, 2007a). A comprehensive analysis of how stage fright can was provided by Butler (1999, p. 17):

> Stage fright is probably a version of performance anxiety and this sudden burst of fear can be totally paralyzing when it occurs, but it is specific to people who give public performances, and may occur in those who are otherwise socially confident only when they have to perform.

This definition is particularly pertinent when assessing the HE landscape and both stage fright and performance anxiety have been documented in previous literature concerning university

lecturers, including lecturers' experiences of and students' perceptions of stage fright (see Scott, 2007b). In Episode 1, Rose tells Leah that she has noticed physical manifestations of Leah's nervousness, including a rash on her neck and the twiddling of her engagement ring: *"You get this red mark, here [points on her own neck]… you spin your engagement ring round on your finger, take a sip of water, trying to buy yourself a few moments"*. This 'nervous rash' has been documented in older literature reviewing teacher stress (see Kyriacou & Sutcliffe, 1977), and more recently in literature about women in HE (see Brabazon, 2014). While lecturers seek feedback from students on their performances (e.g. through student evaluation surveys), uninvited negative feedback may be unwelcomed. In proffering this unexpected and unwanted negative feedback (regarding Leah's stage fright) – which is tinged with truth – Rose had, in effect, 'outed' Leah (see also Wilkinson's 2019 discussion of being outed by a student). This exposed Leah's vulnerabilities and placed her on the backfoot as an academic to her student, leading her to question her significance in the academic system (Strenger, 2011).

Discussion

Our analysis has found that, in the depiction of a UK HE lecturer, the character of Leah demonstrates the potential fragility of the academic self. Whilst emotional labour is said to be both unrecognised and unvalued by university managers (see Barrett, 2004), it clearly exists in the current HE climate with work intensification and attempts to please the student consumer by delivering a successful service (Constanti & Gibbs, 2004). Through the character of Leah, we see feelings are being suppressed on the front stage, only to manifest at home. The very matter-of-fact depiction of Leah's emotional labouring could reflect how emotional labour is increasingly becoming part of the work of university lecturers, as explored in existing research (see Ogbonna & Harris, 2004). Heightening these emotions is the increased casualisation of academic contracts; a well-known effect of neoliberal reform in HE. Our analysis through the character of Leah has revealed the emotional pressure that precarity of fixed-term contracts can bring.

Related to Leah's questioning of why she has not yet secured a permanent position are pressures of perfectionism, increasing social comparisons, and a fear of failure. These are all suggested to contribute to imposter syndrome (Sakulku, 2011). Imposter syndrome has been well documented in the academy (Loveday, 2018c), ranging from research studying the incidence and impact of the phenomenon (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017; Parkman, 2016), to a specific focus on teaching evaluations (Brems, Baldwin, Davis, & Namyniuk, 1994). The character of Leah highlights the importance of taking imposter syndrome seriously, considering that imposter feelings can lead to increased levels of stress, burnout, and decreased job performance and job satisfaction over time (Whitman & Shanine, 2012).

When considering what Berg, Huijbens, and Larsen (2016) describe as the neoliberal production of anxiety in HE, the findings of our analysis suggest that, embedded in the precarity of employment; the pressure to perform; and demands to be on duty all the time, is anxiety. Our analysis of the character Leah does therefore lend some credence to Hall and Bowles' (2016, p. 33) description of university as an "anxiety machine", whereby emphasis on increased productivity is reliant on anxious and overcommitted staff. One implication of this, as shown through *Cheat*, is the blurring of the boundaries between work and home. Whilst Cannizzo and Osbaldiston (2016) note that is it widely unknown how academics understand 'life' in relation to their occupation, it is clear from both the characters of Leah and Adam that their working life spills over into their personal lives, and that the two have in fact become so entwined that they are almost inseparable. Existing research has also found the effort academics must put into their jobs can engender conflict between work life and home life (Winefield, Boyd & Winefield, 2014).

Conclusions

In this paper, we have presented findings from a textual analysis of the four episodes comprising the ITV 1 psychological thriller *Cheat*. We have made a step towards contributing to the "striking dearth of work on academic labour", as noted by Gill (2014, p. 12). Our analysis is focused on one short television series and we thus cannot claim it is an illustration of the broader lived experiences of academics working in UK universities. However, *Cheat* provided us with a rare opportunity to explore the UK HE landscape and a close focus on one academic navigating this. Further, we argued that this focus on the experiences of one academic is not problematic, since it has been widely documented that the experiences of academics have become increasingly individualised (Coate, Kandiko Howson & de St Croix, 2015; Gill, 2013; 2014).

Despite the conceptualisation of students as consumers in more recent rhetoric (see Emerson & Mansvelt, 2014), university lecturers do far more than deliver customer service. In particular, our analysis has shed light on the emotional landscape in current UK HE and the possible resultant fragility of academic selves. Further, this paper has drawn attention to the implications of casualisation in HE. Indeed, there were elements of the representation of the character Leah and the precarity she experienced which resonated with us as early career academics who have been, or are currently employed on, fixed-term contracts. The character of Leah thus enabled us to problematise the normalising of precarious work in UK HE, hopefully opening-up conversations about the impact of working conditions on academics at an individual level. Though the findings from this study cannot be generalised in the traditional sense, it is a first step in a much broader study into this topic, in which we welcome our colleagues to participate. We also hope that this paper will open up further fruitful conversations around the high levels of emotional labour involved in 'being' a university lecturer.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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