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## **“We achieve the impossible”**

### **Discourses of freedom and escape at music festivals and free parties**

**Griffin, C., Bengry-Howell, A., Riley, S., Morey, Y. and Szmigin, I. (in press).**  
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#### **Abstract**

In this paper we explore the notion of freedom as a form of governance within contemporary consumer culture in a sphere where ‘freedom’ appears as a key component: outdoor music-based leisure events, notably Music Festivals and Free Parties. ‘Freedom’ is commodified as central to the marketing of many music festivals, which now form a highly commercialised sector of the UK leisure industry, subject to various regulatory restrictions. Free parties, in contrast, are unlicensed, mostly illegal and far less commercialised leisure spaces. We present data from two related studies to investigate how participants at three major British outdoor music festivals and a small rural free party scene draw on discourses of freedom, escape and regulation. We argue that major music festivals operate as temporary bounded spheres of ‘licensed transgression’, in which an apparent lack of regulation operates as a form of governance. In contrast, free parties appear to “achieve the impossible” by creating alternative (and illegal) spaces in which both freedom and regulation are constituted in different ways compared to music festival settings.

Keywords: Music festivals; Free parties; Neoliberalism; Freedom; Regulation; Escape; Transgression

## Introduction

In this paper we explore how the psychological and social impacts of neoliberal technologies of governance through freedom might operate at outdoor music-based events, comparing participants' accounts of major music festivals and free parties, in which the experience of 'freedom' plays a central role. We analyse data from two related research projects involving participants' accounts of attending music festivals and free parties in England between 2006 and 2009. The first project on 'Managed Consumption' (the 'MC' study) examined the relationship between branding, consumption and identity for young people at UK music festivals and free parties.<sup>(1)</sup> The second study entitled 'Reverberating Rhythms' (the 'RR' study) used case studies of urban drum and bass clubs and a rural free party scene in the South-West of England to investigate social participation and identity in Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC).<sup>(2)</sup> These sites share common characteristics as public music-based leisure events involving substantial numbers of people congregating outdoors and consuming a range of legal and illegal substances. We argue that a new but under analysed discourse of freedom as a form of governance has emerged against the backdrop of substantial changes to the landscape of music-based leisure events related to increased commercialisation and restrictive legislation. Our analysis illustrates how those involved in different outdoor music events negotiate current forms of 'governance through freedom' as they deal with the demands of neoliberal subjectivity in contemporary consumer culture.

### *The problem of 'freedom' in the neoliberal order*

In contemporary capitalist social-democracies, 'freedom' is commonly associated with having freedom of movement, the freedom to express one's political views and beliefs, and to do what one wishes within the bounds of existing legislation and regulation. In the

context of 1960s counter culture 'freedom' was associated with escape from and resistance to forms of oppression (Cohen and Taylor, 1976). Leisure is commonly associated with the experience of 'freedom' when 'free time' is contrasted with waged work (see Rojek, 2010 for critique). Caruana and Crane refer to leisure as offering "the twin promises of liberation (freedom from) and license (freedom to)" (2011, p.1495), within a sphere that is heavily commodified in contemporary consumer culture.

Commodified leisure spaces enable participants to be "free from the constraints of daily living" to "behave in a way not governed by [the] conventional social norms and regulations that structure everyday life" (Kim and Jamal, 2007, p. 184). Such liminal leisure spaces provide opportunities for licensed transgression, as participants experience 'freedom' through a range of hedonistic practices that enable them to express their hidden – and more 'authentic' - selves (Kim and Jamal, 2007; Pielchaty, 2015). However, many social scientists have argued that contemporary consumer culture is fundamentally shaped by the forces of neoliberalism, in which such experiences of 'freedom' are constituted as obligatory displays that reflect a new form of governance (Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Neoliberalism has been defined as a form of political and economic rationality characterised by privatisation, deregulation and increasing individualization, involving marketization and attempts to 'roll back the state' from many areas of social provision (Gane, 2012). It has been understood as an ideology, a policy framework and through the lens of governmentality (Larner, 2000). In this paper we draw on Hall's work on neoliberalism as an ideological formation that shapes and transforms identities through discourse, and especially on Rose's argument that under neoliberalism 'freedom' operates as a form of governance (Hall, 2011; Rose, 1999).

Whilst it appears counter-intuitive to suggest that 'freedom' might operate as a form of governance, theorists of neoliberalism have argued that freedom is now increasingly constituted as an obligation, a marker of individual autonomy and distinctive selfhood that must be continually demonstrated and displayed (Cronin, 2000). Nikolas Rose conceptualises freedom as "a diverse array of invented technologies of the self" including technologies of consumption (Rose et al., 2006, p.100). In the leisure sphere, it is argued that the neoliberal project involves an obligation to express one's 'true' self, to display oneself as a free and autonomous being, *as if* unfettered by the constraints of waged work and traditional social expectations, with public displays of (bounded) pleasure, (calculated) hedonism and (managed) risk operating as evidence of one's freedom (Griffin et al., 2009a; Ringrose and Walkerdine, 2008).

Few analyses of Rose's notion of governance through freedom have examined how this might operate in practice, but a recent study of overseas experience working holidays (OE) amongst young adults in New Zealand argues when young New Zealanders feel most 'free' to plan their OE programmes, in practice they are most constrained by regulatory discourses and frameworks that shape what it means to go on a 'working holiday abroad' (Haverig and Roberts, 2011). That is, they are required to demonstrate, display and experience themselves as adventurous, 'free' travellers.

Most contributions to 'governmentality studies' have focussed on those who seek to govern, and the discursive practices of institutional bureaucracies (Bennett, 2013; O'Connor and Ilcan, 2005; Rose, 1999). The core dilemma of liberal governance rests on the reluctance to govern too explicitly and too much, set against the need to manage key issues such as security and public health (Valverde, 2013). Such systems of liberal governance have been brought to bear on the festival movement in the UK, operating in relation to older

countercultural discourses of freedom and escape for participants at outdoor music events (Anderton, 2009). Major music festivals are now highly commercialised bounded spaces in which the experience of 'freedom' is commoditised, subject to external and internal regulation. In contrast, free parties are unlicensed and mostly illegal events, involving only internally organised forms of regulation and commercial activity. However, it is not clear how the 'neoliberal subjects' participating in such events engage with, negotiate and resist the widespread marketization of outdoor music festivals.

### *A brief history of British outdoor rock and pop festivals*

Outdoor rock and pop festivals in the UK emerged during the mid- to late 1960s, influenced by the hippie counterculture of the period (Anderton, 2011). There has always been a blurred boundary between 'free' and 'commercial' festivals, but the early free festivals positioned themselves in opposition to commercial festivals, offering a freedom from the constraints of 'straight society' (McKay, 1996; Worthington, 2004). Such events were 'free' in several senses: the bands played for free, there was no entrance fee, no camping charge (indeed, seldom any tents), and minimal bureaucratic organisation. They required the active participation of festival goers, offering a more communal way of life as an alternative to highly regulated civil society and the growing consumer culture of the period (Worthington, 2004).

Early Free Festivals drew on utopian discourses, operated according to an ethos of self-governance and freedom from regulation (Laing, 2004). By the late 1970s the Free Festival movement faced increasingly restrictive and harsh policing (Worthington, 2004). The Free Festival movement was re-energised during the 1980s by an influx of politicised young people, influenced by the emergence of punk, feminism, environmentalist and anarchist politics, and opposition to Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government (McKay, 1996). The latter

introduced a raft of legislation in an attempt to regulate and restrict such activities, especially the counter-cultural ethos of 'freedom' represented by these events. The Local Government (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act of 1982 and amendments to the UK Public Order Act 1986 required festival organisers to obtain a public entertainment license from local licensing authorities, addressing any health and safety or public order conditions they imposed (McKay, 2004; Worthington, 2004). This was consolidated under the Licensing Act 2003, a controversial liberalisation of alcohol licensing regulation in the UK, which brought the performance of live music into the orbit of 'licensable activities', such that all live music events were required to submit Temporary Event Notices in advance (Rapley, 2006).

The Free Festival movement revived during the late 1980s and early 1990s linked to the emergence of rave and electronic dance music with its preference for ecstasy over alcohol (St John, 2002). This was followed, in the face of considerable opposition, by the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA), which curtailed the outdoor rave scene after the Castlemorton Common 'mega-rave' in 1992. The CJA included an amendment to the 1986 Public Order Act allowing police to ban groups of 20 or more people gathering over several days when amplified music is played at night (Worthington, 2004).

Now effectively criminalised, the Free Festival movement dissipated, shifting into the beginning of the free party scene, uniting urban dance music and what became known as the New Age Traveller community. Emerging from the EDMC scene in response to what many saw as the commercialisation of rave in the 1990s, early free parties were based on an ethos of freedom of expression and access (Rietveld 1998). It has since been increasingly difficult to stage large events lasting more than one day, but a small free festival and free party scene remains in particular areas of the UK (Morris, 2006; Lewis, 2006). In contrast,

the licensed outdoor music festival sector has become increasingly commercialised, with an international reach (Anderton, 2009).

*The regulation and corporatization of music-based leisure: The growth of music festivals as major branded events*

Whilst commerce has been bound up with festivals from the beginning (Laing, 2004), this is very different from the large scale commercialisation and corporatisation of the music festival sector that has occurred since the turn of the century (Morey et al., 2014). Most major festivals are now highly branded leisure events, with substantial levels of commercial involvement and relatively managed forms of consumption on offer (Morey et al., 2011). The corporatisation of the music festival sector reflects the near monopolisation of this industry by a few major transnational corporations, notably the global live music and events company Live Nation. Since launching inception in 2005 Live Nation now owns shares in the Glastonbury, Reading / Leeds and Big Chill festivals.

The corporatisation of the music festival sector has produced a market segmentation in which different events have enhanced their individual brands, investing heavily in 'boundary work' to differentiate them from other festival products. This process has brought rising ticket prices and significant changes to the demographic characteristics of festival-goers, who now span a broader age range and increasingly consist of white middle class consumers from the affluent ABC1 social bracket (Anderton, 2009). A number of smaller 'boutique' festivals have also emerged over the past decade aimed at affluent, middle class festival-goers, often combining musical performances with comedy, poetry, 'gourmet' food and other activities.

As contemporary tourist destinations music festivals are now important sites of consumption within Britain's experiential economy (Pine and Gilmore, 1999). The marketing



and mediation of major music festivals represents these events as promising freedom, excitement and hedonistic pleasure, alongside a powerful discourse linking music festivals with the countercultural ideals of 1960s hippie culture and the Free Festival movement. This is allied to the assumption that festivals should be free from commerce and from the regulation and constraints of everyday life. This discourse, which Anderton termed the 'countercultural carnivalesque', obscures the increased regulation of contemporary music festivals through internal security systems and external licensing regimes (Anderton, 2009).

These regulatory practices take a variety of forms. For example, many major festivals have a visible fence (some with watch towers and security guards), marking a clear boundary between the festival space and the outside world. Entering a festival site frequently involves queuing to show tickets and getting a festival wristband as a sign of authority to be on the site. Purchasing festival tickets requires access to the internet with rapid broadband speed and online payment systems. Individual tickets for a major music festival were priced at around £150 per person in 2008, including the cost of internal security and compliance with licensing regulations such as Temporary Event Notices.<sup>(3)</sup> Following deaths of nine festival goers at Roskilde in 2000, onsite security planning now gives increased attention to crowd control measures. There are also common restrictions on goods that can be brought into festivals (especially alcohol and illegal drugs), and searches on the gate. Festival goers also face restrictions on what they can purchase on site, with availability limited to alcohol brands with 'pouring rights' and franchises for specific brands of food and other commodities (Morey et al., 2014). In contrast, free parties have no formal internal security, no entrance fee, and they do not attempt to comply with licensing regulations (Morey et al., 2011).

## Method

Combining material from two research studies enabled us to explore the significance of 'freedom', escape and regulation for participants at free parties and at a range of commercial music festivals, from well-established events like Glastonbury with its links to the Free Festival movement, Reading Festival with its attraction to younger rock/indie fans, and the Big Chill, one of the first 'boutique' festivals aimed at older, more affluent consumers.

Glastonbury Festival originated in the Free Festival movement and 1960s hippie counter culture, hosted by farmers Ruth and Michael Eavis at Worthy Farm in Somerset since the first Glastonbury Fayre in 1971. Glastonbury Festival has a chequered history of bad weather creating muddy conditions, and people jumping over the fence to get in without paying. In 1979, the Eavis' set up Glastonbury festival as an explicitly commercial event with a strong fund-raising ethos. The Mean Fiddler organisation has provided increased security and fencing since 2000, and the festival is now owned and run by Glastonbury Festival Ltd. Since 2002, Festival Republic (a company combining Live Nation and MCD, an Irish concert promotion company) has managed the logistics and security of the festival with a 40% stake in Glastonbury Festival Ltd. The event now involves a five-day festival involving live bands, dance, comedy, theatre, circus, cabaret and other arts. The 2008 festival attracted over 125,000 people with weekend tickets at £155.<sup>(4)</sup>

The Reading festival takes place during August on a site close to the town of Reading in the South of England. Following its origins in 1971 linked to the National Jazz Festivals, it was renamed the 'Reading Rock Festival' in 1977, beginning a long association with heavy rock music and a predominantly white working class male fan base, becoming the 'Reading Festival' in 1987. The Mean Fiddler Group took sole ownership of the event in 1993, creating a parallel

festival in Leeds between 1999 and 2007. Both events were sponsored by the alcohol manufacturer Carling until 2007, when the Reading Festival was managed (and re-branded) by Festival Republic (Anderton, 2015). Now primarily associated with rock and indie artists, the festival attracted around 87,000 people in 2008, with a predominantly young, white and more middle class audience, and weekend tickets cost £155.

In contrast the Big Chill was a smaller and less obviously commercial event with its origins in rave culture.<sup>(5)</sup> The festival was started in 1994 by PK events, the brand behind ambient parties in London, becoming an outdoor music festival in 1995. The festival was held in August at a rural location in Eastnor Castle Deer Park in Herefordshire. PK events went into liquidation in 2009 and was purchased by Festival Republic, then re-branded as Big Chill Republic Ltd. The Big Chill targeted an older, more middle class and ethnically diverse audience than the Reading Festival. Employing the strapline 'more than a festival, it is a way of life', it was marketed as catering for both 'families' and 'ravers', providing an eclectic range of 'alternative' bands and DJs, including art, film, poetry and cabaret spaces, a Body and Soul field with alternative therapists, and stalls selling gourmet food. In 2008, the festival attracted 39,000 people, standard weekend tickets cost £155, with car parking an additional £7.50, and camper van tickets at £55.

Free Parties are mostly illegal events held in fairly isolated rural areas (for example, dis-used quarries, forestry commission or private farm land) or in unlicensed urban settings, such as empty warehouses. Party crews set up mobile sound systems to play amplified electronic dance music with repetitive beats, usually during a weekend, with an emphasis on dancing, hedonism and the use of recreational drugs (Riley et al., 2008, 2010a). The free party scene in South West England reflects the heterogeneity and flux of the national scene, with many distinctions based on musical genres (e.g. techno, psy-trance, drum and bass); locations and

settings (city/urban vs forest/rural); and an extended repertoire of dance drugs (Riley et al., 2008).

The data we present here involve informal group discussions with festival-goers and free party participants conducted between 2006 and 2009 during and after the events. Both studies involved ethnographic observation and participation, in which ABH and YM attended all three festivals in 2008. The Glastonbury and Reading festivals are surrounded by high metal perimeter fences, which contain the festival-goers and regulate access, but also demarcate these sites as bounded locations apart from 'ordinary life' (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). The Big Chill festival was held in a far more 'open' and secluded setting with no large perimeter fence. This festival appeared to have more in common with free parties, although tickets and access were monitored by security staff. Since free parties are generally illegal, they are often difficult to find and now increasingly organised via social media (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). The researchers spent a considerable amount of time finding out when parties were being held and then locating the party sites. Gaining access to free party spaces involved identifying and gaining the trust of free party organisers, whereas access to commercial licensed music festivals relied on swift internet access and financial resources (Morey et al., 2011).

Individual interviews and focus group discussions carried out for the 'MC' study included 8 participants at Glastonbury festival; 49 participants at the Reading festival; 35 participants at the Big Chill festival<sup>(6)</sup>; and individual interviews and a focus group with 9 participants attending free parties in the South West of England (see Table 1).

Table 1: Managed Consumption study participants

Research site	Females	Males	Age range	Average age	Total
Glastonbury	5	3	17 - 25	21	8
Reading festival	22	27	15 – 43	21	49
Big Chill	17	18	16 - 31	25	35
Free party scene	1	8	21 - 46	29	9

NB: All participants self-identified as white British

Data from the ‘RR’ study included interviews with 15 participants attending free parties in the South West of England; and interviews with 16 participants in a local urban drum and bass club scene (see Table 2). Data from this latter group were included because there was a degree of overlap between the rural free party scene and the local urban drum and bass clubs.

Table 2: Reverberating Rhythms study participants

Research site	Females	Males	Age range	Average age	Total
Free party scene	4	11	20 – 36	29	15
Drum N Bass clubs	5	11	21 – 41	27.5	16

NB: All participants recruited from the Free Party scene self-identified as white British. Of those recruited from Drum N Bass clubs, 1 identified as Black African, 1 as Black Caribbean, 3 as mixed heritage, 7 as white British and 1 as white Other.

The music festival fieldwork in the ‘MC’ study mainly involved informal group discussions on site. Interviews with free party participants in both studies were held in participants’ homes or other locations of their choosing due to the chaotic nature of these events and the extreme difficulty of conducting (and recording) group discussions in free party contexts. The free party participants recruited in both studies had a range of involvement in the electronic music and

free party scene, including musicians, DJs, promoters, party organisers, regular and less frequent partiers.

None of the participants in the 'RR' study received any form of payment, whilst those in the 'MC' study received £10 gift vouchers. All focus group data were fully anonymised, transcribed and analysed through several cycles of coding, moving from descriptive, in-vivo codes to more conceptual codes using a discursive form of Thematic analysis adopting a constructivist approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013). We identified and coded material in focus group transcripts related to notions of 'freedom' and 'escape' in the broadest sense, aiming to identify how and whether such terms were employed, and their meanings for our participants. Codes were given titles and descriptions, we then identified patterns across and between focus group transcripts that enabled us to connect these codes to wider social formations (following Gill, 2009). From this process we identified a series of themes that articulated our data in relation to our research focus.

## **Analysis**

### *"Wearing silly clothes": Freedom from judgement and surveillance*

For festival goers, 'freedom' was commonly constituted as a state enabled by the apparent lack of regulation at these events. In extract 1, festival goers at the Big Chill mobilise the discourse of promise in their accounts of hedonistic enjoyment represented by the ability to "wear silly clothes", "talk to strangers" and "roll around in fields" at music festivals. Such practices were enabled by reduced regulation ("less rules"), and a freedom from the usual social constraints, external surveillance and the critical judgement of others that would be expected in urban settings ("you can... do all the things that you can't do in the streets without catching a huge amount of attention").

Paul I think people really enjoy coming to a place like this because you can just totally open up and you can talk to strangers and you can roll around in fields or you can wear silly clothes and just do all the things that you can't do in the streets without catching a huge amount of attention. But if anything here it's the reverse, these things are erased and it's a good thing people want to walk around with silly clothes on, stupid hats [inaudible] it's the connection with each other

Neil Less rules

Int. Less rules?

Neil Yeah

Int. So in what sense do you mean?

Neil Well I mean people are just, people are just free

(Extract 1: MC study, 4 white males aged 22 to 26, Big Chill festival)

This discourse of spontaneous hedonistic pleasure and social connection enabled by escape from the restrictions of everyday life was also reflected in the accounts of participants at the Reading Festival, as in extract 2. The experience of 'freedom' was evidenced by a display of lost inhibitions ("anything goes") through references to wearing unusual or eccentric clothes that one would not or could not wear in outside the festival space. Dressing up in day glow clothes, tutus and other forms of fancy dress has become a pervasive practice at music festivals. Such liminal spaces offer participants the chance to "experience characteristics associated with the carnivalesque" (Pielichaty, 2015, p.235; Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010; Kim and Jamal, 2007), reflecting what Wickens refers to as the "perceived opportunities to be silly" offered by some tourism experiences (2002, p.838).

Grace: Hmm we dressed up as super heroes yesterdays and made songs about different things, it was great

Yvonne: Yeah and it was just to have a laugh and kind of get away

Cath: But it is like you're in a totally different world and you know anything goes like you know

Yvonne: Nobody cares about what anyone does and it's great

Cath: That's what it's all there for

Yvonne: And you see totally different sides to people, like this morning people will walk past you and they'll say nothing, and then comes the night time and it's, what's going on? It changes throughout the day doesn't it?

Grace: It's amazing, it's as if your inhibitions are lost, that's it.

(Extract 2: MC study, 4 white females and 2 white males aged 18 to 22, Reading festival)

Music festival spaces were represented as “a totally different world”, apart from everyday life and free from regulation, in which eccentric behaviour was expected rather than disdained. One's state of freedom could be displayed – and demonstrated - by dressing up super heroes and “wearing silly clothes”.

*Freedom from the 9 to 5: A temporary escape into a 'wacky weekend'*

The 'freedom' on offer at such events was also represented as a temporary respite from the responsibilities of life outside the festival space, associated with the conspicuous consumption of alcohol and illegal drugs. In extract 3, Patsy and Dave contrast the eccentric appearance of most festival goers with their “normal” lives as 9 to 5 employees who “work in a bank and wear a suit”. This discourse of temporary escape into hedonistic excess has many parallels with Bey's work on 'Temporary Autonomous Zones' (TAZ), which offer a bounded release from the pressures and constraints of everyday life (Bey, 1991; Bennett et al., 2014; Riley et al., 2010a).



Patsy: It's a release though isn't it for lots of people. It's like we were saying, the majority of people here who are being quite eccentric. They'd normally be working in a bank and wear a suit Monday to Friday and they come away for the weekend, get absolutely hammered, take loads of drugs, go slightly mental

Dave: Yeah, have their wacky weekend being, yeah, dressed like a fairy and then go back to normality kind of thing (laughter)

(Extract 3: MC study, 3 white females and 2 white males aged 22-25, Reading festival)

Similar discursive configurations were also reflected in the free party participants' accounts in both studies. In extract 4 Tim represents "the whole point" of free parties as a "big escape from reality":

Tim: The whole point of like, well, my personal point of view, like, a party is to go to escape from everything else that's happening, and as soon as you get to the party everything else from your mind is blanked out, you're there to enjoy yourself, do whatever, go crazy, have a dance, you know, it's a big escape from reality

Int: And what's so, because a lot of people say that, but what's so wrong with reality?

Tim: It's not, er, there's nothing wrong with reality at all, it's just nice to get away from it, and forget about everything that you have to deal with every day in your life. Just be care free for ten hours, you know or whatever amount of time you spend at a party, just losing all inhibitions, and just, forgetting about who you are really

(Extract 4: RR study, white male aged 28, musician)

When the interviewer asks Tim to justify the need to escape from "reality" ("what's so wrong with reality?"), he defends himself from any implied critique, valuing the opportunity to lose one's inhibitions, to escape and forget ones' responsibilities, even to forget "who you are. Like

many participants, Tim valued the sustained (if temporary) experience of escape from internal and external constraints, responsibilities and regulation that epitomised the feeling of 'freedom'.

*'They let us do what we want': 'Freedom' as temporary, licensed and commodified*

A number of participants in both studies attended music festivals and free parties. Some festival-goers' presented a critique of the temporary 'freedom' on offer, constituting these as forms of 'licensed transgression' in the context of consumer society. In extract 5 the interviewer references an earlier discussion about the commercial aims of music festivals:

Int: Yeah do you think that's what festivals are really about, people making money?

Cath: Oh that is

Adie: Oh yeah

Grace: That's why they turn a blind eye on, they let us to do what we want to do you know?

Int: So what do you mean there when they let you do what you want to do?

Grace: Like it's like supposed to be controlled and stuff but it's not. It's a bit mental but they let us kind of go mental in the campsite cos they're making money, it's ok

(Extract 5: MC study, 4 white females and 2 white males aged 18-22, Reading festival)

According to these young people, the apparent lack of regulation at music festivals was not quite what it seemed. Grace argues that such events operate a visible system of regulation that is not enforced in practice, with this lax approach justified by the profits being made. The main

rationale for music festivals is not so much the experience of 'freedom' and 'escape', but the commercial imperative ("people making money"). In extract 6, Drum N Bass clubber and Free Party participant Rebecca argues that the experiences of 'freedom' on offer at the Glastonbury Festival are highly commodified ("the experience you are being sold is the idea of Glastonbury"). Rebecca presents a cogent critique of the commodification of 'freedom' in the commercialisation of the Glastonbury festival over time, referencing its origins in the early Free Festival movement:

Rebecca: They take something and they sell it to you as an experience and while you're in the middle of the experience it feels fantastic and it feels really free, but if you stop for a second to actually have a look around you realise that you are actually being sold an experience. So therefore are you really, are you really understanding, are you really enjoying the experience quite like the people at the first ten years of Glastonbury? You know what I mean, like the travellers used to just go there, and they didn't pay to go there, they just parked up in the fields, and they partied. Do you know what I mean, and then one day they built a fence and said no you gotta pay to come in, and suddenly they haven't been going to Glastonbury for the past ten years, so, er, is it still Glastonbury? The experience you are being sold is the idea of Glastonbury but if you actually speak to someone like Michael Eavis, it's not really Glastonbury anymore.

(Extract 6: RR study, Black African female aged 28, mother)

For these participants, the experience of 'freedom' is constituted as both licensed (ie. allowed) and a commercialised form of an earlier and more 'authentic' experience. This resonates with the notion of postmodernity as epitomised by an image-driven consumer society in which "the distinction between original and copy collapses, leaving only hyper-

realities and simulacra” (Kim and Jamal, 2007, p. 182). For Rebecca, seen from inside the festival space, Glastonbury “feels really free”, and can appear to provide an authentic experience of ‘freedom’. If one takes a step back, however, any connection with this feeling of ‘freedom’ is blurred and lost as the commercial forces of marketing and consumer culture do their work over time, until “it’s not really Glastonbury any more”, and the travellers who came to the earlier festivals have disappeared.

### *Free parties and the freedom from unnecessary regulation*

Whilst Rebecca and the young music festival goers in extract 5 presented critiques of the illusory nature of the ‘freedom’ on offer at commercial music festivals, many of the free party participants in both studies associated Free Parties with liberation from constraining regulations and legislation. In extract 7, participants made explicit mention of “the constraints of licensing laws”, “silly health and safety regulations”, “financial constraints” and the ability to play music as loudly as they want. The particular freedoms available at free parties are contrasted with the restrictions imposed at legal events including music festivals. Free parties are constituted as providing a source of freedom (“they give you freedom”) as a result of their freedom from regulation:

Alice: They [free parties] give you freedom don't they?

Steve: I feel free to be able to, free from the constraints of licensing laws, and silly health and safety regulations, free from the financial constraints of hiring a venue to put an event on, and being able to play the music we want as loud as we want because a lot of the sound systems that you get at illegal raves make a joke of anything that you'll hear at a legal party or a festival. I went to a rave

festival this summer and the amount of expensive sound system equipment that they had there that they couldn't turn up to [people talk over one another]. The regulations that were imposed on them because of the, and you have, you know, fences keeping you way back from these systems coz "oh it could be damaging to your ears in 30 or 40 years' time [in accent]", whereas at a party if you really want it you can climb inside

Stanley: Yeah, I've done that

(Extract 7: RR study, 1 white female aged 36 and 4 white males aged 26-28)

Many Free Party participants represented rules and regulations as largely unnecessary, providing detailed accounts of the ways in which Free Parties develop their own internal regulatory strategies, whilst recognising the challenges this could involve.

Genie: Yeah I love just being able to do what the hell I wanna do, when I wanna do it.

That's brilliant, that is probably one of the major reasons why I like free parties. Yeah no-one telling me what to do. And actually the freedom of it works pretty well and I think, if there are few rules and regulations it's actually amazing how people manage themselves and actually don't get into huge trouble. I don't know, rules and regulations suck really

(Extract 8: RR study, white female aged 32, Free Party organizer, Sales adviser)

It is hardly surprising that Free Party people should produce more detailed accounts of the various regulations and forms of legislation they view themselves as "free from" at such events, especially those who were more involved in organising the parties. Free party people represented themselves as "able to do what the hell I want", as Genie put it, regardless of these regulations, constituting Free Parties as giving or providing a fuller experience of 'freedom'.

*“We achieve the impossible”: ‘Freedom’ as an alternative way of life*

Many Free Party crews and party goers (such as Tim in extract 4 above) represented Free Parties as part of a temporary and necessary escape from the mundanity and alienation of ‘normal life’ in similar ways to music festival-goers. However, there was an equally pervasive discourse in which the ‘freedom’ on offer at Free Parties and (to a lesser extent) Music Festivals was constituted as a potential alternative to “real life”. In extracts 9, 10 and 11, the temporary experience of freedom at music festivals is represented as offering festival goers a taste of what could become an alternative way of life on a full-time basis:

Jon: There is seventy, eighty per cent of the people I have seen here are not festival goers they are just like week end parties from college but from that some of them are going to get the bug. You know, it is like when they go on their gap year, they all pile off to Thailand don’t they with their little back packs and a Lonely Planet guides to follow the backpacker route and tens of thousands of them do it every year and out of that you know a couple of hundred think ‘Jesus, that is the life for me’ and

Int: Carry on with it.

Jon: Carry on with it. [yeah] And that keeps the tradition going in a way

(Extract 9: MC study, 1 female and 2 males aged 16, 38 and 43, Reading festival)

Middle aged festival regular Jon is doing important identity work here, differentiating himself from the majority of younger and less authentic festival goers for whom festivals are part of organised forms of leisure such as the gap year experience (cf. Haverig and Roberts (2011)). In extracts 10 and 11, Free Party participants from both studies elaborate on this theme:

Int: So it's not just about a party or the weekend off?

Ian: It's not just about a party, we're trying to say, 'Wake up, you don't need to be living a mundane existence where this is the only escapism that you can have. You can have escapism every day of your life, you know

(Extract 10: MC study, white male aged 22, Free Party crew)

Alice: Hopefully if you're a partyhead you'd understand that you've always got options and you can change your life. We get away with something that's illegal every weekend, we do we achieve the impossible. So if it can be achieved at the weekend it can damn well be achieved during the week. There is no need for people to be working in a job and leading an existence that causes them misery and at the party they'll find someone who'll give them the answer

(Extract 11: RR study, 1 white female aged 36, self-employed DJ in a FP crew)

For Alice, Free parties “achieve the impossible” because they should not be happening: the various legislative changes introduced during the 1980s and '90s were intended to regulate them out of existence. The accounts – and activities – of our Free party participants represent a refusal to recognise or be bound by these forms of regulation, and indeed a refusal to accept the need for or legitimacy of externally imposed forms of regulation per se. They locate themselves within an alternative discourse of freedom with a longer history, distancing themselves from the temporary, licensed and commodified transgressions engaged in by those who return to 'normality' after such events.

## Discussion

The pervasive culture of surveillance associated with neoliberalism, especially in the workplace, has had a range of damaging emotional and psychological consequences (Bauman, 2007). If uncertainty and anxiety are key elements of neoliberal subjectivity, one might expect contemporary leisure spaces to be characterised by security and stability. To some degree, commercial music festivals appear to offer such reassuring experiences, alongside the chance to engage in hedonistic and chaotic excess set within a bounded (and relatively expensive) liminal space. For festival-goers, these events offer a treasured opportunity to be 'free' from the constraints, responsibilities and stresses of 'normal life', enabling one to return to life beyond the festival gates.

Such displays of 'freedom' involved intoxication over a prolonged period using alcohol and other substances, as well as dressing up and acting silly in practices marked by infantile abandon and loss of inhibition. Festivals provided a contained space for the display of carefree hedonistic excess by predominantly white middle class festival goers, away from the mundane pressures of '9 to 5' working lives as well as the legal restrictions and judgemental gaze of others in urban leisure spaces.

Music Festival goers' accounts reflected a dual discourse of highly valued hedonistic abandon and escape from regulation, surveillance and 'normality', alongside a sense that this was somehow 'allowed' in the festival setting as a condition of contemporary consumer capitalism. Some festival-goers' accounts reflected a critique of the temporary (and expensive) 'freedom' on offer, alongside a sense that they were purchasing a legitimate opportunity for hedonistic release, aware of the possibility that this 'freedom' could also operate as part of a system of governance (see extract 5 above).



The illicit status of Free Parties was highly valued in participants' accounts, constituted as a mark of the 'freedom' enabled by the refusal of external regulation (notably the CJA) and the relative absence of internal regulation. Free Party participants articulated the importance of having the 'freedom' to 'do what you want' via a neoliberal discourse that represented 'freedom' as an individual right (Riley et al., 2010c). 'Freedom' was constructed as an alternative way of life that is co-produced in a collective form, in contrast to the mass experience on offer as part of commodified events such as Music Festivals. Our participants (including some with '9 to 5' jobs) drew on this discourse to constitute themselves as different from, and superior to, the mass of other revellers who would return to mundane jobs and 'normality' after the event (Bourdieu, 1984).

Other researchers have argued that such illegal dance events operate as liminal spaces offering a temporary and fleeting alternative that is different to and distant from 'everyday' lives and identities (Morey et al., 2014). Following Turner (1982), Jaimangal-Jones and colleagues noted the strong sense of social bonding or 'communitas' reported by Free Party (Jaimangal-Jones et al., 2010). Our participants constructed these events in similar terms, and Music Festivals in particular appear to offer bounded spaces in which the chaotic and potentially dangerous aspects of such liminal zones can be accommodated and 'managed' - though never completely contained - by the forces of corporate consumer culture. The sense in which Music Festival-goers are 'allowed' to engage in excessive and transgressive behaviours, some of which might be illegal outside the bounded zone of the festival site, also reflects the grounding of such commercialised experiences of 'freedom' in visible forms of stability and security (Bauman, 2007).

## Conclusion

One of the cornerstones of neoliberalism is that we are called on to experience our 'free time' *as if* we were not being regulated (and to display such experiences as 'fun' and 'freedom'), and *as if* this 'freedom' was not also a form of regulation (Rose, 1989; Griffin et al., 2009a). Music Festivals in particular operate as bounded and temporary spaces in which festival goers can feel *as if* they are escaping regulation, in order to recover sufficiently to return to the mundanity, constraints and responsibilities of the '9 to 5' world. Music Festival spaces therefore operate both as technologies of neoliberal governance and as means of coping with the pressures of neoliberalism (cf. Griffin et al., 2009a and b).

The Free Party scene appears to offer alternative ways of negotiating the relationship between 'freedom', escape and regulation in neoliberal times. Our Free Party participants produced more explicit critiques of current legislation and leisure in contemporary consumer capitalism, but their talk was also framed by a neoliberal discourse of individual rights. The perspectives of Music Festival goers and Free Party people leach into one other, so neither space is entirely separate nor contained. The contemporary Free Party scene has also been shaped by the ideological expansion of the neoliberal project. However, the continued existence of the illegal Free Party scene and the 'dual discourses' generated by many of the Festival-goers and Free Party people in our research indicates that the neoliberal project of 'governance through freedom' is not without contestation or critique.

## Notes

1. The 'MC' project was funded by the ESRC (RES-061-25- 0129) between 2007 and 2010, led by ABH, with YM as the RA, and CG, SR and IS as mentors.
2. The 'RR' study was funded by the ESRC (ref: RES-000-22-1171) between 2005 and 2007, led by SR, with CG as Co-Investigator and YM as RA.

3. The year 2008 was a peak year in the music festival sector, following a 71% growth in the outdoor music festival market between 2003 and 2007 (Anderton 2009; Mintel 2010). Over 500 festivals took place in the UK in 2008, and the sector remains popular but highly competitive since the recession (Bainbridge, 2012).
4. The festival did not sell out in 2008, with 3,000 tickets remaining unsold as the festival began. This was attributed to bad weather at previous festivals, and the controversial choice of African American hip hop artist Jay-Z as the Saturday headline act.
5. The last Big Chill festival was held in 2011, but the UK 'boutique' festival sector remains buoyant, including events such as Latitude and Bestival.
6. In 2008 the small independent Sunrise festival was combined with the Big Chill at short notice due to financial problems. Our Big Chill participants included 11 from the separate Sunrise area and 24 from the main Big Chill site.

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