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Article

Inhabiting the contradictions: Hypersexual femininity and the culture of intoxication among young women in the UK

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Abstract

This paper contributes to debates on post-feminism and the constitution of contemporary femininity via an exploration of young women's alcohol consumption and their involvement in normative drinking cultures. We view femininity as a profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit. The juxtaposition of hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication produces a particularly difficult set of dilemmas for young women. They are exhorted to be sassy and independent – but not feminist; to be 'up for it' and to drink and get drunk alongside young men – but not to 'drink like men'. They are also called on to look and act as agentically sexy within a pornified night-time economy, but to distance themselves from the troubling figure of the 'drunken slut'. Referring to recent research on young women's alcohol consumption and our own study on young adults' involvement in the culture of intoxication in the UK, we consider the ways in which young women manage to inhabit this terrain, and the implications for contemporary feminism and safer drinking initiatives.

Key words

Femininity, Youth, Alcohol, Sexuality, Class, Culture

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Introduction

Respectable femininity has formed the cornerstone of normative femininity in western capitalist societies for many centuries, set firmly within Judeo-Christian hetero-patriarchal ideology (Hollway, 1984). The figure of the respectable 'nice girl' is classed and racialised in ways that limit which young women might occupy this space, with Black and working class young women particularly excluded (Griffin, 2004; Skeggs, 2004). Feminine respectability is constituted in (hetero)sexual terms, in contrast to the reviled figures of the whore, the lesbian and the feminist (Griffin, 1982; Quinn and Radtke, 2006). The contradictions of contemporary femininity are also constituted through the operation of a sexual/gendered double standard, whereby the agentic, unashamed expression of sexuality is generally endorsed as a key marker of masculinity in men, it is more likely to be derided as a signifier of undesirable sluttishness in women (Cowie and Lees, 1981). The long-standing influence of the sexual/gendered double standard remains in evidence throughout contemporary western societies, including youth drinking cultures (Crawford and Popp, 2003; De Visser and McDonnell, 2011). In addition, both popular masculinity and respectable femininity are forged in relation to a pervasive discourse that disparages femininity itself (Barnes, 2011).

The emergence of 'second-wave' feminism during the second half of the 20th century challenged the dominance of this hetero-patriarchal order, and mainstream cultural discourse began to incorporate elements of (liberal) feminist rhetoric in response. In the UK, these cultural shifts were reflected in discourses around 'post-feminism' (McRobbie, 2004), 'girlpower' (Griffin, 2000) and 'ladette culture', with the latter focussed around young women's drinking (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007). Within post-feminist discourse, feminism is "simultaneously taken for granted and repudiated" (Gill, 2007, p.161). Feminist critiques of the sex-saturated cultural shifts accompanying the emergence of post-feminism (referred to as 'the pornification of culture') have argued that girls and women are exhorted to participate through discourses of pleasure and the 'empowered' expression of femininity (Attwood, 2009; Walters, 2010).⁽¹⁾

In the UK, post-feminism has produced new forms of classed and racialised femininity in which young white middle class women are constituted as the vanguard of a new form of neo-liberal subjectivity (Walkerdine, 2003), and young (white) working class women are condemned as feckless, disordered and excessive consumers (Skeggs, 2004; Redden and Brown, 2010). Respectability and the importance of maintaining a 'good' sexual reputation remain as normative elements of contemporary femininity, this rests uneasily alongside a post-feminist discourse in which young women are also exhorted to be always 'up for it' and agentially (hetero-)sexual (Farvid and Braun, 2006; McRobbie, 2009).⁽²⁾ Renold and Ringrose have identified this as the 'schizoid' discourse of femininity (Renold and Ringrose, 2008, 2011).

A key element of female sexual subjectivity in post-feminist culture is its self-referential and 'knowing' quality, as reflected in McRobbie's concept of the 'post-feminist masquerade' (McRobbie, 2009). In the UK, young women are called on to enact 'excessive' or 'hyper-sexual' forms of femininity which are racialised and classed, and constituted as the norm for young women in the urban night-time economy (Skeggs, 2004). We use the term 'hyper-sexual femininity' here to refer to a particular form of 'excessive' sexuality that is associated with femininity in the post-feminist order (Barker and Duschinsky, 2012).⁽³⁾ The hyper-sexual feminine 'look' is characterised by high heels, short skirts, low-cut tops, fake tan, long, straight and (bottle) blonde hair, smooth bare legs in all climates, lots of make-up and a buxom slimness (Bailey, 2012; Bell, 2008). As the contradictions at the heart of contemporary feminine subjectivity have shifted, we argue that it has become an increasingly difficult and even impossible space to occupy, yet girls and women do find ways of inhabiting this profoundly dilemmatic space (eg. Baker, 2010; Gill, 2007; Walkerdine, 2003).⁽⁴⁾ In this paper we examine this terrain in relation to young women's alcohol consumption and their engagement with the pervasive culture of intoxication, as a key arena in which the contradictions and dilemmas of contemporary femininity are played out, navigated and struggled with.

Young women and drinking in the culture of intoxication

Traditionally, young men tend to consume more alcohol (and different drinks) compared to their female peers (Lyons and Willott, 2008; Plant, 2008). Young people's alcohol consumption in the UK is also highly classed and racialised. There is a long history of ritualised drinking to intoxication amongst upper-class young white men, and the upper class as a whole is not subject to the same level of horrified moral outrage and disgust that has been directed at the drinking practices of white working-class youth, especially young women (Day et al., 2003; Skeggs, 2004). Drinking spaces, venues and alcohol products have generally been highly gendered as masculine, with a limited range of 'respectable' drinking spaces and alcohol products aimed at women (Hey, 1986). Drinking, getting drunk, and being able to 'hold your drink' have long operated as key markers of masculinity, especially in all-male sporting cultures (Willott and Lyons, 2011). In addition, women's drinking (and getting drunk) have traditionally been viewed as unfeminine (Day et al., 2003; DeVisser and McDonnell, 2011; Lyons and Willott, 2008).

However, the past two decades have seen substantial changes to young people's drinking cultures and the gendering of alcohol consumption. In the UK there has been a marked increase in the proportion of young people drinking over the government recommended weekly limits (14 units of alcohol for women and 21 for men), especially amongst young women (Smith and Foxcroft, 2009).⁽⁵⁾ Young women's alcohol consumption is rapidly catching up with that of their male peers, but although young women in the UK are drinking more alcohol more frequently and consuming stronger drinks than they were two decades ago, they are still drinking less than young men (Measham and Ostergaard, 2009).⁽⁶⁾ In addition, the British night-time economy has been transformed since the mid-1990s (Measham and Brain, 2005). Recent changes to the drinks industry,

alcohol advertising, marketing and the retail trade have all contributed to a shift towards more 'female-friendly' drinking spaces (Szmigin et al., 2008). Young women are now playing an active part in a new and widespread culture of 'extreme drinking' based on the regular normative practice of drinking to intoxication (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001; Griffin et al., 2009a).

A number of recent empirical studies have explored young women's relationship to drinking and the gendered aspects of alcohol consumption (De Visser and McDonnell, 2011; Eldridge and Roberts, 2008; Guise and Gill, 2007; Leyshon, 2008; Lyons and Willott, 2008; MacNeela and Bredin, 2010; Peralta, 2008; Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2010; Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; and Young et al., 2005). This work indicates that despite young women's increased alcohol consumption and the feminisation of the night-time economy, traditional cultural associations between alcohol and gender have not disappeared. However, this research has not explored the significance of young women's alcohol consumption in relation to post-feminism and the contradictions of contemporary femininity in any depth (though see Waitt et al., 2011, Bailey, 2012 and Pedersen, 2010 for recent exceptions).

Dilemmas of femininity: Hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication

The juxtaposition of hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication produces a particularly difficult set of dilemmas for young women. They are exhorted to be sassy and independent – but not feminist (McRobbie, 2009); to be 'up for it' and to drink and get drunk alongside young men – but not to 'drink like men' (Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2010; Young et al., 2005). Hyper-sexual femininity calls on young women to look and act as agentically sexy within a pornified night-time economy pervaded by 'cheap deals' on alcohol, but to somehow distance themselves from the troubling figure of the 'drunken slut' (De Visser and McDonnell, 2011). All this is happening in the context of a

pervasive media discourse of anxiety about drunken young women (Waitt et al., 2011), and intense voyeuristic speculation in the activities of 'drunken (female) celebs' (Bell, 2008).

Not all young women in the UK have access to this new culture of intoxication. In many parts of rural Britain, long-standing gendered distinctions between men's and women's drinking spaces and practices remain (Hey, 1986; Leyshon, 2008). In a recent ethnographic study Michael Leyshon argued that young women in rural south-west England forged their own spaces in local village pubs to drink and chat on the margins of the 'main stage' of the bar, which was dominated by older men and their younger male peers. In village pubs and heavily alcohol-fuelled Young Farmers' discos, most of these young women tended to 'dress down' in baggy T-shirts and jeans in an attempt to "avoid the leers and unwanted sexual approaches of (drunken) men" and to "claim a desexualized rural body" (Leyshon, 2008, p.279). Bars and clubs in the distant city of Bristol were represented as more desirable leisure spaces in which they could "tart up", dance and get drunk "without being felt up" (2008, p.282). The culture of intoxication is a predominantly urban phenomenon: a regime that flourishes in diverse leisure environments from major conurbations to small towns across the UK (Griffin, 2009b), but which still exerts a considerable allure beyond these domains, operating as a fantasy space that appears to offer young women the promise of dressing up, getting drunk and having fun.

So what of those young women who participate in the culture of intoxication and negotiate the pleasures, risks and demands associated with the 'look' of hyper-sexual femininity in this context? Recent interview studies involving female university and college students in Scotland (Guise and Gill, 2007), Ireland (MacNeela and Bredin, 2010) and England (Griffin et al., 2009a and b; Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2010) indicate that getting drunk is defined not in relation to units of alcohol consumed but in terms of its effects on the body. Passing out, memory loss, vomiting and falling over are all represented as relatively unremarkable events on a 'normal' night out (Griffin et al., 2009a). Drinking to intoxication is represented as an enjoyable – if occasionally risky – activity, which is justified by its capacity to increase self-confidence, loosen inhibitions, enhance sociability

and pursue personal 'freedom' (MacNeela and Bredin, 2010; Hackley et al., in press). Heavy alcohol consumption is constituted as a masculinised practice (ie. 'drinking like a guy'), constructed not as a form of empowerment or equality, but as affirming young women's heterosexual desirability to men (Young et al., 2005). In contrast, 'drinking like a girl' tends to be derided as boring, 'lightweight' and 'girly', whilst drunken young women are still viewed as sexually 'loose' and unfeminine (Guise and Gill, 2007).

From this brief overview of recent research, it appears that young women's engagement with the culture of intoxication is characterised by an uneasy and often contradictory combination of pleasure, having (chaotic) fun, and attempts to manage or avoid potential risks while drinking like 'one of the boys' but dressing in a hyper-sexualised manner. We turn now to our own research on the meanings of alcohol consumption for young adults in the UK to explore in greater depth how young women negotiate the dilemmas and contradictions of contemporary femininity within the culture of intoxication.

Young women negotiating hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication in the UK

The 'Young People and Alcohol' study explored the relationship between consumption and identity for young adults aged 18 to 25, focusing on accounts of 'everyday drinking' by 'ordinary' consumers.⁽⁷⁾ The project examined the role of drinking in young adults' social lives from their perspective, in relation to the marketing of alcohol to young people. The study explored whether consumption differed in major cities compared to smaller towns; the role of drinking stories and other drinking practices (e.g. drinking games) in young people's social lives; and whether (and how) young adults' drinking was differentiated by gender and class in particular (Griffin et al., 2009b).

The project involved an in-depth analysis of 216 alcohol adverts, video and print media, including internet and other marketing; informal focus group discussions and individual interviews with 107 young adults; and ethnographic observation in three geographical locations: a major city centre in the English Midlands with a diverse population ('Rowchester'); a seaside town ('Seatown') and a small

market town ('Burnaston') in the English West Country. Eight focus groups in Rowchester involved 33 women and 11 men in total, as well as interviews with three women and three men. Five focus groups in Seatown involved 14 women and 26 men, and the three focus groups in Burnaston involved nine women and six men, as well as interviews with one woman and one man. Rowchester has a substantial night-time economy dominated by a wide range of bars and clubs aimed at a young adult clientele. It is ethnically and culturally diverse with a large student population and a degree of separation between the leisure spaces of predominantly white middle-class 'students' and more ethnically diverse but predominantly working-class 'locals'. Burnaston and Seatown have more homogenous populations and a more limited range of drinking venues.

Participants were recruited through contacts with local colleges, and in most cases they were interviewed in friendship groups. Focus groups were facilitated by researchers in their twenties and thirties (see note 7), with a view to putting participants at their ease when talking about their alcohol consumption, although they were still somewhat older than the respondents. These sessions aimed to identify key ways in which drinking and the culture of intoxication were significant for the participants. Participants were told that the project aimed to understand young people's social activities and were encouraged to talk about what they liked to do on a night out in order not to limit the discussion to alcohol consumption. Not all participants drank alcohol, and drinking was mentioned by participants as an important (although not essential) aspect of their social lives at an early stage in all the group discussions (Szmigin et al., 2008). Focus groups lasted between one and two hours and all participants received a voucher worth £10. Sessions were digitally recorded, transcribed and fully anonymised.⁽⁸⁾ The interview data were analysed using a form of discourse analysis that paid attention to the local construction of participants' accounts in the interview context. Analysis moved through several cycles of coding, moving from descriptive, in-vivo codes to identifying more conceptual patterns of discourse linked to wider ideologies (Griffin, 2007).⁽⁹⁾

“It’s just fantastically fun”: Getting drunk and the joys of losing all your inhibitions

In all 16 focus groups going out to get (very) drunk was represented as a pervasive and normative cultural practice. Both young women and young men constructed alcohol as an important means of enabling social interaction, giving them the ‘confidence’ to talk to strangers, especially for facilitating interactions with the opposite sex (Griffin et al., 2009a; cf. Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2009). The gendered, sexual and classed dimensions of drinking to intoxication were often referenced in coded and implicit ways, and young women frequently drew on a discourse of (loss of) control in their accounts of being drunk (Griffin et al., 2009b; cf. Lindsay, 2009).

In extract 1 below, a group of young white working class⁽¹⁰⁾ Further Education (FE) college students⁽¹¹⁾ discuss the benefits of getting (very) drunk, in response to a question from the (male) interviewer referring to their earlier talk about having “no control” when drunk:

1469 ABH: so when you say you’ve got no control over things (1) so what do you like about that?

Laura: it’s just great, it’s just fantastically fun to do that sometimes (.) you know fun sometimes just to lose all your inhibitions

Sara: yeah (.) just to be able to do just what you want (1) not to be out of control but just to get into a state that you want

Laura: you just lose your inhibitions (.) you’re confident (.) it’s fun (.) you just have fun and you’re not bothered what anyone else thinks of you

Maria: you don’t have to be completely drunk to be like that

Laura: oh I do

Sara: yeah I do [...]

Laura: no but you can say things that you wouldn't say walking down the street to some random guy when you're drunk [...] cos you can blame it on the fact that you were drunk (.) if you needed to (laughter)

Extract 1: Seatown June 2006, seven white female FE college students, all aged 18

Laura constitutes “los[ing] all your inhibitions” as a key source of “fun”, going on to associate this with feeling “confident” and “not bothered what anyone else thinks of you”. The frequent use of the word “just” throughout this extract operates to normalise (and minimise) the potentially negative connotations that might be associated with drinking heavily, constituting them as ‘only’ a form of “fun”. Both Sara and Maria orient differently to Laura’s emphatic connection between being drunk and the “fun” of losing control. Sara refined the precise quality of this desired state (“not to be out of control but just to get into a state that you want”), introducing a degree of (self)-control into this scenario. This hypothetical state is reminiscent of the ‘controlled loss of control’ or ‘calculated hedonism’ that has been identified as central to the culture of intoxication in the neo-liberal order (Szmigin et al., 2008; Measham and Brain, 2005), although in practice it might be extremely difficult to exert such a precise measure of (self-)control when drunk.

Maria dissents from Laura’s account when she objects to the need to be “completely drunk” in order to attain this desired state – and both Laura and Sara disagree with her. Maria is countering the force of the culture of intoxication here by asserting that it is possible to reach this state of confidence, lack of self-control, inhibition and restraint without recourse to alcohol. Her position is also reminiscent of post-feminist discourses that offer young women the possibility of inhabiting ‘free’ unconstrained forms of femininity (Gill, 2008).

Laura’s rejoinder at the end of this extract draws on an explicitly gendered heterosexual scenario to illustrate *why* alcohol is necessary, because alcohol can allow young women to “say things you wouldn’t say” to male strangers in the street. The drunken “you” is constructed as fundamentally respectable here, since alcohol enables a form of behaviour that might otherwise be constituted as not

respectable, and therefore unfeminine (Skeggs, 1997, 2004). The state of being (visibly) drunk and the possibility of ‘blaming it on the drink’, appear to offer young women the opportunity to engage in some “fantastically fun” aspects of unfeminine behaviour without being (seen as) not respectable and/or constituted as sluts.⁽¹²⁾ However, the fun and confidence associated with “los[ing] all your inhibitions” could be somewhat problematic for young women because of the risks associated with being completely “out of control” (Griffin, 2009a).

Dealing with “random guys”: Risks associated with being female in the culture of intoxication

Young women’s engagement with the challenges associated with the culture of intoxication emerged in their talk about dealing with drunken men. The risk of sexual assault associated with these encounters was generally referenced in coded terms such as “anything could happen”, “you gotta be careful” or “you can never be too careful” (Griffin et al., 2009a). In extract 2 below, a group of three white working class nursing college students from Rowchester discuss going out drinking in Castle Street, the busiest part of the city’s night-time economy. This entertainment zone given over to bars and clubs aimed at young drinkers is constituted as a potentially dangerous space in which precautions must be taken:

199 Abi I don’t drink that much (.) especially when you go up Castle Street (.) cos there’s loads of pervs about [laughter]

 DC loadsa pervs?

 Abi [laughter] it’s probably cos everyone’s drunk or whatever (.) and you’ve just gotta be careful ain’t ya?

Extract 2: Rowchester June 2006, three white female nursing college students aged 18-22

Abi constructs the potential risks associated with the “loads of pervs” in Castle Street as a key reason for her relatively low level of alcohol consumption, in an exchange characterised by a great deal of laughter amongst the group. The existence of “pervs” is attributed to the high level of drunkenness

amongst a generic and gender-neutral “everyone”, enabling Abi to refer to the risk of sexual assault in a relatively coded way.

In extract 3 below, the group of FE college students from Seatown draw on a discourse of ‘randomness’ in a discussion of unwelcome aspects of drinking in which gender and (hetero)sexuality are referenced in more explicit terms:

3418 Maria: when you go out and someone (.) who is totally drunk (.) you get like (.) quite a lot of people come over randomly don’t they (.) and they just (.) they don’t listen as (.) you don’t pay attention to what they’re saying

Laura: and guys

Maria: that’s what I mean

Laura: you get lots of random guys coming over to see you

Michaela: that’s alright

Maria: and they like (.) yeah but not when they’re so drunk they don’t listen [(.) when you say (.) no thank you (.) or they just =

Michaela: [that’s true (.) yeah (.) yeah

Maria: = you know what I mean (.) like ruin it for you

Laura: you say no and they don’t actually understand the word no (...)

3450 Maria: cos that’s when you get guys [=

Laura: [the word no is out of their vocabulary

Maria: = or girls that rape people and they don’t realise (oh yeah) or they’re like (.) oh they said yes (.) and it’s like [

Laura: [yeah but sometimes guys or whatever get that drunk that
the word no is not in their vocabulary =

Extract 3: Seatown June 2006, seven white female FE college students, all aged 18

The notion of randomness is mobilised in two different ways in this exchange. Maria establishes the canonical⁽¹³⁾ using gender-neutral terms (ie. drunken “people” or “someone (.) who is totally drunk”) to represent those who “come over randomly”, that is, without any apparent reason or motivation. In the first instance, ‘randomness’ is represented as a quality of *practices* that are attributed to “people’s” drunken state. These drunken “people” are then emphatically gendered by Laura (“and guys”), which is endorsed by Maria. Secondly, their ‘randomness’ is then located in their status as *strangers* (cf. Waitt et al., 2010). Although Maria and Laura represent the advances of drunken men as unwelcome and unwanted, Michaela interjects a dissenting voice, objecting when Laura and Maria constitute “lots of random guys coming over to see you” in negative terms. Maria’s reply emphasises the negative character of such events by referring to this attention as unwelcome, persistent and with the ability to “ruin it for you”, and Michaela backs down (“that’s true yeah”). This interchange revolves around a distinction between (sexual) attention from “random” drunken male strangers that might be constituted as acceptable, and attention from less attractive “pervs” that is cast as unwelcome and potentially risky (see extract 2 above).⁽¹⁴⁾

In extract 3, the traditional gender categories associated with the act of rape are blurred in Maria’s reference to “guys (...) or girls that rape people”, who do not realise whether the “people” they had sex with consented or not.⁽¹⁵⁾ The apparent inability of “random guys” to listen to young women’s rejection of their unwelcome sexual attention is attributed to the men’s drunken state, rather than the agency of the men themselves. Young women are constituted as relatively passive subjects within this discursive frame, since alcohol is constituted as responsible for men’s sexual approaches, and saying a polite “no thank you” is likely to be ignored. This has wider implications in the light of recent research evidence on alcohol and rape indicating that some men target drunken

women who are then held responsible for their own victimisation (see Lovett and Horvath, 2009 for review).

Pole-dancing in the night-time economy: "I don't mind as long as they don't take it too far"

The British night-time economy has become increasingly sexualised, and 'sexual entertainment venues' such as pole- and lap dancing clubs have become relatively commonplace in many British cities (Measham, 2008). Some 'ordinary' urban bars and clubs also have poles around which their (young female) customers can dance. In the group discussion involving the female FE college students from Seatown, Michaela recounted a story about dancing around a pole in a night club in the nearby city of Burnham:

3460 Michaela: like when I went out to Burnham I was like pole dancing and all these men came up to you (1) but I don't mind (.) as long as they don't take it too far (1) because my boyfriend was there it was alright (mmm) so if they were really like (2) did anything really bad he was like (.) he said are you alright?

Maria: which one? (laughter)

Extract 4: Seatown June 2006, seven white female FE college students, all aged 18

Throughout this discussion, Michaela constituted herself as assertively sexual, refusing to position herself as respectable and apparently unfazed by potential threats to her sexual reputation: the ideal post-feminist subject. In extract 4 above, Michaela's acceptance of sexual attention from "all these men" within limits set by herself positioned her as the person in control, determining whether to allow men to continue watching her based on own her assessment of their behaviour ("I don't mind as long as they don't go too far"). Michaela's reference to the presence of her boyfriend as her ultimate recourse if they "did anything really bad" is represented as a guarantee of her safety. This also provides Michaela with a badge of sexual respectability, since without her boyfriend's presence she might risk damage to her sexual reputation as a consequence of dancing around a pole whilst

drunk. Maria undermines Michaela's claim to feminine respectability with her joking query "which one?" which is greeted by laughter from the rest of the group.

Outside the night-time economy, pole-dancing has become a widely available and popular activity for women in many affluent post-industrial societies, constructed as a form of 'sexercise' in all-female classes (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009). Post-feminist discourse constitutes such practices as a reflection of assertive female (hetero)sexual 'empowerment' (Donaghue et al., 2011). Evans and colleagues (2010) refer to young women's involvement in pole-dancing classes in the UK as part of the 'technology of sexiness'. Characterised by the 'doubled' quality of post-feminism, pole dancing "produces a consumer practice that is constructed as liberating [for women], and yet it is tied into a culturally historical context that situates it as sexist and objectifying" (Evans et al., 2010, p.119). They argue that pole-dancing "has *shifted from* an activity typically associated with the sex industry to all female exercise classes" (Evans et al., 2010, p.119, my emphasis). One of the difficulties here is that pole-dancing *remains* an activity that is "typically associated with the sex industry", *as well as* being a new addition to ways in which young women are called on to experience sexual empowerment and fitness (Donaghue et al., 2011). This dual positioning reflects the dilemmatic quality of contemporary femininity, revealing the insecure basis of the promise of female sexual empowerment on offer, and making it particularly difficult for young women to navigate the contradictions of post-feminism within the culture of intoxication.

Holding the figure of the 'drunken slut' at bay: Claiming respectability and Classed 'Othering'

Identifying oneself as a full participant in the culture of intoxication (especially to a male interviewer) may have raised the troubling possibility of being viewed as not respectable, with potentially damaging implications for one's sexual reputation. In some instances young women constituted themselves as respectable and responsible drinkers, such as the group of nursing college students from Rowchester in extract 5 below:

142 DC do you ever consider (.) or would you ever go out on your own?

Caz I wouldn't consider going anywhere on my own (.) I spose it's because it's (yeah) like umm well (.) one cos I'm a lady (.) (yeah) and like you've obviously gotta be careful about going out on ya own (.)

Extract 5: Rowchester June 2006, three white female nursing college students aged 18-22

Women drinking on their own are traditionally viewed as prostitutes or as 'easy' in patriarchal discourse (Hey, 1986), and Caz's explicit claim to feminine respectability ("I'm a lady") distances her from the possibility of being 'mistaken' for one of these 'other' women. Her respectability is reinforced by constituting herself as a responsible (female) drinker through her awareness of the risks associated with going out drinking as an unaccompanied young woman (Waitt et al., 2011).

Young women also distanced themselves from the troubling figure of unfeminine, irresponsible female drinkers through a process of classed Othering. Extract 6 below was part of a discussion by another group of white working class nursing college students in Rowchester about different drinking venues. Anne referred to a group associated with a particular suburb of Rowchester as "the Dissmoor scum":

286 Anne yeah (1) an' (.) but erm (.) the Slammer is nice (.) because it's not as crowded as Castle Street (.) and um (.) you don't get the erm =

Rose = yeah =

Anne = the Dissmoor scum (.) as I like to call them (inaudible)

All (laughter)

ABH so what (.) what are the Dissmoor scum then what are

Sally it sounds really really really really snobby but (.) you know when (.) you know the people that (.) arr wha (.) but they all go on Castle Street an' (.) the they wear like they wear like (.) really horrible (.) things (.) and the way they act arrr

Extract 6: Rowchester November 2006, six white female nursing college students aged 20-22

“The Dissmoor scum” are identified by their clothes (“really horrible things”) and behaviour (“the way they act”), and are to be avoided at all costs. They constitute themselves as respectable in class terms through distancing themselves from the derided “Dissmoor scum”, but this is a potentially troubling move, as indicated by Anne’s “as I like to call them” and Sally’s class-based disclaimer (“it sounds really really really snobby but...”: Holt and Griffin, 2005).

Other recent British research on young women’s drinking in south-west England indicates that this process of classed Othering is especially prevalent amongst young white middle class women (Bailey, 2012). Rudolfsdottir and Morgan’s interview study with white middle class university students in Bristol identifies the pervasive negative construction of “chavvy girls”, as illustrated in the lengthy extract from a focus group discussion below:

“Yeah, I think they [‘chavvy girls’] think they can take the place of the male. They try to be loud and aggressive. And I don’t think, what they don’t realize is that they’re not attractive, they are really not attractive and I think they think ‘Oh yeah’. But at the end of the day a man’s only going to sleep with them because they look easy because they are off their face. They’re not going to find them very attractive if they can’t walk in a straight line. I think, I hate, I really don’t like it because I think women are losing their femininity (...)
They’re losing their respect. It’s basic respect like, er, how many men they’ve slept with and they’re just going to be known as a slut for the rest of their life and it doesn’t happen to men and that’s what they don’t realize and they just look stupid ‘cos a man can do it and get away with it but a girl can’t” (Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2009, p.501, added material).

“Chavvy girls” are constituted as unfeminine in two ways here: through (unknowingly) being at risk of “losing their femininity”, and through their inappropriate aspirations to masculine status (“think they can take the place of the male”). In the British context, the figure of the female ‘chav’ is associated with white working class femininity, exemplifying sexually uncontrolled and drunken

excess (Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008). The public drunkenness of “chavvy girls” and their lack of awareness about how unattractive (ie. unfeminine) they look are represented as the basis of their loss of femininity and respectability. This account establishes a patriarchal discourse of (middle class) respectable femininity and a sexual double standard (“a man can do it and get away with it but a girl can’t”) as canonical, not as the subject of critique.

The derided figure of “chavvy girls” enables young middle class women to speak about the risk that *all* young women face in getting (very) drunk and operating as actively (hetero)sexual subjects in the culture of intoxication without implicating themselves. This process of classed and gendered Othering constitutes the speaker as a responsible and respectable female drinker who is *self-aware*, and therefore able to navigate the challenges of the culture of intoxication without the risk of “being known as a slut for the rest of [her] life”.

Unashamed intoxication and unbridled hedonism: Counter-discourses and dissenting voices

In other instances young women produced narratives of drunken excess in which they unashamedly inhabited the enjoyment, chaos and humour associated with heavy drinking (Griffin, 2009a). Every focus group discussion also included at least one young woman who produced counter-discourses that challenged this canonical narrative. This is exemplified in the extract below involving a mixed group of Rowchester FE college students:

595 Melanie I went to Planet X for my seventeenth Birthday and I was really good at bowling (.)
 just cos I was really really drunk (laughs) (mimics herself) “yeah I’m doing it (.) I’m
 really good” and then I went home and spent the night in my own sick in my bed

All ergh

Melanie I was sick in my sleep (.) and when I woke up the next morning it was everywhere

Kirsty this is why I don’t get drunk it’s disgusting erhh (laughter)

Molly yeah but it’s fun =

Kirsty = it's not

Rob [mmm my face is stuck to the pillow

Molly [it is cos you laugh at it when you look back on it

Kirsty I don't

Karen yeah yeah it is fun it is fun

Melanie I just think it's really funny

Kirsty I don't

Extract 7: Rowchester March 2006, eight FE college students: one Black African woman [Fran], one white male [Rob], and six white women, aged 19 to 24

Melanie recounts a 'funny' drinking story with herself as the butt of the joke in which she occupies the masculine position of drunken hedonism. The rest of the (mixed) group react with disgust ("ergh"), but Kirsty's more vehement disgust is couched in a counter-discourse that challenges the culture of intoxication (cf. Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Kirsty's disgust can also be viewed as an attempt to call Melanie back to feminine respectability. This fails since Melanie, Molly and Karen all reiterate the enjoyment ("fun") and humour ("funny") associated with getting drunk. Others in the group repeatedly try to draw Kirsty (back) into the canonical narrative, though she resolutely retains her critical position. None of the group reference the potentially life-threatening risks associated with waking up in your own vomit. This particular counter-discourse might prove too unsettling and challenging for the culture of intoxication. So Kirsty and her friends continue with their different perspectives, the friendship group remains intact, and the construction of heavy drinking as humorous and enjoyable (at least in retrospect) remains as a canonical narrative and a powerful cultural norm.

Discussion

Across our dataset there were few explicit references to the contradictory or dilemmatic quality of contemporary femininity: the sexual double standard, the possibility of sexual harassment or assault when out drinking and the importance of avoiding a 'sluttish' sexual reputation were all taken-for-granted as 'common sense', constructed as familiar, unwelcome but inevitable aspects of socialising (Bailey, 2012; Rudolfsdottir and Morgan, 2009). However, young women did manage to navigate the dilemmas and contradictions associated with drinking and getting drunk in the British night-time economy.

Within the post-feminist order, we argue that the culture of intoxication forms part of the 'technology of sexiness', enabling young women to "use the technologies available to them to reproduce, but also to subversively parody, gender norms, even if they must refer to these norms for their parody to be readable" (Evans et al., 2010, p.126). This arena of post-feminist discourse offers young women the promise of escape from the boring constraints of respectable femininity and paralysing anxieties over what others might think if they appear or act 'inappropriately'.⁽¹⁷⁾ Our research and other studies on young women's drinking indicate that this promise is largely illusory, and the 'freedom' and sexual empowerment on offer is profoundly insecure (Waitt et al., 2011).

Neoliberal ideology lies at the heart of post-feminist discourse, in the UK as in other affluent post-industrial societies (Rose, 1989; Gill, 2007). Post-feminism appears to unsettle or even overthrow the contrast between normative feminine respectability as an aspirational category and the 'sluttish' agentic sexuality associated with the reviled figure of the slag (Donaghue et al., 2011). Young women are called on to 'have fun' *as if* they are 'free' and 'liberated' subjects, and *as if* pervasive sexual double standards have faded away. They are exhorted to enjoy the pleasures of the post-feminist masquerade within the culture of intoxication *as if* the risks and dangers associated with being visibly drunk (and dancing round a pole in a night club) can be dealt with without recourse to feminist critique – or the presence of a boyfriend. More than this, young women are called on to operate *as if* they

were unaware of the illusory and unstable nature of the promise of freedom, fun and empowered sexuality offered by hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication. Our work indicates that young women *are* aware of the illusory nature of this promise, as well as the unstable character of respectable femininity and the continued existence of the sexual double standard. They *do* manage to inhabit this impossible space in which pleasure and danger are locked in a dangerous and alluring embrace.

Recent feminist re-appropriations of the derogatory term 'slut' (such as the 'Slutwalk' movement) have attempted to challenge the patriarchal discourse at the base of the sexual double standard, turning the term into a point of celebration rather than shame (Attwood, 2009). Exploring teenage girls' orientations to a Slutwalk campaign in the UK and their uses of the troubled term 'slut' on- and off-line, Renold and Ringrose argue that this term can become "too dangerous to 'try on'" (2012, p.337) in some circumstances. Our work reiterates the challenges for young women in attempts to 're-appropriate' the term 'slut', since post-feminism exhorts them to inhabit an active, assertive (hetero)sexuality whilst holding both 'boring' respectable femininity *and* the reviled figure of the slut at bay, simultaneously operating *as if* they were unaware of the dilemmatic nature of such 'schizoid' contradictions.

It is important to recognise the central role of class – and race – in assigning 'slut' status to others through a range of distancing practices. Young white middle class women mobilised figures of classed disgust (eg. 'chavvy girls' in the Rudolfsdottir and Morgan study) to distance themselves from the disreputable drinking practices associated with working class young women (Bailey, 2012). In our study, young white working class women produced similar accounts that disparaged particular localised groups of working class youth as disreputable, 'cheap' and 'rough' ("the Dissmoor scum"). In both cases, these discursive moves enabled the speakers to construct themselves as morally superior to these reviled Others.

Some recent campaigns in the UK (and Australia) have attempted to ‘scare’ young women back into feminine respectability, drawing on what Brown and Gregg term the ‘pedagogy of regret’ via references to the possibility of damaging their sexual reputations through heavy drinking. Such approaches risk reinforcing patriarchal discourses around gender, alcohol and sexuality, and seldom recognise the pleasures for young women associated with ‘losing all your inhibitions’ when (very) drunk (Brown and Gregg, 2012). Our work indicates that the cultural norm of intoxication *is* challenged by some young women – but these are generally treated as marginal perspectives. The dominance of this cultural norm could be unsettled by making clear that these counter-discourses do not have such minority status (Piacentini and Banister, 2009). Safer drinking campaigns could also challenge the constitution of the sexual double standard as ‘natural’, and the illusory nature of the promises offered by the culture of intoxication for young women. However, it is important not to place the onus on young women to change their drinking practices without addressing the role of the retail trade and the alcohol industry in shaping the marketing, price and availability of alcohol (Hackley et al., 2008).

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Notes

1. Although these issues have generated considerable debate in feminist circles, Conservative and right wing rhetoric has tended to dominate the growing moral panic in the UK around the 'sexualisation of society' (see Barker and Duschinsky, 2012 for critique).
2. This apparently unconstrained female subject is reflected in representations of the "fun, fearless female" at the heart of the 'Cosmo' brand, for example (Machin and Thornborrow, 2003, 2006).
3. We distinguish 'hyper-sexual femininity' from Connell's notion of 'emphasized femininity', which he viewed as "defined around compliance with ... subordination and ... oriented to accommodating the interests and desires of men" (1987, p.183).
4. See Billig et al., (1989) for a fuller discussion of the concept of 'ideological dilemmas'.
5. There is recent evidence that levels of alcohol consumption amongst young people in the UK are starting to plateau, but young people's drinking practices appear to have polarised, with a proportion of young people drinking less or abstaining, while other groups' drinking has increased (Measham, 2008; Piacentini and Banister, 2009).
6. This pattern is also found across many parts of Western and Eastern Europe, North America, Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, with local, national and regional variations (Ahlstrom and Osterberg, 2004/5; Beccaria and Sande, 2003; Casswell et al., 2003; Young et al., 2005)
7. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ref: RES-148-25-0021) as part of a programme on Identities and Social Action. Andrew Bengry-Howell, David Clarke and Louise Weale were involved in the data collection and analysis, with Willm Mistral, Chris Hackley and Isabelle Szmigin as co-investigators and Christine Griffin as the Principal Investigator. Fuller analyses are available elsewhere (Griffin et al., 2009a and b; Hackley et al., 2008 and in press; Szmigin et al., 2008).

8. All the names of individuals and locations mentioned in this paper have been changed.

Transcription conventions are listed below, based on Potter and Wetherell (1987):

| | |
|-------------|---|
| = | Indicates the absence of a discernable gap between speakers |
| (.) | A pause of less than 1 second |
| (1), (2) | A pause of 1 second, 2 seconds and so on |
| [...] | Some transcript has been deliberately omitted |
| [XX laughs] | Material in square brackets is clarifying information |
| <u>They</u> | A word or phrase underlined indicates additional emphasis |
| [as you can | Left square brackets indicates overlapping speech |

David Clarke is indicated as the interviewer by 'DC', and Andrew Bengry-Howell by 'ABH' in all the quoted extracts and line numbers from the interview transcripts are presented at the start of each quoted extract.

9. The observational research was primarily undertaken by one researcher (ABH). Although these data are not presented in this paper, this material provided important contextual information for interpretation of the interview data.

10. All participants were asked to identify their age and ethnicity on the research consent form. We have identified participants' social class based on their reported education and occupation, whilst recognising that such categorisations are far from straightforward (Skeggs, 2004).

11. In the UK, FE colleges offer academic and vocational courses at pre-degree level to predominantly working class and ethnically diverse student groups. Their academic entry requirements are lower than university courses in the Higher Education sector.

12. This has some parallels with what Waitt and colleagues refer to as: "the ability of drunken behaviour to absolve gender norm violations" (Waitt et al., 2011, p.270), or what Peralta calls the 'deviance disavowal phenomena' (2008, p.374).

13. Following Bruner (1991), a canonical narrative refers to the cultural taken-for-granted regarding everyday practices, established by talking in general, hypothetical terms (Frosh et al., 2002).
14. In Waitt and colleagues' study, young women tried to avoid the unwelcome sexual advances of those 'random' men (ie. strangers) they constructed as "pervs". The 'look' of hyper-sexual femininity was represented as giving them power to attract the attention of the "hotter" (ie. more desirable) "random guys" (as opposed to those constituted as "pervs"), and also the power to rebuff them (Waitt et al., 2011).
15. These young women were interviewed by a male researcher, which might have shaped their accounts to some extent.
16. In a study with young adults on alcohol and sexuality, Demant and Heinskou refer to the heterosexual 'gender game' in which getting drunk and playing with "dangerous pleasure" (2011, p.411) can shift into a 'grey zone' in which sexual assault is more likely. Young women and men tend to produce different narratives about such situations in which highly gendered sexual reputations are at stake. However, the stakes are not equivalent since only young women face the risk of "losing the gender game" (2011, p.410) through being positioned as sluts.
17. In an ethnographic study on young women's drinking during the late 1990s, Tina Barnes-Powell went to a British holiday camp with some of her participants, sharing a chalet for a week with a group of young white working class women. They spent many hours drinking and getting ready, but never left their chalets, unable to attain the necessary level of 'confidence' to go out in public (Barnes-Powell, 1997).

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