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“A Good Story Never Started With Eating a Salad...”

Drinking and (in)appropriate femininity on a night out in Newcastle

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Introduction

This research project investigates the ways in which young women navigate the boundaries of appropriate feminine behaviour on a night out through their everyday, embodied practices, including drinking, risk management and managing appearance.

The project will consist of 25 semi-structured interviews and 2-3 focus groups with young women aged 18-25. This poster explores preliminary findings based on 9 semi-structured interviews for one of the key themes, drinking practices.

Theoretical Background

The literature has long identified a number of contradictions within young women’s performances of appropriate femininity, where supposed ‘new’ femininities of agency and empowerment (McRobbie, 2007) may continue to sit awkwardly alongside more traditional notions of femininity as passive and submissive (Griffin, 2004), particularly within spaces such as the Night Time Economy, which has been theorised as a site of both empowerment and regulation.

Similarly, women’s alcohol consumption has been portrayed both as a key component of female socialising and fun (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001) and a perceived threat to health, safety and femininity (Day et al, 2004). With prior research on women’s drinking practices suggesting they *are* likely to limit their drinking (Measham, 2002:358), it is timely and important to investigate these tensions and explore the ways in which young women themselves navigate femininity through drinking practices.



Appropriate Drinking Practices

Inappropriate Drinking Practices

Consumption in moderation as key component of going out:-

Findings: Drinking Practices

Excessive consumption as undesirable and unfeminine:

- Allows young women to construct selves as fun and sociable
- Tool to cement existing friendships and facilitate the making of new ones
- Seen as lowering inhibitions and increasing confidence
- Heightens relaxation and enjoyment by reducing self-consciousness
- Temporarily suspend traditional feminine identities such as the ‘good’ mother or girlfriend
- Means to excuse potentially transgressive behaviour such as flirting
- Young women contrast ‘boring’ sober selves with the drunken self, who is better able to ‘have a laugh’



There’s a thin line of being... drunk where you’re enjoying it and it’s a good drunk, to being in that position of... you know... like... horrendous feeling... (Kelly, 20)

- Perceived as increasing vulnerability to sexual assault and other ‘dangers’
- Linked to loud, irresponsible and excessive behaviour
- Associated with loss of control over body and behaviour
- May result in looking a ‘state’ or a ‘mess’
- Drinking the ‘wrong’ kinds of drink is also unfeminine; beer – particularly pints – seen as masculine and manly



I think pints are just, like, associated with *men* (Ruth, 21)

it sort of helps you loosen up a bit, and you start being a bit silly I guess. Cause I am generally quite sensible and boring [laughter]... (Susie, 22)

Conclusions

The young women talk about drinking in numerous complex ways and with a mix of pleasure, humour and guilt, and frequently use pauses, hesitations and laughter, often qualifying their claims about how important drinking is on a night out with statements such as ‘this is really bad but...’ or ‘I shouldn’t say this but...’. This suggests traditional understandings of drinking as unfeminine (Day et al., 2004) still have an impact on the ways in which women talk about their drinking practices.

Some alcohol consumption was clearly identified as a very important and inevitable part of a night out. However, young women’s stories about the positive role of alcohol in their nights out were tempered by tales of the risks of drinking too much and losing control. The pleasures of drinking in moderation had to be balanced with the negative effects of drinking too much, suggesting women are required to strategically manage their drinking practices in order to avoid crossing the boundaries of (in)appropriateness.