Marketing “Raunch Culture”: Sexualisation and Constructions of Femininity Within the Night-Time Economy

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We focus on the role of the nightclub venue in supporting and perpetuating the mainstreaming of “raunch” culture. Data from social media and focus groups explores how nightclubs are contributing to the mainstreaming of porn culture, and thus contributing to condition conducive to the normalisation of sexual harassment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Since the 1990s, there has been significant academic interest in “porn chic”, that pornography and sexualised entertainment permeate almost all aspects of our popular culture and everyday lives. This “pornification” or “raunch culture” (Levy 2005) relates to numerous social and cultural shifts, and Maclaran (2015) argues that we need to have a better understanding of marketing’s role in this is needed. We focus on one marketing context (the nightclub venue), and examine the role of the venue in supporting and perpetuating the mainstreaming of this sexualised or “raunch” culture.

The mainstreaming of sexualisation relates to more than just sexualised images in advertising or the use of women’s bodies to sell products. The contemporary culture of sexualisation relates to the ways in which these images have entered our everyday lives, resulting in the ‘mainstreaming of sexual explicitness for women’ (Evans et al 2010: 115). One major commercial space where we see evidence of this is the night-time economy (NTE), and particularly the context of nightclub management. Griffin et al (2012) have exposed the contradictions involved here for young women, particularly when inhabiting the current “culture of intoxication” in the UK (Measham and Brain, 2005), where the construction of “femininity” in relation to drinking cultures is problematized, particularly when situated within a post-feminist context. These contradictions are integral to “new” idealised images of femininity (McRobbie 2009).

Research on alcohol consumption amongst young people has focused mainly on public health risks, bodily harm and anti-social behaviour (Szmigin et al, 2008; Measham, 2006), but less has been written on situating these risks in gendered terms. Young men have tended to consume more alcohol than women (Plant, 2008) with heavy drinking traditionally considered a sign of “masculinity” (Willott and Lyons 2012; Dempster 2011). Heavy drinking is also an aspect of contemporary “lads cultures” which may “intensify attempts to put women in their place through misogyny and sexual harassment” (Phipps and Young, 2015, 1). Women participating in the excessive drinking culture has raised concerns about the potential violence, threats, and health risks that women face by entering these environments allow sexual harassment to take place.

The study took place across two UK cities, one in the Midlands (City A) and the other in the North of England (City B). Phase 1 was a social media tracking study, involving selecting and following a number of drinking venues via popular social media sites. For Phase 2, we conducted 10 focus groups with young people (aged 18-28, 13 men and 28 women, students and working adults). The focus was on exploring drinking habits, perceptions of risk in relation to alcohol consumption, venues frequented and social media usage. For Phase 3, we set up a Facebook page where we invited participants (19 members) to post their thoughts on subjects related to alcohol consumption and venues, and where we further explored themes emerging from the focus group data.

The social media analysis showed venues were slightly more active than brands in their postings. Focus groups and Facebook discussion also focused on venues, and findings were organised around two main themes: (1) sexual discourses and “raunch culture” and (2) sexualisation, harassment and violence.

Sexual discourses and “raunch culture” Club venues regularly use images of female patrons, staff or models to market their nights out. One club in particular appeared to be marketing their events around particular images of hypersexualised femininity, regularly posting images of their female staff wearing revealing “uniforms”, and dancing provocatively. The club uses sex to appeal to a young audience, referring to itself as the “sexiest night out in City A” putting this claim immediately next to an offer for “£1.50 drinks”, linking the notion of “cheap” drinks” with “sexiness”.

Participants highlighted both the sexualised nature of nights out, and the underlying “lads culture” that permeates them. Heteronormative constructions of sexuality dominate in the marketing of mainstream drinking venues. This “hyper-sexualisation” marks a shift away from what feminist scholars might traditionally have understood as “objectification” (Gill, 2007), as the depiction of women as silent, passive objects has in some cases been replaced by a more explicit, active, knowing female sexual subject where self-sexualisation is a route to success (Levy, 2005).

Sexualisation, harassment and violence Data showed how sexual harassment and the threat of violence were often very “real” aspects of a night out for young women. Many of the Facebook comments highlighted that the sexualised images and language used had a more harmful sub-message, related to the promise of sexualised interactions for men entering these spaces, without repercussions for the men. For young people inhabiting this NTE it was striking how some form of violence is to be expected although not accepted. A consequence of the mainstreaming of sexualised culture is a potential normalising of sexual harassment and assault (Phipps and Young, 2015). Women reported that men tried to make them complicit in their violent interactions through suggesting that it was a ‘game’ or ‘joke’ and being instructed to ‘lighten up’ when they resisted their advances. The hegemonic masculinity associated with contemporary laddism can be viewed as a defence mechanism, and this sexual harassment is one aspect of this (McLaughlin et al, 2012).

Our study has shown how marketing communications serve to ensure that images of femininity are seen and understood against a backdrop of neoliberal, post-feminist discourse of individual choice(s) and empowerment. Nightclubs are contributing to the mainstreaming of porn culture, and thus shaping the ways that young women dress and act in particular situations, in order to fit in with these norms. A consequence of this hyper-sexualised culture is the normalisation of sexual harassment and violence towards women (McLaughlin et al., 2012). Our analysis shows how these marketing materials set up the conditions that are conducive to the normalisation of sexual harassment and violence.

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