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Transgressive drinking practices and the subversion of proscriptive alcohol policy messages

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ABSTRACT

This research makes a new contribution to alcohol policy practice and theory by demonstrating that transgression of officially sanctioned norms and values is a key component of the sub- and counter cultural drinking practices of some groups of young consumers. Therefore, policy messages that proscribe these drinking practices with moral force are likely to be subverted and rendered counter-productive. The qualitative analysis draws on critical geography and literary theories of the carnivalesque to delineate three categories of transgression: transgressions of space and place, transgressions of the body, and transgressions of the social order. Implications for alcohol policy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

Mass consumption is often identified with conformity, yet transgression also plays an important role in consumer motivation (Desmond, McDonagh, & O'Donohoe, 2000; Heath & Potter, 2005). Consumer transgression of norms and rules need not be motivated by the prospect of economic gain, but for reasons of identity positioning. To transgress is to go “beyond the bounds or limits set by a commandment or law or convention...to violate or infringe” (Jenks, 2003, p.3). Advertising and marketing offer discursive resources for the production of consumer identities through creative or adaptive consumption (Firat & Venkatesh, 1995; Holt, 1995). The outright rejection of consumption can also be constitutive of identity positioning, in the form of an anti-consumption identity positioning (Cherrier, 2009). Marketers are astute in exploiting the transgressive dynamics of some consumer groups, by tapping into sub-cultural and counter-cultural consumer movements (Frank, 1997). By so doing, marketers seek to co-opt sub- and counter-cultural consumer practices by structuring them ideologically (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). For example, many new branded alcohol drinks were

promoted in the UK in the 1980s as if they had implied psycho-active properties at a time when the government was intensifying the policing of the illegal and drug-infused rave culture (Measham, 2004; Measham & Brain, 2005), thus tapping into an element of sub-cultural capital.

Drinking in the West has a history of facilitating a convivial ‘time-out’ from everyday social rules and structures, yet it is also associated with social harms when drinking practices are seen as excessive or uncontrolled (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Berridge, 2013). UK government policy has systematically de-regulated the sale and marketing of alcohol over the past thirty years (Nicholls, 2009) and combines approval of the “positive impact” of “moderate” drinking (HM Government, 2012, p 3) with condemnation of those who “drink to get drunk” (p 4). As a result of trying to mediate between the market needs of suppliers, many of whom are directly involved in alcohol policy formulation (Moodie et al., 2013), and public health priorities, certain drinking practices that are constituted as harmful or dangerous are effectively criminalised by policy (Moore & Measham, 2012) and the individuals who indulge in them are constituted as reckless or irresponsible (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2008). The distinction between acceptable and unacceptable drinking practices is not necessarily clear because of the variability in definitions of excessive ‘binge’ drinking (Herring, Berridge, & Thom, 2008) while drinking practices themselves are inflected by discourses of class and gender (Brown, 2013). As a result, there is a potentially mixed message or double

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standard in proscriptive policy messages (Hobbs, Winlow, Hadfield, & Lester, 2005) that characterise transgressors of desired norms in terms of a moral deficit (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral & Szmigin 2011) but ignore the ways in which extreme drinking practices are constituted as fun and enjoyable by participants (Brown & Gregg, 2012; Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009a; Moore & Measham, 2012).

The possibility that transgression constitutes part of counter-cultural consumer behaviour poses a problem for alcohol policy. The proscriptive message that warns consumers to drink less or face moral condemnation and damaging consequences lacks resonance with the lived experience of consumers (Keane, 2009) and rests on an over-simplified picture of the complex messages and meanings that surround anti-drinking social marketing campaigns (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014). Health policies form part of the constitution of drug and alcohol problems (Moore & Measham, 2012). Under neo-liberal alcohol policy (Haydock, 2014) government campaigns ostensibly seek to control un-sanctioned, carnivalesque drinking practices that potentially subvert official rules and controls. Proscriptive messages can unwittingly provide discursive material to support sub-cultural or counter-cultural identity positions. Consequently, government anti-drinking messages might exacerbate the very practices they seek to control in some counter-cultural consumer groups.

This research makes a new contribution to the understanding of alcohol policy by showing that the transgressive impulse is an important feature of some of the very drinking practices that neo-liberal policy prescriptions seek to address through proscriptive policy messages. The data sets used in this study remain highly salient as expressions of contemporary ways in which some young people use alcohol to negotiate counter-cultural identity positions within prevailing discourses of space, class, ethnicity and gender (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009b; Hutton & Wright, 2015; Roberts, 2013). The paper will now set the topic within a wider context of relevant literature to establish the theoretical framework, drawing on research in health and public policy, critical geography and theories of transgression.

1.1. Literature review

Concerns continue to be raised in the UK and worldwide about the health and social consequences of rising levels of alcohol consumption, with increasing rates of liver cirrhosis, and a greatly lowered mean age of sufferers (e.g. Harker, 2012; Matthews & Richardson, 2005; Matthews et al., 2015; Leon & McCambridge, 2006). The latest data available for England at the time of writing indicate that there were 1.2 million annual hospital admissions related to alcohol, some 15,500 people died from alcohol-related causes, and alcohol-related harm cost the UK National Health Service £3.5 billion annually (Public Health England, 2013). Many Western countries have seen evidence of determined drunkenness becoming a common behaviour for younger and younger people (Martinic & Measham, 2008) while others have seen a more nuanced evolution of patterns of harmful drinking, with youth “binge” drinking becoming less prominent but potentially harmful levels of in-home drinking amongst older consumers rising (Measham & Ostergaard, 2009). High levels of sessional alcohol consumption remain a normalised part of social life for some young people (Cherrier & Gurrieri, 2014; Fry, 2010; Piacentini & Banister, 2009). Extreme alcohol consumption is perceived positively by many young Western adults, both male and female, as legitimate and autonomous behaviour that cements social bonds of friendship and belonging, generates fun and establishes identity (Griffin et al., 2009b) in ways that entail managed risk rather than unthinking hedonism (Szmigin et al., 2008).

For some young adults, drinking heavily amongst friends is not merely a transient rite of passage between youth and adulthood but forms a “more permanent socialising ritual...expressed in the night time economy, including group drinking rituals, fashion, music and

dance and drug cultures...” (Hollands, 1995, p. 6). Alcohol is deeply implicated in young adults’ phenomenological experiences of social life and ‘going out’ in the UK (Hayward, 2004; Hobbs, Lister, & Hadfield, 2000), although ‘priming’ with cheap alcohol often takes place at home before venturing into town for the more expensive clubs (Kuntsche & Labhart, 2012). Going out can be seen as a spatial practice (de Certeau, 1984) that has ideological undertones within a consumer cultural context. The integration of ideology and space is exemplified in drinking spaces, traditional bars and pubs and heavily branded urban drinking venues located, planned and policed specifically as spaces representing leisure (Hollands, 1995; Lefebvre, 1976; 1991; Roberts, 2013). Urban drinking zones have assumed considerable economic importance for UK local authorities but also entail massive costs in policing, hospital admissions and neighborhood disturbance (Chatterton & Hollands, 2001; Measham, 2004; Harker, 2012). Drinking practices that are characterised as excessive or immoderate are linked in policy discourse with individual irresponsibility, criminality and social harm (Hackley et al., 2008). Youth drunkenness in public spaces carries a transgressive force that can be seen as dissent rather than deviancy (Stanley, 1995) but is also bound up with the tension between criminality and the politics of transgression (Hayward, 2004; Campbell, 2012).

Transgression has been conceived as a universal impulse to exceed limits that is driven by a sense of the eternal (Bataille, 1988). It is also a necessary part of a functioning social system in that transgression both tests and maintains social order (Durkheim, 1964a,b; 1965 Gane, 2011) by reinforcing culturally and historically relative norms and limits. As individual behaviour, transgression can be seen not only as a matter of deviance, but as a “deeply reflexive act of denial and affirmation” (Jenks, 2003, p.3) in the sense that transgressing the norm also cements its social significance. For example, government sponsored anti-drinking advertising campaigns in the UK and Australia have targeted women by portraying excessive drinking as un-feminine, yet apparently without any deterrent effect (Brown, 2013). The ideological dilemma of being feminine and also enjoying heavy drinking is discursively negotiated within existing ideological frames of femininity. Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley & Mistral (2012) find that young adult female drinkers are fully aware of the risks getting very drunk poses to their health, personal safety and their putative reputation, yet going out to get very drunk is constituted as a normative practice. Drunkenness and drunken behaviour are constituted as permitted transgressions against the convention that respectable (Skeggs, 1997) women do not get outrageously drunk, in spite of well-publicised social advertising campaigns warning of the dangers of excessive drinking in the night-time economy (Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Hackley, & Mistral, 2011).

Imposed social norms of femininity (Skeggs, 1997) have been represented vividly in some anti-drinking campaigns, for example in one UK campaign described by Brown and Gregg (2012) in which a young woman is portrayed preparing for an evening out by ripping her clothes, rubbing vomit in her hair, and snapping the heel off her shoe, with the strapline “You wouldn’t start a night out like this, so why end it that way?”. This example constitutes overt female drunkenness as a transgression of norms of female deportment, but it fails to acknowledge that such behaviour can be constituted as fun and enjoyable in drinking stories told to friends after the incident (Brown & Gregg, 2012;). The attempted co-optation of sub-cultural ideologies can be turned back on itself to reinforce the sub-cultural norm (Thompson & Coskuner-Balli, 2007). Transgressive consumption can be seen as a form of creative consumption that can be used to accomplish an identity position for the consumer. For example, the drinker who enjoys alcohol brand advertising but ignores the “drink sensibly” subtext and, instead, drinks to excess, might be expressing a form of anti-heroic resistant identity, as opposed to an ostensibly more conformist heroic identity narrative (Cherrier, 2009).

Some drinking practices are characterised as carnivalesque (e.g. Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, Szmigin & Hackley 2013; Hubbard, 2013) in the sense that alcohol, in large quantities, acts to

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