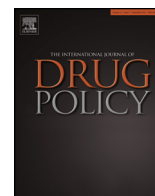




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## Research paper

# 'If I don't look good, it just doesn't go up': A qualitative study of young women's drinking cultures and practices on Social Network Sites



Amanda Marie Atkinson\*, Harry Robin Sumnall

Centre for Public Health, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool L3 2ET, United Kingdom

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** Young women in the UK often partake in a culture of intoxication in the pursuit of pleasure and friendship fun. Experiences of intoxication and drinking spaces remain highly gendered, and relative to men, women continue to find their behaviours in drinking spaces more constrained and scrutinised. Simultaneously, young women now express themselves via Social Network Sites (SNS), where they display drinking experiences and where they perform, negotiate and display contemporary femininities.

**Methods:** The research explored young women's experiences of drinking and intoxication, the use of SNS in their drinking cultures and the display of drinking practices on SNS through group interviews (n = 12) with women (n = 37) aged 16–21 from one city in the North-West of England, UK.

**Results:** The practice of uploading drinking photographs to SNS played an important role in displaying young women's popularity, enhancing friendship fun and belonging, and in positioning the hyper-sexual feminine look as the norm in drinking spaces. Both intoxication and the hyper-sexual and feminine look challenged traditional notions of respectable femininity, while the highly groomed feminine look itself was threatened by drunkenness. As such, young women invested much work and effort in self-surveillance and in managing the display of their drinking behaviours on SNS.

**Conclusion:** The dilemmas in contemporary femininity created by the juxtaposition of hyper-sexual femininity and the culture of intoxication are reproduced on SNS. Controlling and restricting certain content on SNS with the aim of achieving the 'right' feminine self-presentation resulted in a narrowly set of body oriented and behavioural feminine attributes being presented as the norm, and an overly positive online representation of young women's drinking experiences.

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## Introduction

In neo-liberal societies where discourses of individualisation, self-expression, autonomy, commodification and marketing are ever present, consumption, leisure and lifestyle are important markers of self-transformation and identity performance (Giddens, 1991; McCreanor, Greenaway, Moewaka Barnes, Borell, & Gregory, 2005; McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai, & Borell, 2005; McCreanor et al., 2013; McRobbie, 2009; Miles, 2000). Within such neo-liberal discourse, identities are fluid and shifting based on individualism and the means to consume (Giddens, 1991; Hutton, Griffin, Lyons, Niland, & McCreanor, 2016) and are therefore influenced by an individual's access to economic and cultural resources (e.g. consumption practices and leisure). Access to such resources are further structured and governed by the power relations and inequalities inherent in the lived

experiences of gender, age, class, race and sexuality (Bourdieu, 1984; Miles, 2000; Skeggs, 1997, 2005, 2004; Warde, 2005; Wetherell, 2009). Consequently, consumer items such as alcohol products, and leisure and consumption practices such as alcohol consumption, drinking practices and intoxication in public drinking contexts, and their display on social media, act as cultural resources and sites of consumption and leisure in signalling and performing identity (Atkinson, Kirton, & Sumnall, 2012; De Visser & Smith, 2007a, 2007b; De Visser, Smith, & McDonnell, 2009; De Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Kolind, 2011; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Thurnell-Read, 2012, 2013). For example, drinking culture remains highly gendered and drinking spaces, and practices and relations within them, act as important sites of performing gender (Atkinson, Kirton et al., 2012; Bailey, Griffin, & Shanker, 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Measham, 2002; Nicholls, 2016).

The gap between young men's and women's experiences of drinking and intoxication has begun to narrow as women have become more active participants in night life drinking spaces, and as a result, more women are reporting drinking and drunkenness

\* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [a.m.atkinson@ljmu.ac.uk](mailto:a.m.atkinson@ljmu.ac.uk) (A.M. Atkinson).

(Atkinson, Sumnall, & Bellis, 2012; Fuller, 2015; Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hacklet, & Mistral, 2012; Hibell et al., 2012; Slade et al., 2016). Such changes in women's drinking need to be understood in relation to the increased affordability, availability and strength of alcohol, the marketing of alcohol towards females and the post-industrial restructuring of the night time environment which has led to its sexualisation and feminisation (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2011; Szmigin et al., 2008; Thurnell-Read, 2016). Gender continues to pervade every aspect of drinking, and society responds differently to men's and women's drinking, usually viewing women's drinking as more problematic (Griffin et al., 2012; Thurnell-Read, 2016). Accordingly, drinking practices and spaces have traditionally been viewed as masculine domains, with women's participation being labelled unfeminine (Atkinson, Kirton et al., 2012; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012).

While contributing towards various health and social problems, alcohol use can provide social and cultural pleasures and release from the stresses of modern life, and through its cultural and social significance, provides social cohesiveness and a means of forging (gendered) identity (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Griffin et al., 2012; Thurnell-Read, 2016). International research suggests a culture of heavy episodic drinking and intoxication among young people in which a (controlled) loss of control is desired and pleasurable (Griffin et al., 2009, 2012; Measham & Brain, 2005). Drinking contexts (e.g. parties, nightlife) and intoxication are also important to sociability, the pursuit of fun and pleasure, group belonging and bonding (Griffin et al., 2009, 2012; Measham & Brain, 2005; Niland, Lyons, 2013; Niland, Lyons, 2014; Szmigin et al., 2008). Differences in young women's and men's experiences and communication around intoxication and associated loss of control also exist both on and offline (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2009, 2012; Hutton et al., 2016; Niland et al., 2014). For example, in Westernised societies some women have been found to self-manage and restrict their levels of intoxication and associated risks to a greater extent than men using a range of individual protective strategies, as well as factors derived from the friendship group, to moderate the adverse effects of intoxication and to avoid the social judgement associated with being labelled as lacking the feminine virtue of self-control (Atkinson, Elliott, Bellis, & Sumnall, 2011; Atkinson, Kirton et al., 2012; Atkinson, Ross-Houle, Begley, & Sumnall, 2015; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Laverty, Robinson, & Holdsworth, 2015; Lyons et al., 2014; Nicholls, 2016). While men may glorify what may be perceived by some as negative or extreme experiences of intoxication as a way of accomplishing masculinity, for some young women, tensions exist between their recent freedom to drink to intoxication as a statement of personal choice and empowerment, and the expectation of 'respectable' femininity (Bailey et al., 2015; Brown & Gregg, 2012; Cullen, 2011; DeVisser & McDonnell, 2012; Griffin et al., 2012; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Measham, 2002; Nicholls, 2016; Skeggs, 1997, 2004, 2005).

Drawing on the work of feminist scholars (e.g. Gill, 2008; McRobbie 2007, 2009), a number of research studies (Bailey et al., 2015; Brown & Gregg, 2012; Cullen et al., 2011; Dobson, 2013, 2014; Griffin et al., 2012; Hutton et al., 2016) provide useful insights into the tensions in contemporary femininities experienced by young women in the culture of intoxication. These authors discuss how nightlife as a commercialised space provides women, as relatively new participants in a previously male dominated sphere, the opportunity to publicly consume alcohol, enjoy and experience intoxication, and to dress up and perform highly 'girly', glamorous and 'hyper-sexual' femininity, in ways that are framed as an expression of empowerment through sexual agency (McRobbie, 2007, 2009). By this, we refer to a form of sexually active and body-orientated femininity in which women self-objectify through

consumption and dress such as short skirts, high heels, the use of fake tan and eye lashes, and glamorous makeup (Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; McRobbie, 2009; Watts, Linke, Murray, & Barker, 2015). As a form of commoditised and 'power' femininity, this hyper-sexual feminine look is presented as an aspirational archetype by female celebrities in the traditional entertainment media (e.g. magazines, television) and on social media in which a narrow set of bodily attributes are presented as the norm, and sexiness is framed as a form of empowerment in itself in ways that disguise the entrenchment of traditional gender roles and relations (e.g. The Kardashians) (Dobson, 2013, 2014; Gill, 2007; Jackson & Vares, 2015; McRobbie, 2009, 2015; Watts et al., 2015).

Ostensibly, female participation in public drinking spaces and the expression of hyper-sexual femininity may be interpreted as a reflection of progress on the basis of women's rising incomes, economic freedom and the right to choose, express and enjoy within neo-liberal discourses of individualism, choice and empowerment (Griffin et al., 2012). For some young women, such discourse is felt to provide a justification for the rejection of feminism as outdated and unneeded (Griffin et al., 2012; McRobbie, 2007, 2009). However, within this so-called 'post-feminist' and pro-capitalist order, women continue to face sexual/gender double standards as traditional notions of respectable (middle class, white and sexual passive heterosexual) femininity are unsettled and the redefining of femininities is limited by traditional conceptualisations as women self-govern their behaviours in accordance. Post-feminism has also coincided with the development of Social Network Sites (SNS) as a means of performing identity, and as a space in which social relations along the lines of gender, class, age, ethnicity and sexuality are played out (Hutton et al., 2016). As Griffin et al. (2012) states, it is against this backdrop that the culture of intoxication and the hyper-sexual feminine look produces a difficult set of dilemmas for young women, in that they are exhorted to be sexy but not slutty, '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' within an heteronormative and increasingly sexualised night-time economy (Griffin et al., 2012, p. 184; Skeggs, 1997, 2004; Stepney, 2015).

Young women's experiences of drinking, drinking spaces (i.e. nightlife, parties) and SNS are therefore highly negotiated, contradictory and dilemmatic within this post-feminist order (Griffin et al., 2012; Hutton et al., 2016). Such post-feminist discourses are also classed, with it being more difficult for working class women to achieve the 'right' form of femininity relative to those who are middle class, and regardless of class, young women have been found to distance themselves from the practices of working class women through the process of classed Othering (Bailey et al., 2015; Cullen, 2011; Griffin et al., 2012; Skeggs, 1997, 2004, 2005; Stepney, 2015). Despite the illusion of empowerment, drinking and drinking spaces thus act as sites of control for women and as contexts in which gender and classed restrictions continue to be being placed upon them (Atkinson, Kirton et al., 2012; Bailey et al., 2015; Griffin et al., 2009, 2012; Nicholls, 2016; Niland et al., 2014).

The spaces in which alcohol-related practices are managed and gendered are not only mediated (e.g. mainstream media) and physical (e.g. local public drinking environments), but have more recently become virtual (e.g. Social Network Sites, SNS) (Goodwin, Griffin, Lyons, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2016). Drinking itself takes place in public spaces (i.e. bars and clubs) and within the context of 'preloading/drinking' within the private sphere (Barton & Husk, 2014; Griffin et al., 2009; Measham & Brain, 2005). Young people's drinking cultures and the 'intoxicogenic spaces' in which consumption and related practices are displayed and managed have now also entered online environments such as

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