International Journal of Drug Policy 58 (2018) 13–21

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Research Paper

The role of alcohol in constructing gender & class identities among young women in the age of social media

Jemma Lennox[a], Carol Emslie[b,*], Helen Sweeting[a], Antonia Lyons[c]

[a] MRC/CSO Social & Public Health Sciences Unit, University of Glasgow, UK
[b] School of Health & Life Sciences, Glasgow Caledonian University, UK
[c] School of Health, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, New Zealand

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Gender
Drinking
Facebook
Femininities
Online
Digital

ABSTRACT

Research suggests young women view drinking as a pleasurable aspect of their social lives but that they face challenges in engaging in a traditionally 'masculine' behaviour whilst maintaining a desirable 'femininity'. Social network sites such as Facebook make socialising visible to a wide audience. This paper explores how young people discuss young women's drinking practices, and how young women construct their identities through alcohol consumption and its display on social media. We conducted 21 friendship-based focus groups (both mixed and single sex) with young adults aged 18–29 years and 13 individual interviews with a subset of focus group respondents centred on their Facebook practices. We recruited a purposive sample in Glasgow, Scotland (UK) which included 'middle class' (defined as students and those in professional jobs) and 'working class' respondents (employed in manual/service sector jobs), who participated in a range of venues in the night time economy. Young women's discussions revealed a difficult 'balancing act' between demonstrating an 'up for it' sexy (but not too sexy) femininity through their drinking and appearance, while still retaining control and respectability. This 'balancing act' was particularly precarious for working class women, who appeared to be judged more harshly than middle class women both online and offline. While a gendered double standard around appearance and alcohol consumption is not new, a wider online audience can now observe and comment on how women look and behave. Social structures such as gender and social class remain central to the construction of identity both online and offline.

Introduction

In her important review of the role of alcohol in British women's lives, Plant (2008) argues that changes in gender roles and in women's social and economic position, the 'feminisation' of the night time economy, sales of cheap alcohol in supermarkets, and female-targeted marketing form the backdrop to increased drinking amongst young women over the past 50 years. A more recent body of qualitative research suggests that young women view alcohol as a pleasurable and important aspect of their social lives (Bancroft, 2012; Guise & Gill, 2007; Seaman & Edgar, 2012), and place value upon sharing drinking and hangover stories (Griffin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2009; Sheehan & Ridge 2001). It is not simply the consumption of alcohol which is considered enjoyable, but also what that consumption represents. This includes peer group popularity and validation resulting from drinking in line with dominant social norms (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2015; Lunnay, Ward, & Borlagdan, 2011) and the use of alcohol as justification for engaging in traditionally 'unfeminine' behaviours such as public rowdiness, with less risk of being viewed as unrespectable than if sober (Griffin, Szmigin, Bengry-Howell, Hackley, & Mistral, 2013; Rúdólfsdóttir & Morgan, 2009).

Despite young women reporting pleasure from their drinking, there remains a gendered double standard around their consumption practices (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). There is a disproportionate emphasis on women's 'binge' drinking in the media which is often framed as an attempt to emulate men and as transgressing traditional gender roles (Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; Lyons, Dalton, & Hoy, 2006; Measham & Østergaard, 2009; Patterson, Emslie, Mason, Fergie, & Hilton, 2016). While women's drinking may now be considered socially acceptable, drunk women continue to elicit reactions of visceral repulsion (e.g. 'skanky', 'gross', 'trash', a 'state': (MacLean, Pennay, & Room, 2018)); "a '*drinking* femininity' is acceptable but a '*drunken* femininity' is not" (Hutton, Griffin, Lyons, Niland, & McCreanor, 2016) (p85). Anxieties over young women's drinking and intoxication have also filtered into public health campaigns which suggest that excessive drinking is likely

* Corresponding author at: School of Health and Life Sciences, Room M410 George Moore Building, Glasgow Caledonian University, Cowcaddens Road Glasgow, G4 0BA, Scotland.
E-mail address: carol.emslie@gcu.ac.uk (C. Emslie).

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2018.04.009
Received 11 December 2017; Received in revised form 4 April 2018; Accepted 8 April 2018

to result in shame and regret (Brown & Gregg, 2012). A 'vulnerability discourse' in respect of 'spoiled' femininity and (sexual) assault is often used to justify the double standard around gender and intoxication, even by those young people who perceive that heavy drinking by young women shows equality with their male peers (Lyons & Willott, 2008).

Young women can now participate in the (traditionally masculine) culture of intoxication, as long as they display an 'up for it' heterosexually attractive femininity (Griffin et al., 2013; Waitt, Jessop, & Gorman-Murray, 2011). The individualism, self-reinvention and consumption inherent in neo-liberalism has led to a 'postfeminist' femininity characterised as young, bold, self-confident, sassy and sexual (McRobbie, 2008). However, these individualistic discourses tend to "minimize the role of social structural limitations … in the formation of identities and life paths" (Dobson, 2012), p371 As Dobson (2012) argues, navigating the contradictory discourses of postfeminist femininity is likely to be particularly difficult for young women from lower socio-economic groups, and the risks of failure are also likely to be greater. Our previous work with other authors has focused on the intersections between gender and sexuality (Emslie, Lennox, Ireland, 2017), gender and age (Emslie, Hunt, & Lyons, 2013; Emslie et al., 2015; Lyons, Emslie, & Hunt, 2014; Lyons, McCreanor et al., 2014; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Willott & Lyons, 2012), and gender and ethnicity (Goodwin, Griffin, Lyons, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2016) in relation to identity and drinking practices. This paper explores how gender and social class intersect and are embedded in identity and drinking practices.

The importance of the intersection between gender and social class has been highlighted repeatedly. For example, Skeggs (1997) argues that while working class men can use class as a positive source of identity, the description 'working class' when applied to women "has been used to signify all that is dirty, dangerous and without value" (p74). It is therefore unsurprising that middle class drinking culture is positioned as 'normal', while female working class drinkers in particular, who often lack the economic and cultural resources to consume 'appropriately', are pathologised as vulgar, loud, immoral and out of control (Bailey & Griffin, 2017; Brown & Gregg, 2012; Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2003; Haydock, 2014; Skeggs, 1997). This has implications for how women from different class positions drink and participate in the night time economy. A number of studies have found that young women draw on these highly gendered and classed discourses to distance themselves from 'slutty', 'trashy', 'tragic' or 'chavvy' (working class) women (Bailey, Griffin, & Shankar, 2015; Griffin et al., 2013; Hutton et al., 2016; Rúdólfsdóttir & Morgan, 2009). Hutton et al. (2016) argue that young women "remain aware of the need to retain control and appear 'respectable' (not 'trashy'); "*positioned othering*" of disreputable others perhaps means that respectability can be maintained" (p82).

Social class, and other axes of social stratification, are further accentuated by venue choice (Forsyth & Lennox, 2010). As Thornton (1995) suggests, different venues "facilitate the congregation of people with like tastes"; club clientele are "pre-sorted and pre-selected" through venue publicity and the door policy which may "refuse admission to those who don't belong" (p22–24). Working class young women tend to go to 'mainstream' venues, which are usually corporately owned, play commercial chart music, have a smart dress code and attract a particular hypersexual performance of femininity: "high heels, short skirts, low-cut tops, fake tan, long, straight and (bottle) blonde hair, smooth bare legs … lots of make-up and a buxom slimness" (Griffin et al., 2013, p194). In contrast, 'niche' venues, attract a more middle class or 'alternative' clientele, focus on particular music genres and have a more 'dressed down' approach to style (Hollands, 2002, Lindsay, 2006). Thus, different venues attract and reinforce different performances of femininity embodied through appearance, style, attitude and consumption choices (Hutton, 2006).

Social media is now an inherent part of many young people's social lives, identities (boyd, 2014) and drinking practices (Lyons, McCreanor, Goodwin, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). Young people regularly post and share drinking photographs and engage in ongoing interactions around their drinking practices (McCreanor et al., 2013), while venues in the night time economy employ professional photographers to take pictures of patrons which are then posted on social media to encourage interaction by, for example, 'liking', 'sharing' and 'tagging' (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Goodwin et al., 2016) Social network sites are valued by young people for the pleasure they bring to friendship groups as well as for the ongoing formation of individual and group identities (Lyons, Goodwin, McCreanor, & Griffin, 2015). Facebook, for example, plays a major role in young people's lives, shaping normative behaviour, enabling the creation of connected identities and promoting (and branding) the self within contemporary cultural worlds (van Dijck, 2013). Yet social media practices are also gendered and classed in ways that go beyond access issues.

Taking and sharing photos and producing online self-displays within drinking cultures have value and provide pleasure for both men and women, but these practices are more challenging for young women. Young women are more invested than young men in their online appearance and identity (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2017; Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Lindsay & Supski, 2017, Manago, Graham, Greenfield, & Salimkhan, 2008; Shafie, Nayan, & Osman, 2012) and undertake more work to ensure 'appropriate' online displays (Bailey, Steeves, Burkell, & Regan, 2013; Hutton et al., 2016; Lyons, Goodwin, Griffin, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2016; Willem, Araüna, Crescenzi, & Tortajada, 2012). While young women have abandoned 'passive femininity' online, actively participating in positive 'girl talk' and commenting on representations of masculine bodies, 'highly romanticized heterosexuality' is still pervasive, making it difficult for non-traditional gender identities to thrive (De Ridder & Van Bauwel, 2013). Other research suggests that online portrayals of drinking cultures are 'airbrushed' (Niland et al., 2014); photographs perceived to portray young women as extremely intoxicated or unattractive are removed, untagged or not shared with others (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Brown & Gregg, 2012; Hutton et al., 2016). This pressure to conform to normative expectations around gender is likely to increase, given that social media makes socialising visible to a wider audience and given the rise in 'shaming' sites such as 'Embarrassing Nightclub Photos' (Lyons, McCreanor et al., 2014).

Online practices around drinking are also highly classed (Dobson, 2014; Goodwin et al., 2016; Hutton et al., 2016) and require different kinds of work and (self) surveillance by users depending on their social location. Maintaining respectability is key for young female drinkers. However, as a number of commentators have recently noted (Atkinson & Sumnall, 2016; Bailey & Griffin, 2017), there is a dearth of research which explores the intersection of gender and class in relation to young people's drinking and their online social media practices.

The current study aimed to explore these issues among young people in Glasgow, Scotland. This paper examines how young people discuss young women's drinking practices and their display on social networking sites, focusing on the gendered and classed nature of drinking, online displays and implications for feminine identities.

Methods

After obtaining ethical approval for the study, the first author conducted 21 focus groups (a total of 91 participants; 46 women) with groups of friends aged between 18 and 29 years, followed by individual Facebook interviews with a sub-sample of 13 focus group participants (7 women) in 2012 and 2013. Friendship groups are a key site where practices around alcohol consumption are adopted (Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010) and in which masculine and feminine identities are learned and enacted (Paechter, 2003), and so enabled investigation of the normative understandings that these groups shared and drew upon. The Facebook interviews used the contents of participants' individual Facebook profiles as prompts for discussion (Livingstone, 2008). This