

'Who do you think you are?' Female students' experiences and responses to unwanted sexual attention in night-time spaces

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Femininity in the NTE

- ‘Young adults make their own nightlife, but not under conditions of their own choosing’ (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003, p.8)
- ‘Hypersexuality’ of the 21st century NTE (Measham and Østergaard 2009)
- Young women are encouraged to style femininities that are ‘sassy’ and independent (but not feminist), ‘up for it’ and for getting drunk alongside the men (but not ‘drinking like a man’), that are agentically sexy and ‘classy’ but never ‘sluttish’ or ‘trashy’ (Bailey et al. 2015; Griffin et al. 2012; Nicholls, 2018)
- But patriarchal double standards remain – ‘respectable femininity’
- Femininity is a ‘profoundly contradictory and dilemmatic space which appears almost impossible for girls or young women to inhabit’ (Griffin et al. 2012, p.184)

Thursday 4th, Friday 5th & Saturday 6th April 2013

CASINO ROOMS PRESENTS

NATIONAL CLEAVAGE WEEKENDER

IT'S NOT ABOUT THE SIZE,
IT'S ABOUT THE PRESENTATION!

Unwanted Sexual Attention

- Sexualised comments, groping, staring, touching, taking pictures - frequent features of nightlife (Anitha et al., 2020; Fileborn, 2012, 2016; Graham et al., 2017; Green, 2021; Nicholls, 2018)
- 54% of women had experienced unwanted touching/comments (Drinkaware, 2016)
- Men are not immune to unwanted sexual attention
- Bartenders experience USA



FREE ENTRY FOR EXPOSED CLEAVAGE B4 11PM ON ANY NIGHT!
ONLY AT KENT'S BIGGEST & BREAST PARTY VENUE!



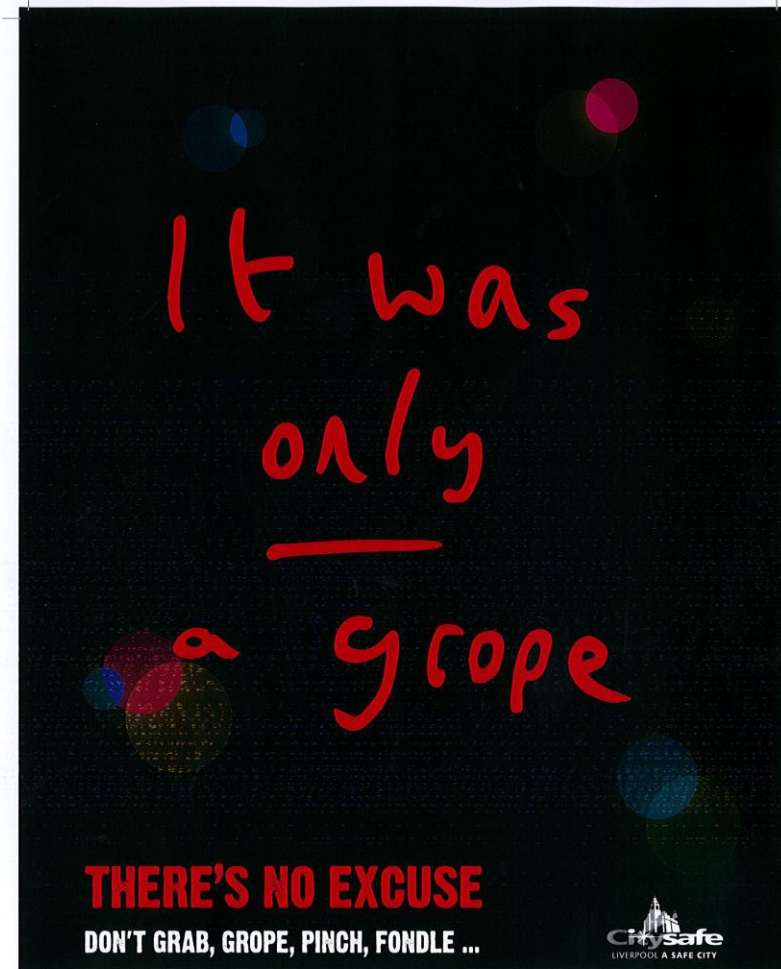
Participation strategies

- Incidents may not be a 'big deal', whilst others report fear/upset/distress and the development of strategies to mitigate the behaviour
- E.g. the use of a 'buddy system'
- Brooks (2011) 'safety strategies' can serve to minimise or control the potential for unwanted encounters

Aims of research

- Involvement from 2014/15 with Liverpool City Council
- Developing campaigns around alcohol involved rape and USA
 - To target male NTE users aged 18-24

1. What does unwanted sexual attention looks like on nights out?
2. What strategies are adopted in order to manage it?
3. Is there scope for women to resist unwanted attention?



THIS IS SEXUAL ASSAULT
WHICH IS A SERIOUS CRIME



Methodology

- Series of focus groups with young people aged 18-24:
 - Female students: 31
 - Male students: 47
- Caveat - participants primarily white, straight and all Liverpool-based
- Focus on experiences within 'mainstream', straight, youth-oriented city centre bar/club spaces which often hosted 'student nights' or were 'student inclusive'

A persistent presence

- Some form of *'touching, slapping and, like, just grinding on you...'* or *'comments about people's chest and tits'* were an unavoidable part of night-life:
- *'If you're going, like, out clubbing or something, you, kind of, like, sort of, like, expect to be touched'*
- Unwanted sexual attention fell within two overarching forms



1. The pick-up artist

- *'If you're up dancing on the dance floor, they'll go up right behind you'*
- The point at which it became unwanted was a 'blurred line'
- *'... because he was quite a good looking guy, so it kind of makes you feel a bit attracted. But then, when you realise he was literally doing that to everyone, trying to just get lucky...no'*
- *'...you feel like a bitch saying, oh, I'm not interested, because then they can turn round and be... it's a bit, kind of... you feel a bit harsh'*
- Ending such encounters frequently resulted in *'being abused after that... I've had people say, oh, I didn't really like you anyway, you fat bitch'*
- *'That's what affects me more than if someone slapped my bum... if someone turns around and is absolutely horrible to me, that'll make me feel like shit for the rest of the night. That'll affect me a lot more...'*
- *'You can't win, ever'*

2. The guy with no interest

- Sexual attention divorced from any attempt to pick-up the woman and was instead ***'done for your reaction'*** and to act as bravado amongst peers
- Having ***'your arse grabbed'***, strangers ***'that pulled my top down'*** and multiple stories of men putting their hand up women's skirts and into their underwear
- Performative 'girl hunt' rituals whereby men objectify women in order to solidify friendships, heterosexual identity and assist in the mobilising of certain forms of masculinity (Grazian, 2007)
- Reactions to these behaviours were multiple
- ***'I don't think it affects me that much because . . . it's an issue that does make me angry, but it's very much a case of, like, I can brush it off and get rid of it and ignore it and carry on having fun...'***

Minimisation strategies

- Cutting an evening short and going home, reducing the amount drunk, avoiding venues/leaving venues, pretending to have a boyfriend
- Women need to know *'how to look after themselves'* – but, typically, a responsibility that is to be shared:
- *'So we [the friendship group], kind of, all just keep an eye on each other. It's like an unspoken rule sort of thing where you've got to, like, guard everyone else from complete strangers.'*
- These informal means of responding to USA were especially relevant
- *'...It's just dismissed. It's like, it's a night out, get over it, cheer up and have a smile love... as if I should be happy that... or I should be proud that people are hitting on me.'*

Feisty femininity

- *‘And this boy just – it really hurt as well – like, literally slapped my bum. And I just turned around – I was quite drunk, so I was really angry – I was, like, who do you think you are, like, what right do you have to touch my body? It angers me so much.’*
- Not being prepared to *‘just stand back’*, having *‘gone really, really mad’* at perpetrators, *‘turning around and being, like, back off’*
- Femininities that are ‘sassy’ and independent (but not feminist), that are agentically sexy and ‘classy’ but never ‘sluttish’ or ‘trashy’ (Bailey et al. 2015; Griffin et al. 2012; McRobbie, 2009).
- Such responses could perhaps be viewed as ‘resistance strategies’ that challenge oppressive power structures (Kovac and Trussell, 2015)
- Highlighting the potential to destabilise traditional gender relations

Conclusions

- Unwanted sexual attention is diverse
- Women's opportunity for freedom in leisure spaces is restricted
- Women do find the means to negotiate their evenings – in individualised, but frequently collective ways
- Education must encourage young people 'to stop tolerating sexual harassment and molestation' (Christmas & Seymour, 2014, p. 10)??
- There must be a multi-pronged approach to prevention, that underscores the importance of collective action
 - Venues play an active role in responding to incidents
 - Through continuous, reinforcing prevention campaigns
 - Via the nurturing of femininities/feminisms that feel able to challenge sexist norms

If you're interested in reading more:

Gunby, C., Carline, C., Taylor, S. and Gosling, H. (2020) 'Unwanted sexual attention in the Night Time Economy: Behaviors, safety strategies and conceptualizing "feisty femininity"', *Feminist Criminology*. 15(1), pp. 24-46.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1557085119865027>

