



**‘DON’T THINK, JUST DRINK!’:  
AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY INTO  
WHY YOUNG PEOPLE ENGAGE WITH  
ALCOHOL-FUELLED LEISURE  
MARKETS OF THE NIGHT-TIME  
ECONOMY**

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**Abstract**

Consumption and consumerism are now accepted as being fundamental contexts for the construction of youth lifestyle in post-modern society. This research is a critical exploration of why young people consume alcohol in a manner that can go beyond ‘pleasure’, to the painful realms of jouissance. This research draws on various disciplines utilising a deviant leisure perspective in order to explore the broader harms that lie beneath the surface of commodified leisure, which have become culturally acceptable and normalised in today’s society. Through the use of ethnographic research, utilising observations and unstructured interviews, this project critically explores the significance of alcohol-fuelled leisure markets for youthful consumers aged 18 to 25 of the NTE in the South-West of England. Analysis of the data opens up a focus into the subjective and socially corrosive harms that are embedded in today’s society as a result of the commodification of leisure. The study concludes that the pursuit of intoxication and commitment to the night-time economy is an endeavour that is reflective of the harms and anxieties of contemporary times.

**Introduction**

Generally, ‘leisure and recreation are viewed as fundamentally positive in their pursuit and ends’ (Raymen and Smith, 2016: 392). The consumption of alcoholic beverages and engagement with alcohol-fuelled leisure venues can be recognised as being entirely conformist to the underlying values and ethos of neo-liberal capitalism (Smith, 2014). Nevertheless, growing concerns over the harmful effects of the new culture of intoxication evolved around ‘binge drinking’ has become the forefront for policy-makers. Youth culture is predominately associated with the desire to indulge in the intoxicating pleasures of night-time leisure on a regular basis (Smith, 2014). With the commitment to the notion of leisure as a tool for creativity, freedom, and liberation to create one’s own identity and lifestyle

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(Bauman, 2007), there tends to be little room to acknowledge the harms of commodified leisure that have become culturally acceptable and normalised in today's society (Hall and Winlow, 2015; Raymen and Smith, 2016).

In Britain, excessive alcohol consumption is becoming an increasingly dominant aspect of youth culture (Measham, 2008; Bennett, 2014). Despite alcohol consumption being entirely conformist to the underlying values and ethos of neo-liberal capitalism (Smith, 2014), 'the line between harmful deviance and legitimate leisure is becoming increasingly blurred to the point of imperceptible' (Raymen and Smith, 2016: 392). The night-time economy (NTE) has become 'synonymous with rising levels of interpersonal violence' (Smith and Raymen, 2016: 7), however despite the continuous warnings from police, health services, and various other sectors, the hedonistic consumption of night-time leisure remains a dominant feature of contemporary leisure among youth cultures. Smith (2014: 43) elucidates that there is a 'problem with the simple deployment of the moral panic thesis', and with the reporting of pathological behaviour within mainstream literature and the media. Social structures within society have 'changed radically since Cohen and Young were formulating the one-size-fits-all structure of the 'moral panic', with changes in capitalism, class, and consumption (Smith, 2014: 44).

In England and Wales, statistics from the British Crime Survey illustrate that between 2009/10 and 2013/14 there has been a 2 per cent decrease in violent incidents where the victim believed the offender was under the influence of alcohol (ONS, 2015). Although data illustrates a statistical drop in 'crime', a lot of harms are being embedded within circuits of consumption (Smith, 2014), therefore this research will attempt to challenge these claims. Accordingly, Smith and Raymen (2016: 7) stipulate that in today's society there is a need to look beyond these subjective harms, and instead focus on 'the invisible and systemic violence which underpins the subjective violence of the NTE'.

Slavoj Žižek (2008) articulates the difference between forms of violence, and suggests that subjective violence takes place against a back drop of both systemic and symbolic violence. He advocates that subjective violence is the more immediate and physical acts of violence, such as shootings. Whereas systemic forms of violence are those that stem from the social structures of late capitalism and underpin the subjective forms of violence that generate the condition for manifestation of subjective violence (Žižek, 2008; Smith, 2014). Additionally, symbolic violence is embodied in language and communicative forms of consumer symbolism that demarcates social distinction (Smith and Raymen, 2016), for example through fashion to elevate the individual to others. Although systemic and symbolic forms of

violence are less visible, they have to be considered in order to 'make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence' (Žižek, 2008: 2). Thus, there is a need to focus on systemic harms that stem from social structures of late capitalism and subjectivities embedded in consumer culture, rather than the invented micro traumas that pathologise an individual body (Smith and Raymen, 2016).

This research will take a 'Deviant Leisure' perspective (Smith and Raymen, 2016), drawing upon advances in both cultural criminology (Hayward, 2016) ultra-realist criminology (Hall and Winlow, 2015). The deviant leisure perspective offered by Smith and Raymen (2016) focuses on legitimate forms of leisure that adhere to cultural values and norms by consumer capitalism, which have the potential to result in harm. The purpose of this research project is to critically examine the broader harms of commodified leisure and the wider contexts of young consumers lives, in order to discover the motivations that drive an individual towards consumption in NTE. Therefore, this project aims to critically explore current and relevant issues, which underpin commitment and engagement of commodified leisure, within the alcohol-fuelled leisure markets of the NTE. Such research can contribute to the understanding of the mutating harms of the twenty-first century that can ultimately lead to criminality.

## **1 Consumerism, Youth Identities and the Night-Time Economy**

Consumerism is essential to our global political economy and has played a large role throughout the history of capitalism (Winlow and Hall, 2016). Leisure markets within the NTE have evolved to be inextricably linked to spending a large amount of money (Winlow and Hall, 2006), creating cynicism and narcissistic competition within youth cultures. The constant changes in consumer preference and advances in globalisation have led to this considerable expansion of the NTE, creating many opportunities for young people to achieve a state of intoxication (Measham and Brain, 2005; Smith, 2014). As a result, consumerism has become an integral part of youth culture, fundamentally linked to aspects of identity, image, and lifestyle (Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Winlow and Hall, 2009).

Over the last decade, alcoholic beverages have been recommodified in several stages to produce a wide and varied range of new alcohol products (See Measham and Brain, 2005). The majority of marketing campaigns and advertisements by alcoholic beverage companies endorse young people's drinking as a pleasurable and fun adventure, and the NTE as a hedonistic destination (Griffin *et al*, 2009). Its offers of 'plentiful new starts and resurrections (chances of being 'born' again)' through consumption within the NTE entices new

consumers to consume (Bauman, 2007: 49). Therefore, the NTE is much more complex than being one's leisure destination of choice. It produces leisure divisions among young people based on style, fashion, and taste, with brands aimed at different groups of people within a youthful demographic (Hollands and Chatterton, 2003; Winlow and Hall, 2006). Smith (2014) advocates that social marketing tends to create mythic desires by playing on social anxieties. One example of a brand that has cultivated such an image is *WKD*, with their recurring slogan of '*Have you got a WKD side?*', and their offer of a fun time with friends and an escape from normal obligations. Furthermore, licensed leisure venues of the NTE have also experienced a redesign and re-emergence over the last few decades, with the introduction of pre-club bars, post-club bars, and dance bars; all of which contribute to the 24-hour city (Measham, 2004). The 24-hour city enables consumers of the NTE to continue their 'night out' beyond the night, offering a continuous opportunity for sessional and excessive consumption. In addition to new products, alcohol companies and retail sectors of the NTE have repositioned their marketing focus following the rise of social media use (Nichollis, 2012). With the emergence of new media platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, the media landscape has transformed (Chester *et al*, 2010). As a result, social networking platforms are increasingly being used by alcohol companies and leisure markets of the NTE in order to share their content, promote their businesses, and predominately engage with young consumers of the NTE (Moraes *et al*, 2014).

Consumerism plays a dominant role in shaping the desires, fantasies, and aspirations of consumers (Winlow and Hall, 2016). The growth in the range of alcoholic beverages available, along with the hedonistic excess of the NTE can cultivate a sense of lack, and an instantaneous cycle of desire shaped by consumer capitalism (Lancan, 2007). With respect to Smith and Raymen (2016: 7), 'it is the pervasive anxiety surrounding the threat of cultural irrelevance and a fear of missing out that drives the basic hedonism, excess and competitive consumerism in the NTE'. Young people are spurred on by the allure of the new, generating a need to continuously return to the consumer markets of the NTE, enduring a sense of what Hall (2012) terms as '*objectless anxiety*'. Winlow and Hall (2016: 27) describe objectless anxiety as being a form of anxiety 'where it cannot make the transition into fear- the unstable and insecure capitalist system- because the real object of fear is ideologically disavowed'. Thus, consumerism has infiltrated the desires and social motivations of consumers in today's neophilic society (Hall *et al*, 2008). Accordingly, the social and cultural conditions within leisure markets of the NTE cultivate subjectivities that drive individuals towards harmful social practices, such as systemic and symbolic forms of violence.

Previous to the economic collapse of 2008, young people found themselves with more disposable income, easier access to credit, and fundamentally less debt; youth culture was associated with 'vitality and freedom' (Smith, 2014: 52). However, post-global financial crisis left young people's future prospects uncertain, with a rise in both unemployment and temporary employments, leading many young people towards a life riddled with debt (Lloyd, 2013). The freedom and vitality that was once associated with youth cultures has been replaced with increased pressures, anxieties, and challenges that they have to face at an earlier age than previous generations.

As a result of the lack of employment opportunities and the rise in zero-hour contracts, individuals find themselves indebted through mortgages and extortionate rents. In regards to all the pressures and anxieties among young people, Fisher (2009: 21) advocates that in late capitalist Britain being a young person is 'close to being reclassified as a sickness'. The lack of financial security and employment security, along with the pressures to fulfil the lifestyles expected of them is indicative of the rise in mental health disorders among young people, with depression being the most treated condition within the NHS (Fisher, 2009). Bauman (2001: 43) elucidates that mental depression is a 'feeling of one's impotence, of inability to act, and particularly the inability to act rationally, to be adequate to the tasks of life'. Accordingly, Smith (2014: 43-44) suggests that young consumers of the NTE 'drink to forget the multifaceted problems they face, and problem drinking behaviour amongst the young are continuing to rise'. Consequently, this indicates that these pressures and strains can drive an individual towards excessive alcohol consumption within the NTE, in an attempt to temporarily forget the wider contexts of their lives and fulfil these lifestyles expected of them. Therefore, the NTE experience has the capacity to exacerbate subjective insecurities that have the potential to lead to forms of criminality, such as subjective violence.

Consumer capitalisms offer of a temporary escape from the social pressures can also be argued to drive an individual into the hedonistic excess of the NTE (Smith, 2014). Many young people associate the NTE with being drunk and having a good time. Coleman and Carter (2005: 23) conducted research and found that 'the perceived acceptance and normality of young people (aged 14-17 years) getting drunk was considered an important motivating factor'. Although this research is focussing on underage drinking, it highlights the extent getting drunk has become culturally acceptable and normalised in society. In addition, ethnographic research from Briggs (2013: 127) explored British youth consumers in Ibiza and found that one respondent defines a night as 'good' on the basis of 'how fucked' they get and who they end up with at the end of the night.

Drunkenness suggests a desire for consumers to escape the dull normality of everyday life (Smith, 2014), such as work and consumerism, akin to what Badiou (2007) refers to as a 'Passion for the Real'. In the words of Smith (2014: 45), the Real 'relates to pre-symbolic subjective psychological experience, an intoxicating mixture of conflicting stimuli and drives that cannot be defined through language', rather than what we understand as 'reality'. Individuals are increasingly developing this 'Passion for the Real', yet the real is argued to be the symbolic and imaginary (Žižek, 2002). Thus, this indicates that individuals are living in an 'artificially constructed universe' (Žižek, 2002: 19), where perceptions are being created by others. For example, the belief that a branded good is of a greater value than a non-branded good is a perception that society has constructed. This 'irresistible urge to return to the Real' (Žižek, 2002: 19) is creating an instantaneous cycle of desire and lack, as individuals are trapped in the complex double bind of postmodern society in hope for the Real. Therefore, these systemic harms that stem from social structures of late capitalism, and subjectivities embedded in consumer culture that underpin excessive alcohol consumption can lead to criminality.

Despite the fact that these behaviours are conforming to the underlying ethos and cultural values of night-time leisure, they also illustrate an aspect of what Smith and Raymen (2016: 8) term as '*parasuicidal* disregard for life and well-being'. Stieger (2013: 61) suggests that 'what is referred to as 'parasuicide' is related to the proliferation of risk behaviour and constitutes a substitutive behaviour in relation to that 'acting out' that is suicide, and it develops in direct relation to the machines of the technical system that deploy hyper-power' (Stieger 2013: 61). Nonetheless, at the same time the desire to get drunk can be seen as 'faithful reflections of the drive-based models that marketing promotes' (Stiegler, 2013: 62). In the UK the desire to obtain 'determined drunkenness' has become increasingly normalised and tolerated within youth cultures (Griffin *et al*, 2009). This suggests that young people may be drinking to get drunk, however they might not be doing it in an attempt to cause inward forms of harm.

James (1998: 321) infers that 'the goal of the individualist is to express oneself through hedonism, achievement or consumerism'. Broadly speaking, alcohol consumption, and engagement with the NTE has been acknowledged by many academics as being fundamental in the establishment of individual and group identities (Hollands, 1996; Smith, 2014). James (2010) suggests that in society social competition and aggressive comparison stimulate anxieties and create social divisions, cultivated by consumer markets and the associated circuits of self-expression. Hall (2012: 379) claims that within society:

'we are...driven by our material nature to be free, but becoming so is still an extremely difficult task; so precarious, traumatic and daunting, that it can be hijacked by fake ideologies that offer comforting alternatives'.

While the NTE offers an opportunity of freedom from normal identities and responsibilities, there is still a large amount of pressure to gain this desired sense of individualism, but at the same time 'fit in' with society (Bauman, 2001).

Measham and Brain (2005: 279) highlight that the 'psychology of consumption is centred on the search for gratification, integration and identity formulation'. Thus, this suggests that individuals are more likely to engage with night-time leisure in an attempt to gain social recognition, and obtain individual and social identity. Similarly, Douglas (1987: 4) advocates that alcohol consumption is 'essentially a social act'. Nevertheless, research from Dupree *et al* (2016) found when looking at young adult drinkers in the US that alcohol consumption can inform both positive and negative self-evaluations in relation to others. Participants that regarded their motivation to drink as a positive, expressed that they consumed alcohol in order to gain social membership and facilitate social interactions. However, some participants expressed concern that alcohol consumption can also lead to less desirable social outcomes. This supports the idea offered by Hall and Winlow (2015) that the stimulus for harm exists in both negative and positive forms. An example of this is Phillip Laing, who was a 19-year-old student at Sheffield Hallam University. Following Laing's excessive alcohol consumption within the NTE, he was photographed in national press urinating on a wreath of poppies laid out in preparation for Remembrance day rituals [*Guardian*, 2009]. Therefore, the opportunity for self-expression has the capacity to exacerbate subjective insecurities, producing coercive harms that lead to forms of criminality.

Furthermore, alcohol consumption, voluntary-marketing, and drinking practices are all used by young people to obtain 'cultural, symbolic and social capital and status in the process of peer acceptance and in the formation of group identities' (Atkinson *et al*, 2014: 6). With the rapid growth of social networking technologies, young people have become increasingly attached to the enjoyable and practical domains for daily social interactions (McCreanor *et al*, 2013). In respect to Veblen (2007) and Mestrovic (2003) individualisation is achieved through the means of self-aggrandizement. The need to portray oneself in a way to cause a sense of envy and admiration in others, through anti-social means is becoming a more common exercise within society (Yar, 2012). The rise of social media use as a 'will to represent' allows individuals to have the 'desire for social recognition through self-representation' (Yar, 2012: 252). On social media an individual will selectively decide what pictures to upload or what status to post, in an effort to display their identity and lifestyle to

others (Yar, 2012). The desire to achieve a certain look but also maintain a certain identity is constantly being intensified through the pressures of a competitive society and social media, and therefore motivates consumers towards the NTE.

In addition to this, social media is an easily accessible way to explore and be exposed to celebrity lifestyles. With the increases in alcohol consumption, NTE engagement, and the constantly changing trend cycle, the desires and aspirations to look the same as these so-called 'idols' have shifted from being culturally desirable, and instead are producing anxieties and pressures with a 'constant sense of unfulfilment' to live a particular lifestyle (Hayward, 2004: 161). Thus, this further supports the idea that individuals are living in an 'artificially constructed universe' (Žižek, 2002: 19), where our perceptions and hopes are being created and fabricated by others. The belief that being in a certain bar or drinking a particular branded drink is of greater value than a non-branded good is a perception that has been culturally constructed within society, and has been intensified through the use of social media (Yar, 2012). These values are ones that have been created by those with a high status, and have produced the hyper-competitive society of today (Hall *et al*, 2008; Smith, 2014). As Smith (2014: 46) notes, with regard to the NTE:

'the mystery and frustration brought about by the unattainability of the Real is represented by all-pervasive culture of celebrity- professional footballs, musicians, actors all playing out lives dripping with the essence of the Real- conspicuous consumption of the markers of social distinction- consumer goods, flash cars, flashier clothes, strings of sexual conquests that are filtered down to the coalface of consumer culture through lurid media headlines and exposé'.

Thus, those with a high status play a large role in not only sensationalising style and appearance through the means of social media, but have also stimulated a perception of enjoyment beyond its limits (Smith, 2014: 46). The desire to achieve the lifestyles they have has become nurtured within today's hyperreal world (Baudrillard, 1983), and is therefore indicative of a continuous sense of lack. As a result, the socially cohesive harms produced through consumer pressures, conflicts, and tensions, can ultimately drive an individual towards excessive and harmful forms of consumption within the NTE.

## **2 Findings and Discussion**

The information collected through ethnographic research, using un-structured interviews and observations showed that there were many different themes generated throughout the research. The main themes that emerged throughout this research were coded and thematically analysed, in order to identify the central issues. This chapter will explore four fundamental themes derived from this research: identity, friendships, the rise of insecurity, and social media.

### **Identity**

One major theme that emerged was that the NTE is associated with identity creation. The notion of achieving a sense of identity through the NTE coincides with research from Winlow and Hall (2006). Within their ethnographic research they identified the extreme pressures among youth cultures to be individualistic, yet at the same time 'fit into lifestyles based on the acquisition and competent display of consumer symbols' (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 82). The vast majority of respondents acknowledged these pressures, however struggled to uphold the social ideal. This is further exemplified in the words of Emma, a 20-year-old sales assistant, who converses the difficulties in keeping up with the fashion of consumer culture:

*"I thought I actually looked alright today, but then I saw what everyone else was wearing. Designer this, designer that... It just makes me feel a bit shit. I'm not really that into fashion or expensive bars, but I do care what people think... I don't even like cocktails. I'd much prefer a beer any day, but then people are just like 'lad'."*

The notion that products are consumed in order to achieve a particular identity, and to fulfil the ideals of society was highlighted by all of the respondents. The excerpt from Emma illustrates how consumption of branded products within youth culture serves a status symbol (Veblen, 2007). However, rather than a conscious choice of consumption, these findings indicate that they are instead achieved through the means of self-aggrandisement (Veblen, 2007).

For this group of friends, the possession and conspicuous display of consumer goods within the NTE was a palpable identity marker, and an opportunity to position oneself with the social standing they desired. This confirms the findings presented by Smith (2014) who stated that symbolic consumption within the NTE is driven by the desire to obtain a particular identity and lifestyle. One limitation in comparing this research with Smith (2014), is that he explored an older cohort of respondents, however it signifies the extent society as a whole consume commodities to generate symbolic value. In addition, this corroborates the ethnographic research undertaken by Raymen and Smith (2016), whereby consumption is fundamentally linked to aspects of identity. Therefore, these findings show how consumer culture creates a sense of envy and admiration, which tends to play on anxieties (Fisher, 2009). This highlights the capacity for harms to turn outwards on other consumers, through symbolic forms of violence (Smith and Raymen, 2016). This is irrespective of what Bauman (2009) refers to as the 'moral duty to the other', as norms and values are manipulated by ideological dominance of consumer capitalism, causing desires to be socially mediated.

Participants also acknowledged that leisure venues and drink choices are a vital factor for identity formation was illustrated by this consumer.

*“I am more of a garage kind of guy. Anywhere with a good DJ that I can that I can dance to, get drunk, and maybe take a few [ecstasy pills] ... I’m not like everyone else with their alcopops and mainstream pop music... I always meet random people out and they know me as garage geezer, I think it is cool.” (Garage Geezer, 22-years-old)*

The hedonistic excess of leisure highlights a form of social capital that is used to strengthen social position within the cohort of participants of the NTE, and gain a distinctive identity (McCreanor *et al*, 2005). Accordingly, this excerpt from Garage Geezer indicates a decline in collective identities, and a rise in individualism (Žižek, 2002). Garage Geezer illustrates how the interplay between music and the type of leisure venue enables young people to form an individualistic identity. This finding is also reflected in the work of Riches (2016), that demonstrates through heavy metal scenes and moshpits, how the pleasurable experiences of alcohol consumption can enable individuals to partake in the NTE in ways that would normally be deemed unacceptable. However, this undue emphasis on illegal drug consumption is also discussed by Blackman (2004), which serves to underestimate the influence of the consumer culture and identity nexus with intoxication. Currie (2004) asserts that for young people many of the things that are perceived as being intrinsically pleasurable, are those that are dangerous and can result in harm or death. Many young people go beyond the pleasurable aspects of the NTE, and instead inflict harm on themselves, that arguably also has the ability to cause outward harms, through objective and subjective forms of violence (Žižek, 2008; Winlow and Hall, 2006).

### ***Friendships***

One theme that emerged was that friendships are regularly fabricated within the NTE, with the majority of friendships being solely based on going out. Nearly all of the participants indicated that their friendships were based around ‘going out’, ‘getting drunk’, and having a ‘mad one’. Charlotte an 18-year old bar worker, describes her contact with her friends:

*“I know I’ll see them at the weekend... Every Friday we all meet up, so I suppose there isn’t much need to contact them in the week.”*

Aaron a 22-year old call-centre worker, also describes the dynamics of his friendships:

*“Yeah usually us lads only speak at the weekend. We just all work completely different hours and live different lives... It’s usually a group of 7 of us, sometimes more but I’m probably only close with one of ‘em. To be honest, wouldn’t even know what the others do, just what they drink.”*

This was also highlighted by Winlow and Hall (2009), who acknowledged that young people's friendships are endured within the NTE. The respondents within this research illustrate a difference between friendships that activate within the NTE, and those that operate outside of the night-time leisure culture. The majority of respondents expressed that they rarely have contact with one another during the week, with the only contact being in regard to the aftermath of the night or planning the next. Smith (2014: 157) undertook research within the NTE, and similarly found that friends were used as 'tools to facilitate the entry into the circuits of consumption' and that they are 'often activated through the means of communications technology as the weekend draws near'. This was mirrored by participants from this research, whom all identified that despite them being a group of friends, they didn't really have much in common. Griffin *et al* (2009) also found that when looking at students of the same age, the route to inclusion was through the culture of intoxication.

Furthermore, it was suggested by all of the participants that the act of going out is a form of leisure that easily enables friendships to be built and maintained. However, in order to generate such friendships, they would have to be a regular attendee of the NTE. Emily, a currently unemployed 23-year old, notes the strains of what Bauman (1999) terms are today's liquid modernity:

*"Don't get me wrong, I can't afford it... I've spent two years going from temp job to temp job... I'm not going to not go out though. It is the only time I actually get to see people. Yeah it is expensive but I don't want to just sit in on my own and be miserable. No one wants to miss out. I stayed in one weekend, and the next they didn't invite me out."*

Despite Emily's financial and employment apprehensions, the weekend was identified as a necessity to maintain friendships. The underlying pressures and anxieties associated with the fear of missing out, and the difficulties in maintaining friendships, motivate consumers like Emily to re-enter night-time leisure markets every week (Lancan, 2007). This prospect of denying what Slavoj Žižek (2002; 2008) has identified as the 'injunction to enjoy' was not an option for this group. The possibility of missing out has a large impact among friendships within youth cultures, with friendship bonds being things to be consumed (Bauman, 2001). This was also highlighted by Winlow and Hall (2006: 53), who suggest that 'bonds are no longer rooted in anything more profound than the instrumental display of lifestyle symbolism and cultural competence in the circuits of consumption'. Therefore, this suggests that consumer markets cultivate a sense of lack in the effort to persuade consumers to re-enter the market (Žižek, 2002).

*Researcher's Field Notes:*

*Everyone already appears fairly drunk. Some of the group are slurring their words, yet still holding themselves together in a respectable way. We all chipped in and purchased an array of cheap wines that were on offer this week- it's clear this is going to get a little bit out of hand. They have decided to play a game where we have to voice something we have not done, and if somebody has done it they have to drink. As the game goes on, the questions are getting more personal and explicit to say the least. It's three bottles of wine down and it is now Joe's turn. I can already tell he is going to say something in an attempt to target somebody around the table. Joe slurs: 'I have never missed a fucking good night out with my friends for a bird [a female]'. It appears that Marcus was the culprit for this one. As he necked back his drink, the group began to make jokes. He swears to himself demanding they stop, and looks slightly irritated. After a few minutes he concedes defeat and begins making jokes about himself.*

The majority of participants did acknowledge that, in an ideological sense, progress had been made with the amount they consume. However, it could be argued that the witnessed pressures for one another to excessively consume, in an effort to get more drunk and participate in the group game is suggestive of the underlying anxieties and tensions between competitive consumers of the NTE. Therefore, this is a paradox of a 'cultural injunction to enjoy' (Žižek, 2002). Smith (2013) claims that the insecurities are allied with the fear of cultural inconsequence, stemming from the inability of consumers to access the hedonistic consumer circuits of the NTE. In addition, research from Griffin *et al* (2009) looking at 18-25-year-olds drinking practices, found that drinking stories play a central role in the social lives of young people.

Subsequent to this particular drinking phenomenon, Marcus, a 25-year old window cleaner, expressed his feelings about missing out on nights with his friends:

*"One weekend of not going out and it's like you're out the group, you're a victim to your own friends [Aaron rolls his eyes]. I can take it [the jokes], but it's shit not being able to be involved in the chats and banter we have. Every week they just laugh and have jokes about the previous week. It just makes you feel left out... Man, I'm just going to get completely fucked off my face tonight and forget about it, might even get some gear [drugs]".*

Here, Marcus illustrates how failure to adhere to these cultural norms of going out every weekend can result in a form of anxiety, that is fuelled by consumer capitalism. The promise of a good time, along with the anxiety associated with missing out, pushes young people into the painful realm of night-time leisure markets. With consumer capitalism's offer of an extensive choice of drinks and venues, young people are constantly desiring more, and therefore are experiencing a continual sense of lack in the neophilic society of today. However, consumer markets need to constantly cultivate a sense of lack in order to survive and generate demand, therefore this fear of cultural irrelevance and lack is a depressive

hedonism. The sense that 'something is missing', and the 'inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure' was a significant finding within this research (Fisher, 2009: 21-22). However, the problematic and harmful form of excessive drinking is closely linked to subjective and objective forms of harm, yet it is the most valuable form of consumption for the alcohol industry and their profit margins (Smith and Raymen, 2016). Thus, these harms cultivated by consumer capitalism have the ability to drive the basic consumer towards criminality, such as illegal drug consumption.

### ***The rise of insecurity***

Winlow and Hall (2006) found that for many young people, work was an unavoidable and insignificant part of life, aside from the fact that it provided the funding to enable pleasurable leisure activities. Within this research the obligation to work was not recognised as a negative commotion. Instead the majority of respondents expressed distress over the lack of work opportunities available, and the difficulty in establishing a long-term career, as the following excerpt from Megan, a 24-year-old bartender illustrates:

*"I wanted to work. It's satisfying earning my own money. But at the moment It's job application after job application. Half of them you don't even hear back, or you get offered some shitty temporary position. It's frustrating. It'll be nice to do something you actually want to do... At the moment I'm just stuck in what feels like an endless job, working unsociable hours... I've kind of given up trying now. I just end up spending all my wages getting drunk to keep myself sane."*

Megan identifies how the lack of employment opportunities available are standing in the way of her aspiration to move out of her family home. Although Megan's decision to spend the little money she has may be seen as problematic, her subconscious sense in times of austerity make her believe there is not much of tomorrow to preserve oneself for (Currie, 2004). For many, income is simply there to be spent (Lloyd, 2012). The likelihood of Megan obtaining financial security has altered her perception of work to being something to be 'endured and forgotten', with the sole purpose of funding entry into consumer markets (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 89). This is comparable to the work of Currie (2004), who describes this generation as one that is on the 'Road to Whatever'. He claims 'the current crisis among middle-class adolescents is more than just an aggregation of individual problems (Currie, 2004: 2).

The NTE was recognised by all of the respondents as an opportunity to forget the uncertainty in their lives, in regards to lack of employment and financial security. Jessica, a 23-year old Data Analyst exemplifies her pressures to acquire better employment:

*“Ideally I want a decent job. I didn’t go to university for no reason. The job pays alright and I passed my probation period, but it’s not what I want to do. The worst part is I don’t know what I want to do. But when people I know ask what I’m doing with my life it’s embarrassing. They are all earning way more money than me. I want something better to say. I don’t actually think I’ve been this unhappy in a long time. The only time I am happy is now [holds up her drink].”*

For Jessica, despite her having a secure job and a university degree, the social pressures are pushing her to desire a better job, in which is reflective of a sense of lack. This exemplifies the ideas from psychologist Oliver James (1998) who suggests that the wider social constructs of a person’s life, induces in their bodies low serotonin. He also highlights how society can make individuals feel like ‘losers’, even if they are ‘winners’. Despite the fact that Jessica has a well-paid job, her aspirations have amplified through her tendency to compare herself to others. The permeation of pressure and conflict within youth cultures have contributed towards the underlying anxieties and pressures that lead an individual towards not only the desire to drink, but to get drunk.

Many young people are lured into purchasing the dream of education as a pathway to success, however this harsh reality has evolved to be completely different (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Marcus, a 22-year-old business studies graduate and current call-centre worker expressed similar sentiments:

*“I loved university, but in hindsight what a fucking waste of money. I’ve got mates the same age as me earning more, with better jobs than I’ll probably ever have. Most people go [to university] to just get drunk and have fun, but I actually wanted to make something of myself... It’s a Friday night and I’m fucked off my face again, with two of these [holds up two alcopops], because I call people up for a living... I’m going to be in debt for my whole life, especially now we have left the EU. What a time to be alive”.*

For Marcus, the reality of life was not how he predicted it would be. Winlow and Hall (2006: 6) suggest that ‘the decline of traditional youth transitions and the increasingly unpredictable nature of labour markets generates a riptide of downward mobility and concomitant feelings of insecurity’. Instead of the sold route upwards from further education, many young people are finding themselves unemployed with a large amount of debt, but are still regularly engaging in the NTE. The increase in uncertainty of young people’s lives, along with the pressure to fulfil the lifestyles expected of them was identified by many of the respondents to cause a form of anxiety and hopelessness. This finding was indicative to what Stieger (2013) terms as a form of parasuicide. Beneath the surface appearance of laughter and fun, respondents signified a strange undercurrent of lack, a void and a disregard for one’s own well-being. The lack of both financial and employment security was highlighted as a significant motivation, driving young people towards excessive alcohol consumption.

Therefore, the difficulties and anxieties young people are facing have the capacity for harms to turn outwards through systemic and symbolic forms of violence, in addition to inward harms through a disregard of one's own well-being.

### **Social Media**

Another theme that was present through this research was the relationship between social media and the NTE. The participants all recognised the complexities of alcohol use and social media with expressions of excitement and fun, juxtaposed with accounts of regret, difficulties and exclusion. Social media was a fertile ground for this group to prompt and encourage one another to engage in the NTE on a regular basis.

Participants all held a positive attitude towards the use of Facebook in respect to the ease of organising nights out. However, social media and alcohol use is not always a pleasurable experience, as Harriet, a 24-year old Nurse explains:

*“Usually on nights out I try and stay away from the photos as you just know they will appear on Facebook, or somewhere else online. No one wants pictures of them being shared when they can barely walk. Even if they are just posted in the group [the private Facebook group], you know 40 plus people then have photo of you off your face. It does stop me enjoying my nights... I deleted Facebook a while ago, but then I didn't know where the group were going out. You need it these days, or it is like you are disconnected with the world.”*

This indicates that social networking sites, such as Facebook are becoming embedded in the routines of young people's lives, with it being used as the main avenue to engage with the NTE. The experience of a night out is an opportunity for consumers to live life to the full and escape the problems they face, however for many this is not the case. Instead this hedonistic experience, it is also fuelled by anxieties stemming from the interplay between intoxication and the use of social networking platforms. The intoxicogenic spaces in which drinking practices are created go beyond the night itself, with the disregard for one's own well-being being displayed on social media platforms.

All of the participants recognised the importance of drinking cultures on social networking sites. Luke, a 23-year-old waiter, relayed an anecdote of when he stayed in one night and the rest of the group went out:

*“I stayed in because of money, I thought to myself it's only one night, and most of the nights are the same. But then I had to see the whole night documented on Facebook. Seeing all the pictures and posts online made me feel pretty left out, so I ended up going to meet the group at like 11pm, because I didn't want to completely miss out.”*

This anecdote offered by Luke was interesting as it exemplified the power of social pressures, and showed how being exposed to other people can cultivate feelings of anxiety. This was also evidenced by research from Atkinson *et al* (2014), who found that observing other people's inclusion in drinking practices via social media can result in feelings of missing out. Therefore, this supports the idea from Hall and Winlow (2015: 51), who assert that a 'cursory look at Facebook would suggest that cyberspace is a realm in which the majority of young people, with their often brutally competitive symbolic interactions, are even further immersed in mass-mediated corporate culture'. As a result, the use of social media can be seen to cultivate a sense of lack among young people, and therefore creates this instantaneous circle of desire (Lancan, 2007) to enter and re-enter the night-time leisure markets, in an effort to feel included and relevant.

It was mentioned by one participant, Charlotte an 18-year-old bartender, that she uses Facebook to make others jealous, through sensationalising their night. Charlotte, expressed her desire to use social media:

*"I just do it because everyone else does. If you don't it is like 'oh she isn't having a fun time, I bet she is boring'. I like people to know what I'm doing, and want people to see me looking my best, so I end up uploading pictures."*

However, even when participants are included in the social media and alcohol-fuelled phenomenon, the pressures and tensions to display their lifestyles in a way that is appreciated by others causes a feeling of anxiety. This excerpt from Charlotte and Megan capture this palpable anxiety here:

*"Charlotte: Meg why did you upload that picture? I look so fat, that's probably the worst picture ever."*

*Megan: Sorry Char, I just like my hair in it. I think I look cool."*

*Charlotte: But James will see that picture, he is going to be so happy he isn't with me now... I always see him liking all these pictures of celebrities that look so hot and glam, you know? And I look like this."*

The use of social media to portray oneself in a particular way, even if it is at the expense of someone else, is a common feature of youth culture. Megan displayed a form of self-aggrandizement, where the photograph on social media was one she liked and still uploaded, despite Charlotte disliking the way she looked. Therefore, this is suggestive of the competitive individualism of contemporary society (Smith and Raymen, 2016).

Yar (2012) notes how social media is being used as a will-to-represent, where individuals assert their selfhood through mediated self-presentation, in a hope for social recognition.

These findings are indicative of the fragmented social, where social media is intensifying the competitive and comparative display of lifestyles and consumer competence, creating a continuous sense of objectless anxiety (Smith and Raymen, 2016). Therefore, social media plays a dominant role in shaping desires and aspirations, impacting individual drives and social motivations of consumer culture (Winlow and Hall, 2016). However, the pressures to fulfil the lifestyles expected of them in hope to gain social recognition highlights the anxieties associated with night-time leisure. As Veblen (2007) indicates, the consumption of branded products serves a status of symbol representing a 'seal of approval', and a way to flaunt one's economic means in a competitive consumer society.

Kieran, a 24-year-old student and bartender, expands on this point, and suggests how being exposed to celebrity lifestyles influences his consumption choices:

*"I suppose, I'm easily influenced by what others are doing and wearing. If I see a celebrity that I like wearing a certain brand, or drinking a certain drink then I follow them and do the same. I always want to look my best and think self-representation is so important... I went to Ocean Club in Ibiza last month because I saw that everyone cool was going. Look [Shows a photograph of him via mobile phone]. I think I got like 300 likes on that picture."*

Here, Kieran takes the competitive attitude towards what Hall *et al* (2008) term the narcissistic extreme. The pressure to live up to celebrity lifestyles in order to achieve a high social status and social recognition is a large part of consumer culture. Thus, this goes against Bauman's (2009) idea as a moral 'duty to the other', and instead it is the combined forces of envy, and greed that drive capitalism's subjectivity. Therefore, the assumption can be made that it is the threat of cultural irrelevance, and the anxieties associated with the ideology of not living up to these lifestyles that 'drive the basic hedonism, excess and competitive consumerism of the NTE' (Smith and Raymen, 2016: 7).

## **Conclusion**

The aim of this research paper was to explore three fundamental areas; looking the wider contexts of youthful consumers of the NTE's lives; the difficulties and anxieties they have to face in contemporary times; and how these challenges they are facing tie into drinking habits.

The findings of this study reflect the literature of the topic of youthful consumers that engage within the NTE. The weight of evidence suggests that consumerism has eroded modern forms of civil society, through inducing the belief that consumers are affluent and happy, and therefore this has infiltrated the dreams of youthful consumers. This research paper demonstrates how young people are dealing with the increased pressures in regards to the

lack of employment, lack of financial stability, and the overall uncertainty of their futures. These existential anxieties are causing youthful consumers to feel a sense of hopelessness, which in an attempt to forget, is potentially tied to their drinking habits. Arguably the root cause of these harms associated with the NTE stem from the consumer capitalism, which is intensified by the societal.

The public rhetoric is misrepresenting the true nature of symbolic and systemic forms of harm, and articulates the impression that engaging with the NTE and consuming alcohol is a hedonistic experience. However, despite youthful consumers of the NTE holding this overall view, the findings from this study, in addition to other literature, clearly illustrates that young consumers are quite capable of going beyond this 'pleasurable' experience, to one that pushes them into the realm of pain and suffering (Fisher, 2009; Stiegler, 2013).

Despite the fact that ONS (2015) illustrated a drop in these immediate forms of violence that have a clearly identifiable agent, it remains unclear how many young people are affected by the harms associated with the NTE, as evidence from this research and the supporting academic literature, illustrates that young people are extremely reluctant to report their experiences, as it is seen as a 'injunction to enjoy' (Žižek, 2002), and even some of the negative experiences are reported in a positive way (Griffin *et al*, 2009). Thus this implies that current research surrounding symbolic and systemic forms of violence is likely to be inaccurate, as young people and policy makers are unlikely to be acknowledging these harms directly, and instead pathologise the victims of systemic and symbolic forms of violence. Until society actively demonstrate an acceptance that external factors in their lives are causing them to have an undercurrent of lack and a void, and a strange disregard for one's own well-being, these pressures, challenges, and difficulties that are tied quite potently to excessive alcohol consumption will continue to drive the basic consumer towards the NTE.

The participants of this study demonstrated a willingness to consume in an effort to serve a status symbol and flaunt one's economic means (Veblen, 2007). Given that they pursued what was 'fundamentally expected' of them (Hayward 2004: 161), they continued to experience a sense of lack and a fear of missing out. The pressures to use fashion, music and culture to elevate oneself to others in society, and to engage in the NTE to produce identity and friendships despite the risks debt and health issues was a significant finding within this research. Therefore, social structures of late modernity are being 'artificially constructed' by existential anxieties and harms that emerge from of commodified leisure,

which ultimately are motivating young people to constantly desire yet experience a sense of objectless anxiety (Hall, 2012).

In conclusion, this research study is a valid contribution to the existing literature on why people 'get off their face', and engage with drinking in a manner that goes beyond 'pleasure', into the realm of pain and suffering. It has illuminated the complexities of the mutating harms of the twenty-first century that are causing norms and values of youthful consumers to be manipulated by ideological dominance of consumer capitalism. If this threat of cultural obsolescence and competitiveness is going to continue, then it is essential that harm is no longer disavowed. In doing so, this will advance progress towards the cultivation of an environment in which is able to recognise, and understand the role of consumerism and leisure in relation to symbolic and systemic harms. Young people will then no longer feel a sense of unease in conforming, or not conforming, to these culturally mediated values, and the marginalisation of youthful consumerism. Therefore, this realm of pain and suffering of the extreme (but normalised) drinking habits, in a system cultivated by consumer capitalism can be prevented, and shifted back towards the hedonistic experience desired. All in all, youthful consumer's commitment to the NTE is an endeavour that is reflective of the harms and anxieties of post-modernity.

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