

‘Dulling it down a bit’: Managing Visibility, Sexualities and Risk in the Night Time Economy in Newcastle, UK

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This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Gender, Place & Culture on 08/03/17, available at <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/0966369X.2017.1298575>

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Acknowledgment: This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council under Grant 1116903.

Disclosure Statement: I confirm that no financial interest or benefit has been accrued from the direct application of my research.

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Economy in Newcastle, UK

Abstract

Drawing on qualitative interviews with young women in the UK, this paper highlights how gendered and sexualised negotiations of visibility intersect and continue to be important in the ways in which young women self-regulate bodies and identities to manage risk in the Night Time Economy (NTE). Adopting visible markers of normative, heterosexual femininity on a night out can be understood as simultaneously mitigating against the risks of experiencing certain types of harassment, whilst increasing the risks of experiencing others. This paper reaffirms the relevance of negotiations of visibility in shaping non-heterosexual women’s dress as a strategy for managing the risk of homophobic abuse and demonstrate some of the ways in which *all* young women – regardless of actual or perceived sexual identification - are required to police their bodies in order to manage the additional risks of ‘heterosexualised’ harassment in the NTE. These include threats of sexual violence and harassment primarily associated with women’s positioning as subordinated gendered subjects rather than with the policing of ‘non-normative’ sexualities, with findings suggesting that young women are more concerned with managing the risks associated with a heterosexualised male gaze rather than a homophobic gaze. ‘Everyday’ experiences of harassment are trivialised and normalised in bar and club spaces, and adopting markers of normative, heterosexual femininity was felt to increase the risks of receiving this kind of ‘unwanted attention’. Clearly, young women face challenges as they attempt to negotiate femininities, sexualities and safety and manage intersections of gender and sexuality in contemporary leisure spaces.

Keywords: visibility, sexualities, risk, Night Time Economy, heterosexuality, femininities

Introduction

The concept of visibility has usefully been drawn upon in order to explore the ways in which non-heterosexual individuals may manage their own bodies to hide markers of non-heterosexuality in attempts to minimise the risk of homophobic violence in public spaces (Mason 2001; Corteen 2002). This paper will consider some of the ways in which this concept can also be used to help explore some of the ways in which *all* young women – regardless of sexual orientation – are expected to manage what we might term ‘*heterosexualised*’ risks in and around the bar, pub and club leisure spaces of the Night Time Economy (NTE). These risks encompass the wider threats of sexual violence, assault and harassment that may be associated with women’s position as subordinated gendered subjects in (hetero)sexualised space rather than threats more explicitly concerned with the policing of ‘non-normative’ sexualities. Whilst I in no way wish to deny the ways in which the pervasive possibility of homophobic violence continues to shape the behaviours and experiences of those who do not identify as straight - or of course simply do not *appear* straight - this paper invites us to consider the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect in young women’s negotiations of femininity in the NTE, with the perceived threat of the heterosexualised male gaze often taking precedence over the perceived threat of experiencing homophobic abuse as women grapple with the pleasures and risks of visibility and the pressures to display markers of normative, heterosexual femininity.

Drawing on research comprised of qualitative, semi-structured interviews with young women who participate in the NTE in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK, this paper will explore the ways in which the young women negotiated risk, femininities and identities through strategies which required a consideration of the ways in which their bodies were made visible or hidden, particularly around the extent to which they adopted or rejected visible markers of normative, heterosexual femininities. After a consideration of the ways in which ‘appropriate’ displays of femininity and sexuality are tied to risk management and an overview of the ‘girls’ night out’

research project, I will highlight some of the ways in which ‘doing’ heterosexual femininity on a night out was seen by some of the participants to have value and offer a positive way of being visible in bar and club spaces. For non-heterosexual participants, visibly ‘passing’ as straight could also be understood as a safekeeping strategy. I will then consider the ways in which *all* young women in the sample were expected to self-police dress and practices to manage the risks they experienced as subordinated gendered and sexual subjects in the predominantly heterosexualised spaces of NTE, including catcalling, groping and unsolicited sexual advances. Considerations of visibility will once again be shown to impact upon risk management processes, with women deploying particular safekeeping strategies such as playing down or completely rejecting visual markers of heterosexual femininity as strategies to be less visible / invisible within the NTE. Visibility as a ‘successful’ feminine subject can thus be understood as potentially both desirable *and* risky as women continue to negotiate both a ‘homophobic gaze’ and a wider ‘male gaze’¹. Adopting visible markers of normative, heterosexual femininity on a night out was thus framed as simultaneously mitigating against the risks of experiencing homophobic harassment whilst *increasing* the risks of experiencing heterosexualised harassment. Several of the LGBT participants were *more* concerned about the risk of heterosexualised abuse, suggesting that the harassment and violence these participants fear they may experience as *women* supercedes that which they fear experiencing as *non-straight*. Consequently, managing gendered and sexualised identities in the contemporary leisure spaces of the NTE arguably continues to be an imperative to ‘manage the unmanageable’ (Mason 2001, 40) in sexualised spaces.

Theorising Femininities, Sexualities and Visibility

¹ The concept of the ‘male gaze’ (Mulvey 1989) positions men as active subjects able to exert a desiring and sexualised ‘gaze’ on women, who are positioned largely as passive recipients of this ‘gaze’

‘Appropriately’ feminine behaviour has traditionally been associated with passivity, submissiveness and control over one’s sexuality, sexual behaviour and sexual reputation (Lees 1989). The successful management of ‘risk’ is a key aspect of respectable femininity; as Haydock argues, ‘appropriate feminine behaviour is to be responsible, calculating [and] risk-averse’ (2009, 96). Traditional femininity thus requires women to engage in various ‘safekeeping’ strategies (Campbell 2005) which affect their autonomous and free use of public space (Brooks 2008). This constant pressure to remain vigilant and deploy various safekeeping measures not only curtails women’s freedom of movement, but also operates directly on bodies; risk discourses ‘are directed at the regulation of the body’ and used as personal disciplining techniques (Lupton 1999, 88). Women are thus charged with taking individual responsibility for their own safety and may be subjected to blame if they are seen to have made themselves ‘vulnerable’ through failing to adhere to standards of appropriate feminine behaviour (Brooks 2008). Non-heterosexual women arguably experience a double imperative to manage risk; just as being a responsible woman requires investment in safekeeping practices, the so-called ‘responsible queer’ is expected to employ various strategies to avoid homophobic violence and harassment (Stanko and Curry 1997).

Considerations of visibility have been identified as key in processes of risk management amongst non-heterosexual communities; with previous research usefully exploring some of the ways in which women who identify as lesbian, bisexual or queer may manage the risk of homophobic violence through policing their embodied, sexualised identities in public space (Mason 2001; Corteen 2002). Visibility can be understood here as concerned with both the ways in which one is made visible to and thus read and recognised by others, and the extent to which one is even visible at all. It is important to note that visibility has of course been key in processes of legitimising some sexual identities and in fights for recognition, rights and space

through queer politics (Evans 1993). As Hayfield et al. (2013) argue, visibility and recognition can be important and positive for non-heterosexual individuals and communities, acting as a means through which to express pride and identify as part of a community. Mason agrees that there may be pleasure in making a ‘spectacle of oneself’ through being blatant about one’s sexuality (2001, 35), and visibility may also represent a tactic for resisting heteronormative space and culture (Krakauer and Rose 2002). However, visibility may not always be deemed appropriate, prudent or safe in public space that is always by default ‘heterosexualised’ (Valentine 1996). This heterosexualisation of public space normalises and naturalises displays of heterosexuality and marginalises or denies practices and identities deemed to be ‘non-normative’, meaning those who are – or appear to be² – non-straight may be at risk of homophobic violence (Corteen 2002). Hayfield et al. agree that for lesbians – particularly butch lesbians – ‘visibility becomes vulnerability’ (2013, 173); when lesbians do make their sexuality explicit through their appearance ‘it can lead to societal disapproval, discrimination, and homophobic violence or attacks’ (2013, 173). Mason (2001) highlights how individualised ‘knowledges’ of homophobic violence are used in the construction of ‘safety maps’; personalised and ever-changing assessments of variables, contexts and spaces. External conditions are assessed and decisions made around how sexual identity is mediated and presented through the body and behaviours at any given time. The variables taken into consideration may include factors as diverse as previous experience of violence, time of day and the different types of violence to which we believe we might be vulnerable. These processes are both spatialised and embodied; a ‘safety map’ is also necessarily a ‘body map’ in which the non-heterosexual body is mapped for signs of non-compliance with heterosexual norms that may put the individual at increased risk of violence (2001, 33). This is of course not

² It is how the body is read and interpreted by others that is significant here, meaning that even those who *appear* to be non-straight, regardless of their own sexual identities, may also become vulnerable (Stanko and Curry 1997)

always wholly limiting, controlling or reactionary, but can be understood as a means through which non-heterosexuals can take control of their safety in various contexts (Corteen 2002, 267). These maps are inevitably shaped by considerations of visibility; ‘...safety from the hostility of homophobia may be negotiated in a multitude of ways, but each negotiation inevitably turns on the question of visibility’ (Mason 2001, 33).

Other research focuses on the specific ways in which young women manage *heterosexualised* risk in the NTE. For example, Leyshon’s (2008) research with young women in rural drinking venues suggests women may dress conservatively as a deliberate strategy to avoid unwanted attention from men. Similarly, Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray’s research in an Australian context suggests that women engaging in the NTE remain aware of the male gaze and are likely to engage ‘in a range of disciplinary practices of bodily comportment and management’ (2011, 263) in order to either emphasise or play down their femininity and to display their bodies in particular kinds of (de)sexualised ways. Drawing on research with young women regarding their experiences in the NTE, this paper builds on prior research to explore some of the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect in all young women’s negotiations of visibility and risk, with the threat of heterosexualised risk frequently framed as the primary concern for both straight and LGBT women. In doing so, this paper responds to calls for further research that engages directly with young people’s own embodied experiences of risk and safety in bar and club contexts (Fileborn 2016) and draws on an intersectional approach through considering how gender and sexuality intersect in nightlife settings, and some of the tensions between them. Intersectionality requires us to attend to what Brah and Phoenix describe as the ‘complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect’ (2004, 76). In this

sense, gender and sexuality³ cannot be separated in analyses of women's lives and experiences, and this paper demonstrates the ways in which considerations of both categories press simultaneously upon women's bodies and shape their negotiations of risk and visibility in contemporary leisure spaces.

'A Girls' Night Out Research Project': Researching Femininities in the NTE

The 'Girls' Night Out Project' was a 3 year ESRC-funded research project based in Newcastle, North-East England and involving qualitative interviews with 26 young women aged 18-25 who participate in the city's NTE. The research focused on exploring their understandings of the boundaries of 'appropriate' femininity, and the ways in which these boundaries were negotiated through 'doing' gender and sexuality in particular embodied ways in the NTE. The NTE can be defined here as the groupings of bars and nightlife clubs concentrated within city centres. Whilst it is recognised that there is considerable variation in the types of venue present in these spaces (including differentiation between bars, pubs and clubs, mainstream and niche settings and venues catering to different audiences and music tastes), most of the participants tended to frequent 'mainstream' bars and clubs concentrated mainly within the 'Diamond Strip' area of Newcastle. This was perceived to be an 'upmarket' drinking area consisting of 'classy' bars and clubs where bouncers often policed entry based at least in part on dress and appearance. Theoretically, the study drew on elements of a symbolic interactionist approach, situating gender and sexuality 'within the mundane activities of social life' (Jackson and Scott 2010, 2), where they are constructed through practices and interactions and fully embedded in the everyday. Sexualities and genders are thus not biological but rather are

³ A consideration of 'race' is beyond the scope of this paper, although all of the participants were white and race – although rarely raised directly – was alluded to throughout the data

‘accomplished’ through the repetition of particular sets of normative practices and behaviours (West and Zimmerman 1987). The study was particularly concerned with the links between practices and identities and the ways in which gendered, sexualised and classed identities are constituted by individuals through embodied interactions and lived experiences in a post-industrial city. Interviews were semi-structured and in-depth, in an attempt to elicit rich and detailed data on individuals’ own experiences and practices and the meanings they attribute to these (Warren 2002), with my own position as a young female researcher familiar with the city’s NTE often helping me to build rapport as I confirmed my knowledge of the different venues discussed. Thematic analysis was used to highlight key themes across the data. Diversity was sought in terms of participant class, educational background and sexual orientation in a move away from other research on young people’s engagement with the NTE that – according to Gill et al. (2007) - has tended to focus on heterosexual, student populations. 17 of the participants self-identified as straight, 5 as bisexual, 3 as lesbian, and 1 as queer. This research did not specifically consider differences in the experiences of butch and femme lesbians, as very few participants identified as butch or femme. However, as previous research suggests, experiences of visibility, risk and homophobic violence may be very different for butch and femme women (Hemmings 1999; Eves 2004). The sample consisted of both students and non-students, and locals and non-locals. Participants were recruited through a variety of means including Facebook, presentations at university and college classes and snowball sampling in local workplaces.

The NTE represents an interesting arena in which to consider some of the ways in which space, risk and sexualities are inextricably linked, with Pilcher arguing that through ‘considering women’s participation in sexualised leisure spaces we can begin to analyse the intersection of geographies, gender, sexualities and space’ (2011, 233). As Griffin et al. argue, young women

are simultaneously ‘called on to look and act as agentically sexy within a pornified night-time economy, but to distance themselves from the troubling figure of the ‘drunken slut’ (2013, 184). The contemporary NTE has on the one hand been conceptualised as an increasingly ‘feminised’ space, where broader changes in their social positions have allowed women to enter this previously male domain (Lyons and Willott 2008), experiment with different feminine identities and re-write traditional sexual scripts (Sheehan and Ridge 2001; Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray 2011). However, the NTE can also be understood as a site of control and regulation where young women are expected to conform to certain modes of respectable, normative, heterosexual femininity through behaviour, drinking choices and of course dress and appearance (Nicholls 2016). Buckley and Fawcett argue that the NTE legitimises the visual display of ‘hyper-sexualised femininities’ through clothes that are glamorous, revealing and erotic (2002, 132), whilst Tan remarks that ‘clubs are paradoxical spaces for performing gendered and (hetero)sexualized selves that vacillate between affirming and subverting heteropatriarchal regimes’ (2013, 23), where women are expected to challenge understandings of femininity as timid and reserved, yet still present ‘(hetero)sexy’ bodies. The geographical setting of the study within the post-industrial ‘party city’ of Newcastle-upon-Tyne must also be considered. Notably, ‘exaggerated’ forms of femininity may be normalised within such contexts, with classed media depictions of ‘Geordie’ femininities portraying local women’s alcohol consumption and dress as excessive, much as with other regional identities such as the ‘Essex Girl’ (Woods, 2014). Indeed, the ‘typical’ Geordie woman’s outfit has been depicted as ‘glamorous in nature, combining ostentation in terms of glossy and clingy materials with the erotic display of limbs and cleavage’ (Buckley and Fawcett 2002, 132). The NTE can also be identified as a sexualised space where the existing social order is upheld and reified through heteronormative patterns of social interaction that position men as sexually predatory and competitive and women as passive (Kavanagh 2013). Hubbard (2007) describes the NTE

as a site of various ‘pleasures’ and ‘dangers’; young women’s engagement with leisure spaces after dark can be regarded as particularly ‘risky’. Previous research highlights some of the extensive safekeeping practices that women continually engage in, with measures such as guarding drinks, limiting alcohol consumption and turning to male friends for ‘protection’ regarded as ‘common-sense’ and gender-specific (Brooks 2008). Whilst it should be noted that many of these strategies were also employed by a majority of participants in the current study, this paper will report primarily on young women’s reflections on how they managed the ways in which they were made visible – or otherwise - within the spaces of the NTE as gendered and sexualised subjects, primarily through their acceptance or rejection of some of these pressures to present ‘hypersexualised’ or ‘(hetero)sexy’ bodies. Such negotiations can be simultaneously conceptualised as potential sources of pleasure, safety and risk.

‘Showing Off that I’m a Girl’: Doing Heterosexual Femininity on a Night Out

Being visible as a particular type of gendered and sexualised subject need not always be associated primarily with risk, but may be understood as an ‘achievement’ (Eves 2004, 492), and was certainly identified as such for some of the participants in the current study. As Buckley and Fawcett argue, *all* women are highly visible within the spaces of the NTE and often ‘reduced to their corporeal selves’ (2002, 135); some of the participants were aware that their bodies were frequently subjected to the gaze of both men and other women, and wanted to be seen and noticed by others or to receive male attention and validation of heterosexual attractiveness:

...of course, you always wanna go out and think, you know, ‘do I look good enough for guys to walk past and have a look, or come up to me?’

(Joanna, 24, straight)

There was universal agreement that looking ‘appropriately’ feminine within the NTE required the adoption of a more emphasised, exaggerated and – to an extent – (hetero)sexualised femininity than would be expected in other contexts, highlighting overlaps between ‘doing’ gender and ‘doing’ sexuality in contemporary leisure spaces. This frequently involved wearing tight-fitting dresses and high heels to accentuate feminine curves, and using make-up products such as lipstick or false eyelashes to enhance parts of the body typically associated with femininity. Hayfield et al. (2013) agree that particular exaggerated modes of distinctly (hetero)sexualised femininity are normalised and expected in these leisure spaces, and this may be particularly true in cities such as Newcastle. For several of the participants - both local Geordies and non-Geordies - there was clearly perceived value in investing to an extent in these types of displays of normative, heterosexual femininity, echoing Waitt, Jessop and Gorman-Murray’s (2011) point that investing in ‘sexy’ femininity may give *some* young women a sense of individual empowerment and social power. Furthermore, dressing in such ways could often facilitate access to the mainstream bars and clubs many of the participants frequented, which often had particular dresscodes and entry policies. Clothing and appearance may also play a role for young women in the expression of their sexuality (Gleeson and Frith, 2004), through ‘articulating sexual desires and identities... and in producing sexuality as an important aspect of identity’ (Hayfield et al. 2013, 172). Krakauer and Rose (2002) argue this may be particularly relevant in lesbian women’s attempts to convey a lesbian identity to others (see also Clarke and Turner 2007). However, there was very limited discussion of such strategies in the current study. Rather, striving to achieve a degree of visibility and recognition within the spaces of the NTE was clearly associated with doing *heterosexual* femininity through the

successful production and display of an exaggeratedly feminine body. Being visible in the NTE in the 'right' kinds of ways could also be used a means to 'flash' one's femininity and reassert oneself as an appropriately feminine, gendered subject:

INT: And is it important for you to be seen as looking feminine on a night out?

A little bit, but I think only because I don't go out that often... and I think everyone at uni has this perception of me as being quite like, not *manly* but one of the lads, and quite down to earth, so when I do go out, if I've got a dress on it's like 'bloody hell, you've got a dress on!'

(Susie, 22, straight)

Throughout the interview Susie talked about being a 'bit of a tomboy'; yet at times displaying visible markers of a more conventionally feminine identity was clearly important to her. Ally also described herself as a tomboy, yet at numerous points in the interview distanced herself from what she regarded as the 'butch' stereotypes attributed to lesbian women (Clarke and Turner 2007; Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell 2014):

I *hate* the stereotypes of being bisexual or lesbian. And it's just like, 'why should I conform to that?' I like being a girl, I like wearing heels, I like going out in dresses... I like wearing make-up... I like showing off that I'm a *girl*, you know, this is who I am. And I like long hair [laughter].... couldn't cut my hair.

(Ally, 21, bisexual)

Ally clearly emphasises the importance to her of ‘being a girl’ and ‘showing off’ her femininity to others through her appearance and clothing. In contrast, Naomi, who was transgender, described more of a balancing act between displaying her gender and her sexuality to others. Building on Mason’s (2001) idea of individuals shifting strategically in and out of the metaphorical closet through the extent to which they make their sexuality visibility, the use of particular markers of femininity or masculinity allowed Naomi to play with different aspects of her identity and position herself flexibly at various intersections of femininity, gender and sexuality depending on her mood:

Sometimes I’ll think it’s quite important to look feminine, just to show that I am actually a girl, and stuff. But then, sometimes, with being butch, it’s like I want to show that I’m butch as well...

(19, lesbian)

There are interesting distinctions to be made between the gendered gaze and the sexualised gaze here, with Hemmings (1999) noting that some femme lesbians are able to position themselves as ‘invisible’ sexually but necessarily remain visible as gendered because ‘femininity is highly visible’ (1999, 456). Such practices by Ally and Susie mirror Holland’s (2004) reflections on the use of ‘recuperative strategies’ by female tomboys in order to reassert a normative feminine identity. Similarly, Donna, who identified as queer, avoided wearing what she regarded as ‘butch lesbian hoodies’ on a night out. As Holland (2004) suggests, women who do not always fit the conventions of femininity may still ‘flash’ elements of more traditional femininity to present themselves as feminine women. Some of the young women in

the current study used particular indicators of femininity such as long hair and dresses to do just that.

Being visible as a ‘successful’ – read heterosexual - feminine subject could also be linked to safety in the NTE. Corteen (2002) touches on the importance for some young women of ‘passing’ as heterosexual as a safety mechanism, including through the avoidance of wearing clothing that can visibly mark individuals out as lesbians in certain contexts, including unfamiliar spaces or when travelling through public space to access clubs and venues. This was also evidenced in the current study, where ‘looking’ straight or ‘passing’ as straight was felt by some to reduce the risk of homophobic abuse:

I think I’m safe because I personally don’t think I look gay, or like I like girls.

(Ally, 21, bisexual)

Ally felt the fact that she doesn’t look ‘gay’ increased her safety in public space. Others also felt that they or their friends were relatively safe on the straight scene because their non-heterosexuality was not necessarily easily identifiable to others. Claire – for example - speculated that part of the reason her gay friends do not worry about the risks of homophobic abuse on a night out may be because none of them are ‘obviously gay’. Many of the non-heterosexual participants also talked about deliberately altering clothing and appearance on the straight scene compared to the gay scene in order to display a more ‘girly’ or ‘feminine’ appearance:

I'm with the LGBT Society, so if I'm going out with them, me getting ready doesn't change that much. It's always t-shirt, jeans, trainers. But if I'm going out with my friends who aren't in the LGBT Society, I dress up more. And.... it's more feminine.

INT: Yeah. So why are you dressing more 'feminine', as you say....?

Cause all of my friends are really girly and dress that way. And I don't want it to be that I turn up in converse and jeans and stand out... [pause]... I like to blend into the background.

(Kate, 20, lesbian)

For participants such as Kate, this involved deliberately adopting markers of heterosexual femininity in order to 'fit in' and meet the heterosexual dresscodes adopted by others on the straight scene (and of course, as suggested above, to guarantee entry to mainstream venues). Wattis, Green and Radford (2011) report similar findings on research with students engaging with the NTE, with visibility associated with 'standing out' and feeling vulnerable. It is interesting to note that achieving conventional heterosexualised femininity could be read as a strategy for visibility by some women, and for invisibility by others. Whilst Ally associated looking straight with visibility and 'showing off' her femininity, Kate saw it as a strategy for *invisibility* and a means to 'blend in', echoing Corteen's (2002) findings on some of the distinctions between passing as straight and passing as invisible in public space, with the latter goal more important for some young non-heterosexual women. It is also important to note that the ways in which young women might hide or make visible particular markers of gender and sexuality could vary depending on context and location. Kate – and several others – outlined

clear differences in how they dress within and outside the gay scene. Such findings build on Mason's (2001) argument that safety maps are largely context-dependent and spatialised. These measures allowed the young women to map out settings where they felt that their sexuality should not or could be made publicly visible and alter dress accordingly, an important process as a number of the women had directly experienced homophobic abuse in straight space, including being physically assaulted and being verbally abused or threatened.

'Dulling it down a little bit': Managing 'Heterosexualised' Risk

As illustrated above, it was apparent from the data that adopting an exaggerated and to an extent sexualised mode of normative femininity in the NTE did have value for some women, and could also be seen as a source of safety. However, whilst 'looking straight' might be seen as a useful safety mechanism by some of the young women, this feeling was not shared universally. And whilst being visible as suitably 'feminine' to an extent in the NTE could be regarded as desirable, dressing in what was perceived to be *too* sexualised or even 'too feminine' a manner was frequently associated with attracting unwelcome sexual attention and harassment, as suggested in previous research (see for example Leyshon 2008):

I was having a conversation with my friend about this, cause she really overperforms femininity on a night out. And she said that's the only way she'll feel good when she's out. But *I* don't feel like it's very *safe*. I feel a lot more safe if I'm *not* doing it.

INT: So why doesn't it feel safe?

I think you just feel like you're in the sorta... *gaze*... of everybody in a club if you're doing that. And you're sort of on their *radar*, especially if it's in a straight club with all these men trying to pick somebody up. Say if you're out in some club, and it's all these guys trying to pick up women, and you're, kind of like, 'Oh I'm dressed up'... and you look like you're going out to get with someone. You're probably *not* but I guess that's what they assume, right? So you just get to the point where you're thinking, 'Oh there's really predatory men *watching* us'.

(Gail, 24, bisexual)

Gail's choice of language is particularly interesting here, as she uses a number of words and phrases that allude to the fact that an overperformance of femininity positions women as not just visible but *hypervisible* within the NTE, including 'gaze', 'radar' and 'watching us'. It is the gaze of men – specifically 'predatory men' – that is positioned as problematic here. These points regarding an uncomfortable and unwelcome male gaze were echoed across a number of interviews:

Some of the *men*, the way they look at you... I just think, I wouldn't wanna dress like that [in revealing clothing] knowing that people would look... *stare* at me like that. Even though you *should* be able to wear what you want, I don't think you can, especially as a woman. You have to keep certain parts of you covered up. Because you *will* attract unwanted attention.

(Kimberley, 20, straight)

Kimberley also explicitly draws on terms such as ‘look’ and ‘stare’ to highlight the ways in which dressing in particular ways can position women as highly visible within these spaces and attract ‘unwanted attention’. This term was used across a number of interviews to describe what I term ‘heterosexualised’ risk. This could include harassment (typically groping, catcalling and unsolicited touching, attention or sexual advances from men) and also sexual violence or assault. Heterosexualised harassment was commonly encountered in the NTE and – whilst identified as a source of anger and frustration - was seen by many participants as trivialised and almost to be expected, particularly within certain spaces in the city centre, such as the notorious Bigg Market (an area associated with ‘local’ men and women and with increased levels of violence and harassment by many of the student participants). This highlights some of the ways in which women constructed their own personal safety maps and mirrors the findings of Green and Singleton (2006), who argue that women are forced to adopt a number of safekeeping strategies to navigate public space, including regarding certain areas as risky or ‘off-limits’. The recognition of the normalisation and pervasiveness of harassment echoes Corteen’s (2002) point that gendered verbal abuse and harassment is often downplayed or undermined, with the labelling of acts such as wolf whistles as ‘trivial’ and ‘everyday’ acting as part of the processes through which male violence against women is legitimised. Kavanaugh agrees that bars and clubs can be understood as ‘intensely sexualized social spaces’ (2013, 21) where unwanted sexual contact is both commonplace and normalised, and patterns of interactions between men and women are ‘intensely sexualized [and] heteronormative’ (2013, 22). Although direct experiences of sexual violence, rape or assault were extremely rare, this remained overwhelmingly the primary concern for the majority of young women in the current study, highlighting some of the ways in which this perceived ‘low level’ everyday harassment may form part of a wider continuum of sexual violence (Kelly 1988). Reflections on these types of risk were threaded throughout all of the interviews (even when ‘risk’ was not the direct

topic of discussion) and the pervasive normalisation of heterosexual harassment in these spaces clearly impacted directly upon dress and behaviour. For example, there was clear evidence in the data that many of the participants did not feel that women have a completely free choice regarding what they wear on nights out and felt compelled to keep parts of their body literally ‘covered up’ and hidden:

There would be situations where you’d have guys come up to you and grope you and stuff like that. And I didn’t want that attention. I don’t like anything about that. So, I guess by dulling it down a little bit, and not looking so provocative... you change the people who are attracted to you. And yeah, OK, you could argue that less people then become attracted to you, but then on the other hand, you kinda win a little bit, because you don’t have that negative attitude, and the groping and all that sort of stuff.

(Lydia, 21, straight)

As Lydia suggests, a common strategy for managing ‘unwanted attention’ such as groping was to ‘dull it down’ in terms of dress, or dress in a less ‘provocative’ way. Although Lydia does feel that this has potentially unwanted consequences – ‘less people then become attracted to you’ – it is clear that this was perceived to be worth the cost in terms of providing an apparent means for women to manage their bodies and appearance in way that could minimise risks through making women less visible in the NTE. As women’s sexuality has traditionally been regulated through gendered constructions of risk that position an active and desiring sexual identity as ‘dangerous’ in terms of both safety and reputation, it is perhaps not surprising that women experienced pressure to avoid displaying their bodies in overtly sexualised ways. Lydia also added that appropriate dress was important because ‘you’ve got to be careful that you

don't give the wrong impression, and you don't lead people on'. Likewise, there was also an expectation that behaviour should be controlled and managed to avoid the same issue:

If you flirt too much, then that's always a bad thing [laughter]. Cause you don't wanna lead guys on, make them think that they have a chance of something.

(Emma, 20, bisexual)

Throughout the interviews, the onus was placed on ways that women can take action to avoid unwanted attention, rather than problematizing the behaviour of male perpetrators of harassment. This builds on Rudolfsdottir and Morgan's suggestion that women are instructed to contain their sexuality 'to avoid being harmed by predatory men but also to 'protect' men from misreading the signals about your sexual availability' (2009, 500). Whilst men were positioned as agentic and actively desiring, women were expected to not just keep their own desires in check, but also to act as 'guardians' of insatiable male sexuality (Batchelor, Kitzinger and Burtney 2004):

...men think with their penises, so women who are dressed more provocatively, they're showing off their figure, they're showing what they've got, and how good they look. And compared to a woman who has her figure hidden, she's a lot more attractive. Chances are you're gonna want her more.

(Kate, 20, lesbian)

Here, Kate naturalises the idea that 'men think with their penises', echoing dominant messages in many sex education resources targeted at young people (Holland, Sharpe and Thomson

2004). She also again uses particular types of language around visibility – ‘showing off’, ‘hidden’ – to argue that women who are dressed more provocatively are more at risk of having to manage unsolicited sexual advances from men. This was echoed by other participants who cautioned against dressing ‘inappropriately’ or enticing and encouraging men:

If you dress.... quite inappropriately, like, flaunting yourself, you could maybe get into trouble with, you know, older men. Or men that want to take advantage of you. Because I think that people look like a really easy target if they dress inappropriately, cause it’s just like they’re wanting the attention... but maybe that attention can turn quite negative.

(Alex, 19, straight)

This focus on individual self-disciplinary techniques clearly shifts responsibility for the management of the risks of violence and crime onto ‘would-be victims’ rather than potential perpetrators (Stanko and Curry 1997, 519) and positions women as responsible for managing both ‘the desires they evoke in others and the consequences others’ desires have for themselves’ (Rudolfsdottir and Morgan 2009, 503).

‘Being completely invisible’: Invisibility and Safety through ‘Boyish’ Dress

This ‘toning down’ of dress and behaviour was more often regarded as a useful strategy by heterosexual participants, suggesting they were more concerned with being *less* visible or visible in particular kinds of ways rather than with invisibility per se. In contrast, lesbian, bisexual and queer participants were more likely to talk more explicitly about being *invisible* in the NTE. For some, this involved rejecting conventional heteronormative standards of feminine appearance:

For a while I didn't go out, and then I just went out dressed like a 15 year old boy.... being completely invisible. Cause it was like, I'm not gonna let it intimidate me. I was not recognisable... cause people don't *see* you if you're a woman and you're not really dressed up.

(Gail, 24, bisexual)

...when I was younger, I would go out, not quite in drag but, you know, enough that I was androgynous. And I wouldn't get the harassment that I would, if I'd went out all girlied up.

(Fran, 18, bisexual)

Here, masculine, boyish or androgynous dress are seen to function as a means through which to provide a degree of invisibility in space where the visible female body acts as a marker of 'value' for women in the NTE, with clothing and dress expected to be managed in ways that consciously highlight and foreground aspects of the 'feminine' body (Buckley and Fawcett 2002, 138). Rejection of heteronormative, mainstream dresscodes may provide a means by which to reject the heterosexual male gaze and associated harassment (Krakauer and Rose 2002). As Skeggs (1999) suggests, invisibility can act as a respite and offer freedom from the need to engage in self-surveillance. Such processes may also serve as a means to desexualise the female body in these spaces through invoking ways of dressing that are not just masculinised but also childlike – 'a 15 year old boy' – as strategies to avoid unwanted attention. However, I would argue that boyish, masculine or androgynous dress may also present

particular risks, particularly where women fail to ‘pass’ as straight. It would seem that these participants were prepared to arguably increase their risk of experiencing homophobic violence by shunning more ‘feminine’ modes of dress. Sometimes this mode of dressing was also felt to be expected outside of mainstream venues and on the gay scene as an appearance marked as ‘too feminine could result in women being denied entry to gay clubs and bars:

I’ve been known to go on a night out in men’s jeans and a big t-shirt. And there *were* places [on the gay scene] that said ‘you can’t come in dressed like that’, and I went ‘what, if I had my hair short and I was a bit bigger, and I looked like your *typical* lesbian, you’d let me in!’ ... But because I’m a girly girl dressed in guy’s clothes, apparently I’m not allowed in!

(Georgina, 20, lesbian)

As Georgina explains, even dressing in what might be perceived as more ‘masculine’ clothing might not be sufficient for entry to gay bars and clubs as she doesn’t feel she looks like a ‘typical’ lesbian in terms of her build and hairstyle. With the majority of LGBT participants regular users of both the straight and gay scene in Newcastle, considerations of various and often very different dresscodes and door policies clearly represented another way in which appearance had to be managed and negotiated according to setting and venues. Thus, those who seek invisibility or to escape the male gaze on the gay scene are arguably placed in an untenable position where playing down femininity may be seen as a positive means by which to resist the heterosexual male gaze – or a necessary condition for entry to certain bars - yet at the same time come with the unintended risks of homophobic abuse and violence that women may experience through failing to comply to normative heterosexual dresscodes (Huxley, Clarke and Halliwell 2014, 214). Rejecting heteronormative dresscodes thus arguably leaves women in a ‘catch 22’ position where failing to ‘pass’ as straight may increase the risk of

experiencing homophobic violence even as the risk of heterosexualised violence is perceived to decrease. For the women making that particular choice, this suggests that the perceived risks of simply being present in the NTE as a *woman* may take precedence over the perceived risks of being visible as *non-straight*. Stanko and Curry also note that women may find their sexual identities as lesbian ‘hidden behind the often more important identity of woman as a subordinated sexual object’ (1997, 524), suggesting that the risks of simply being a woman may take centre-stage, particularly in spaces such as the NTE where heterosexualised harassment and abuse is trivialised, normalised and pervasive.

Conclusion

Clearly, appearance can both consciously and unconsciously communicate particular types of gendered and sexualised identities (Corteen 2002) regardless of sexual preferences, identification or orientation. This paper has highlighted how all young women are expected to attempt to manage the ways in which – and the extent to which – they are made visible as certain types of gendered and sexualised subjects in the leisure spaces of the NTE. Such spaces are clearly sites of some tension; whilst (hetero)sexualised displays of femininity may be valued, recognised and pleasurable to an extent, it is clear that gendered discourses of risk continue to shape participants’ negotiations of sexual identities within the spaces of the NTE. Whilst beyond the scope of this paper, it is also important to consider the classed dimensions of visibility. As Skeggs argues, invisibility may be seen as offering a form of freedom from the need to engage in self-surveillance and act ‘responsibly’ for straight, working-class women who ‘are constantly judged and made visible through the discourse of respectability’ (1999, 228). Working-class women are frequently positioned as hyper-visible, vulgar and excessive (Lawler 2005) and this may be particularly the case in the NTE, where the ‘loud’ and ‘disgusting’ hen-partying woman may be framed as the contemporary embodiment of moral

disgust at the working-class (Skeggs 2005). Such findings highlight the ways in which women may lack control over the ways in which, and the extent to which, they are made visible within contemporary leisure contexts.

As Mason argues, the relationship between sexuality and visibility is ambiguous, constantly in flux and ‘a source of much uncertainty and tension’ (2001, 40). Indeed, for the women involved in this study, managing visibility was an ongoing process requiring (re)negotiation in different contexts. Participants experienced expectations, pressure and sometimes the desire to present themselves as certain kinds of (hetero)sexualised subjects in the spaces of the NTE, but without appearing to be ‘enticing’ or ‘encouraging’ men and inviting the risk of abuse and harassment. Engaging in heteronormative modes of femininity through dress could simultaneously be positioned as a source of safety and risk. For example, ‘passing’ as straight was seen by some women as a way to mitigate the risks of homophobic abuse and harassment in the NTE, as reported in previous research (Mason 2001; Corteen 2002). Yet such ways of dressing were often felt to *increase* other types of risk - specifically the heterosexualised risks of ‘unwanted attention’, harassment and groping - through making women more visible as certain types of sexualised subjects in the NTE. As a result, arguments around ‘dulling down’ femininity were prevalent in the data; highlighting the balancing act women negotiate in managing their bodies in the NTE. Likewise, shunning heteronormative dresscodes could also be a source of both safety and risk. Such modes of dress could be associated with invisibility and offer respite from heterosexualised attention and harassment, yet arguably increase the risk of experiencing homophobic violence and abuse in spaces where non-normative behaviour and dress may continue to be heavily policed and challenged. The nexus of visibility is a useful tool in understanding some of the ways in which women may be required to negotiate both a homophobic gaze *and* an implicitly heterosexualised male gaze as they manage the perceived

risk of both homophobic and (hetero)sexualised violence, harassment and abuse in contemporary leisure spaces, with LGBT participants frequently more concerned about the threat of (hetero)sexualised abuse above homophobic abuse. Such findings help to extend knowledge of the ways in which gender and sexuality intersect in distinctly heterosexualised spaces where the risks associated with simply being a woman may dominate both straight and non-straight women's negotiations of dress and appearance.

Whilst it is recognised that participating in city centre nightlife is just one mode of contemporary engagement with public space, this paper highlights some of the ways in which the heteronormativity of such spaces continues to act as a form of governance to police and control not just 'non-normative' dress and appearance (Corteen, 2002), but *all* women's dress. What Corteen describes as 'the prevalence of heteronormativity' (2002, 273) and Skeggs labels 'violent, gawking, entitled, dull heterosexual masculinity' (1999, 227) clearly acts as a form of governance impacting on women regardless of their perceived or actual sexualised identities. Whilst it may be the case that 'heterosexuals are not aware of the heterosexing of space and place in the same way that sexual dissidents are' (Corteen 2002, 261), this paper shows that we should not assume that this means that straight women are not aware of this *at all*. The pervasive ways in which all women's gendered and sexualised identities are policed, regulated and controlled – particularly through everyday acts of 'trivial' harassment - have clear consequences for all women in terms of a continued normalisation of gendered *and* sexualised violence, abuse and harassment (Stanko and Curry 1997). It should be noted of course that the mainstream NTE settings upon which this research focuses can be read as a particular type of sexualised space characterised by fairly rigid, heteronormative patterns of gendered interaction to the point where, arguably 'there is a blurring of definitional boundaries regarding what constitutes sexual victimisation versus

normal heterosexual behaviour' (Kavanaugh 2013, 29). As a result, the wider applicability – or otherwise - of such findings could usefully be explored. Future research could explore the ways in which considerations of visibility impact upon young women's negotiations of embodied risk management in other settings, both within the NTE (such as niche clubs or non-mainstream nightlife contexts) and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my ongoing gratitude to Professor Diane Richardson and Professor Janice McLaughlin for their guidance and support throughout all stages of this project. Thank you also to the young women who so kindly gave up their time to share their experiences and reflections with me.

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