

# **The last night of freedom: consumerism, deviance and the ‘stag party’**

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## **Abstract**

This article offers an ethnographic examination of the stag party phenomenon in the UK. Stag parties have become socially expected as a rite of passage, pre-marriage celebration for men that usually involves excessive alcohol consumption and engagement in deviant, potentially harmful, behaviour. These events produce a shift in time and space, and together with group expectations for celebration, increase the impetus for excessive consumption. Our contention is that excessive consumption of alcohol and deviant behaviour that often takes place are partially rooted in commercial ideology which has become firmly embedded in the attitudes of young British men.

## **Key Words:**

Consumerism; Deviance; Ideology; Night-time Economy; Stag Party

## **Introduction**

This article provides an ethnographic exploration of young British men who engage in stag parties or what are sometimes colloquially termed stag ‘dos’. It offers an examination of this phenomenon in the UK (Thurnell-Read 2011; 2012) and complements the international literature surrounding the gendered experience of pre-marriage celebrations (Tye and Powers 1998; Eldridge and Roberts 2008). The main pretext we offer to the literature is a macro, structuro-culturo perspective which is

subjective in its appreciation of the stag party experience. We consider the way in which commercial imperatives seemingly drive social expectancy for excessive consumption and deviance when groups of young men celebrate the impending marriage of ‘the stag’. This ‘experience’ has become a cultural norm for many young (or even older) groups of men across the UK.

In our paper we draw on data collected from a combination of company websites specializing in the organization of stag parties, ethnographic observations of stag parties, and interviews conducted with men who have been on stag parties. This data adds a further layer of understanding to the way young British men start to learn about what they should be doing with their free time, and in the context of this paper, what they expect to do on stag parties. We utilize this data to analyse the ways in which deviant, potentially harmful, behavior and concomitant excessive consumption, emerge situationally within the spatialized context of the stag party. We suggest that the way in which excessive alcohol consumption, associated risky behavior and harm collectively evolve as a social norm in these contexts (see Hall and Winlow 2015) is commercially buttressed by corporations who sell these jaunts as tokens of the ‘good life’ and as ‘experiences’ to supposedly be cashed in later in life (Briggs 2013) that our respondents are keen to accumulate.

We begin with a brief discussion of the phenomenon of the stag party before addressing how it has become a commercial enterprise for companies specializing in the ‘stag party experience’. Presentation of our research methods precedes a discussion of relevant literature and the formulation of a broad theoretical framework in which to situate the data we present and the arguments that follow. Key to which is the growth of consumer capitalism which now readily supplies young people with commercially-instigated ideological motifs for life and we suggest that social expectations and

behaviour during stag parties are closely related to these commercial imperatives. The stag party provides a *time* and *space* out of the perceived mundane day-to-day and the ordinary, allowing for normal routines and everyday characters to temporarily disappear, which provides the immediate spatial context in which deviant behavior occurs. We argue that the intense pressure to make the most of the moment becomes elevated significantly. Aspects of “normal” moral behaviour are suspended, while subjective fetishes are explored and what we term ‘kudos of the wrong’ becomes central to the stag party experience. The deviant behaviours, though sometimes seen as socially negative for their potentially humiliating and harmful effects, are validated by the perceived value they offer to these young men in their imagined futures. These moments of sometimes extreme deviant behaviour are made for their own extraction from a future which has not yet happened, constructed for its prospective significance in the past.

### **The Stag Party**

In recent times the phenomenon of the ‘stag party’ – the collective celebration for a young man before their impending marriage – has grown in popularity and within public consciousness (Thurnell-Read 2012). In the night-time economies of most large UK cities and with the growth in budget airlines throughout Europe and beyond, one can often find groups of men most weekends of the year present for the purposes of a stag party. The popularity of the stag party and its concomitant expectations of excessive consumption and raucous behaviour, were recently the focus of the highly successful Hollywood film franchise ‘The Hangover’. The first and second instalments of this trilogy are told through flashbacks after the central characters wake up hung-over, suffering from temporary amnesia, and realise a member of their party is missing. The films chart the drug and drink fuelled antics of this group of men during their

‘Bachelor Parties’ (Bachelor party is the American equivalent of the UK Stag party) in Las Vegas and Bangkok in the first and second films respectively. Interestingly, given the focus of our paper, these hugely successful films reinforce many of the themes that emerged from our research with young British men which come to light in this article. The issue of extremely deviant and sometimes criminal behavior during such events, that are touched upon in these films and that we address here, recently resulted in a group of British men travelling to Bratislava, Slovakia for a stag party being removed from their flight by German police. It was reported that members of the group, who were reported to be severely intoxicated, became violent during the flight, forcing the pilot into an un-scheduled stop in Berlin to allow police to remove them (BBC News 2016).

The stag party group is normally orchestrated by the ‘best man’ and numbers can range from just a few to as many as 20 or even 30; some of whom may not know each other as friends prior to the party. Though the transition is difficult to determine, the stag party was often seen as one evening of celebration the night before marriage. Contemporarily, however, it has become something more elaborate, often organized over weekends, involving dressing up, day and night time activities, and general excessive consumption of alcohol predominantly. It now seems to have become a folkloric social expectation that those who participate should do what is expected of them on these occasions. In particular, the pressure to consume is buttressed by the collective motivation to embarrass or shame the ‘stag’ and in the process forge memories often involving deviant and transgressive behaviour (see Thurnell-Read 2011).

Some best men will organize their own independent parties on a seaside town for the weekend for example, or, if the group can afford it (or even if they cannot), perhaps

a weekend in a European city. However, there are an array of companies who arrange stag party ‘experiences’, selling packages for cheap hotels, day-time activities, often combined with VIP entry to bars and nightclubs. Some companies specializing in these experiences offer to make stag party t-shirts (see [www.stagnighttshirts.co.uk](http://www.stagnighttshirts.co.uk)) in order to create a specific collective identity for the group to be displayed to others in the consumer spaces they will later occupy during the party. On the websites clients can browse over images of smartly dressed models in casinos, half-naked women on beaches, and stylish clubs to select the ‘experiences’ they want to realize (The Stag Company) (see also Thurnell-Read’s (2012) discussion of websites promoting organised stag parties in Poland). The websites sell stag party games, drinking vessels, costumes, and various inflatable phalluses, sheep and women (Last Night of Freedom). There are also blogs from previous stag participants as well as photos of previous customers during their stag parties. Importantly, much of the emphasis in the marketing of these stag experiences plays on notions of ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom’, as if this is the soon-to-be grooms’ final opportunity to enjoy ‘the good life’ before impending marriage supposedly secures them to life partners, a family, and the responsibilities associated with this.

Importantly, many of these trips are organized by companies whose interest is to get clients to consume. Most if not all stag parties take place in sites which are spatially designed for excessive consumption (Miles 2010). In the UK, many take place in city centres around bars, nightclubs and gentlemen’s clubs; and it is these spaces which enable the subjective stimulus to consume and exaggerate that consumption (Briggs 2013). To give some empirical weight to the discussion so far we will later draw upon observational data gathered while participating in stag parties, alongside interview material gathered with several men who have occupied the role of ‘best man’ in

organizing a stag party. Before doing this, we will firstly outline our methodology and then a discussion of literature in which to situate our data and arguments.

## **Methodology**

The data we present in this article is drawn principally from two ethnographic research studies. Although these are focused on different issues, with neither of them beginning with any intention of investigating stag parties, what unites our respective studies is an attempt to engage with individual lived experience against a broad backdrop of social and cultural transformation.

The first study was a project undertaken during 2010 to 2012 which examined the deviant and risk behaviours of young British tourists on the island of Ibiza (see Briggs (2013) for details on the sample). Principally, young people were observed and interviewed in the resort of San Antonio, Ibiza; but fieldwork also extended into several large urban centres in the UK, including London, Liverpool, Manchester and Bournemouth. The project sought to explore the cultural attitudes and beliefs of these groups of young people while, simultaneously, it examined the way in which they ‘subjectively experience’ the holiday. For these reasons, the approach utilised a mix of ethnography and phenomenology. The approach evolved organically while in the field as it became clear that many of the young people travelled in large groups, but also had quite individual as well as collective subjective intentions for their holiday: as we will see something also integral to the stag party experience. During the research Daniel frequently encountered large groups of men who had journeyed to the island to celebrate the impending marriage of one of the group’s members and he was able to gather data on their adventures through observation and informal conversations.

The second project was a study of men and violence in the north of England that utilized ethnographic methods to research the lifecourses and experiences of men involved in serious violence and crime (Ellis 2016). When gathering data Anthony spent considerable periods of time in the spaces that these men occupied on a day to day basis, interacting with them and the wide network of male peers and acquaintances they associated with. For many of the men he worked with the night time economy had been, and remained, an important recreational space that was a source of both enjoyment, identity, and a place in which to socialize, and in some cases engage in ‘business’ (such as drug dealing). Through maintaining a regular presence in these social networks during the course of the research, Anthony was invited on, and attended, a stag weekend in a European city along with several of the study’s participants, where much of the group’s activity centered on consuming the city’s night time economy.

Importantly then, the stag party and its common enactment within night-time consumer spaces, arose unintentionally during data collection for our respective studies. This does remain relatively dormant in our final works (Briggs 2013; Ellis 2016), as we had not made it the primary lens for analysis. On reflection we realized though that the area deserved far greater analytical interrogation given the significance our participants attached to these events and the generally limited attention that has been paid to them by sociologists.

Our research roles during these respective studies were participatory to some extent. Being present in the spaces where these stag parties were taking place in order to gather data meant that we had to engage to some extent in the activities of the men we were observing and interacting with. This often involved consuming alcohol, as well as engaging in the conversations and behavior taking place. Particular individuals in the groups we observed, mainly those in the role of ‘best man’, were aware of our

respective research activities; however, the majority of individuals present were not aware of this. As two researchers that have undertaken ethnographic research on active criminality and deviance we are aware of the ethical issues associated with conducting research covertly, which are well documented (see Calvey 2008; Hobbs 2001). Covert observation of these stag parties was essential to not impinge upon the behaviour of those we were researching. As indicated, our research aims were to gain a deeper understanding of excessive alcohol consumption and the deviant behaviours which emerge within the spatial and temporal context of the stag party. As such, we felt it was imperative that our presence did not unduly affect or constrain this process. Despite the evident deceit practiced, we have gone to tremendous lengths to ensure that the identities of those present remain anonymous and that no harm will be brought to them as a result of our research. As well as providing participants with pseudonyms, we have also withheld and altered certain information to ensure complete anonymity. This was accounted for in ethics applications duly approved before commencing our research projects by our respective institutional ethics committee panels.

### **Consumerism, Night Time Leisure and the Stag Party**

It is important to provide a theoretical backdrop to the attitudes and deviant behaviours of the men that our research attempted to understand. We suggest this is related to the increasing prominence of consumer culture and how it plays out in the subjective lives of these men. How we arrive at this situation is related to the wider social changes which have taken place over the last forty years in Western liberal democracies like the US and the UK. This is a period of rapid social change, during which we have seen dramatic shifts in political economy and technological developments, which have had quite profound impacts on everyday social life. For some scholars, the rapidity of these



changes has produced a subjective existential impasse for many people, or what has been termed ‘ontological insecurity’ (Beck 1992). In a context where lives and identities have become supposedly more fluid and are no longer determined so strongly by structuring divisions such as social class, a greater emphasis has been placed upon individuality (Furlong and Cartmel 1997; Young 2007) as a means to construct identity. In this transitional context, consumer capitalism has effectively generated a surrogate social world in which personal identity and lifestyles have become increasingly defined by the individual’s ability to purchase items and goods (see Hall et al 2008; Smith and Raymen 2015; Winlow and Hall 2013). A sense of identity and self-worth is now in part derived from competent consumption practices, something that Veblen (1994) in particular has discussed with reference to the potentially socially corrosive and damaging consequences of this. Veblen’s (1994) notion of the *leisure class* posited that conspicuous consumption assisted in the elite’s status maintenance through access to economic capital and the capacity to spend it. This quest to ‘stand out’ is, on the one hand, related to an emphasis on cultivating individuality but also connected to a desire to engage in *conspicuous consumption* (Veblen 1994) in an effort to distinguish oneself from others.

The quite acute pressures to engage competently in consumer culture has created a situation in which some people will amass significant debt, and borrow money from other people, just to participate in opportunistic moments motivated by immediate gratification and play – all of which are ideologically constructed as what they should be doing in order to be living fulfilling lives (see Briggs 2013; Hall et al 2008; Horsley 2015). For critical sociologists like Bauman (2011: 17), this current context in which consumerism has attained a powerful position within culture ‘sets individuals in mutual competition and renders communal solidarity (except in temporary forms of alliances)

to be perceived by and large irrelevant.’ The life course becomes one of ‘identity reinventions’ and one of advanced meritocracy based on consistent personal attainment at the expense of the *other*. It is within this process, say Bauman and Donskis (2013: 28), that people lose their memory and in doing so ‘become incapable of any critical questioning of themselves and the world around them.’ Public spaces and interactions – such as many stag party destinations – increasingly take place in simulated spaces designed by marketing experts and corporations for our enjoyment, but ultimately to encourage consumption. Here, notions of the *good life* come alive and identity construction revolves around a narcissistic quest for personal gratification which is increasingly commercially and ideologically woven into the subjective politics of our lives.

Within the social context outlined above most British young people are now experiencing what has been termed by some sociologists as a protraction of the ‘youth’ phase, in which traditional transitions that are symbolic of entering ‘adulthood’ are being delayed. Most remain in this protracted phase for some time due to a combination of structural impediments, such as low pay, extended periods of education, an inability to purchase property (Furlong and Cartmel 1997), as well as cultural expectations and pressures to spend money on consumer items and lifestyles (see Hayward 2012; Lloyd 2011). Even after those significant ‘rites of passage’ that are taken as indicative of entering ‘adulthood’, advertising continues to invite adults to temporarily abandon rational self-management in favour of ‘infantile’ pleasures (Hayward 2012). As discussed briefly above, a significant body of research has shown that consumption in general, represents an important contemporary marker of identity for all social groups, but particularly young people (see Bauman 1998; Winlow and Hall 2009). We would argue that for a significant number of young people these days, paid work represents an

instrumental conduit to hedonistic consumption and commodified pleasure (see also Lloyd 2011). And we have found in our research predominantly with young men in their 20s (as well as men in their 30s and upwards), but also some young women, tremendous significance is attached to the importance of weekend intoxication in the night time economy. As discussed above briefly, it is within the night time economies of urban centres in both the UK and abroad that the stag party often takes place (Thurnell-Read 2011; 2012).

Following a series of economic crises in many large urban centres across the UK after the demise of heavy industry, the night time leisure economy has burgeoned considerably becoming a significant market in many local urban UK economies (Hobbs et al 2003). Some early sociological analyses of youth cultures and identities in this consumerist context focused upon the formation of ‘club cultures’ and ‘style’ amongst young people. These postmodern perspectives on night-time leisure emphasized the construction of identity through taste, music, consumption and fleeting, ephemeral relationships (see Malbon 1999; Thornton 1995).

Subsequently, a significant body of social scientific research examined more critically the political economy of night-time leisure; something largely neglected in some postmodern accounts. Hollands (2000) discussed the presence of social divisions, around class and gender in particular, in night time leisure spaces. For Hollands, these divisions are connected to increased corporate activity and regulation of the night time economy, which shapes perceptions of taste, style and consumption, and creates spatialized divisions between groups in relation to these. More recent work, hailing from a critical criminological tradition, has begun to deal more directly with the formation of subjectivity within this more competitive and individualistic context. Against a broad backdrop of the collapse of class-based institutions, employment,

culture and identities, Winlow and Hall's (2009) young participants had completely embraced consumerism as a means to construct individualized identities. The pubs, bars and clubs of the local night time economy were the spaces in which many of them socialised and maintained their friendships. But many also displayed tremendous feelings of anxiety under an oppressive weight of expectation to consume competently and to distinguish themselves from others. Lloyds's (2011) ethnographic research examined the working and leisure lives of young call centre workers in the North East of England, many of whom were apathetic about their employment. Instead, their faith in the local night-time economy's ability to provide more rewarding and desirable identity forms often resulted in them spending large proportions of their meagre salaries on alcohol and branded designer clothing. These pressures, and the lure they felt to indulge in regular hedonistic consumption, impeded their ability to realise their ambitions of home ownership, career enhancement, and general social mobility. These important themes were developed more recently in Smith's (2013) ethnographic work with older users of the night-time leisure economy who had remained committed consumers beyond their youth. Smith's participants found themselves continually drawn to participate in night-time leisure because of the threat of experiencing social inadequacy and irrelevance in a cultural atmosphere that promotes personal enjoyment and pleasure.

So what has for some young, and in some cases older, people become the 'drudgery' of the working week is now punctuated by the possibility of brief bouts of excessive, over-indulgent consumption at the weekend. In addition, there is the occasional 'mad' holiday (Briggs 2013), weekend away, or trip to celebrate some significant point within the lifecourse, all of which often involve heavy consumption of alcohol; it is into the latter that the stag party fits. The stag party represents a preamble

to the significant ‘rite of passage’ that the male is about to undertake. The market has unhesitatingly seized upon this, re-working it into a not-to-be-missed ‘life experience’ with all its associated consumption practices. As we have intimated in this article, a consumer industry has mushroomed around the stag party ‘experience’ both domestically and abroad, which often takes place in the context of the night-time economy and has been facilitated by cheap flights and greater access to foreign destinations.

Somewhat surprisingly, very little academic attention has been paid to this phenomenon with the exception of Thurnell-Read’s (2011; 2012) work. Thurnell-Read focuses upon the temporary inversion of controlled masculine embodiment and the situational accomplishment of masculinity through parody and self-destruction during the stag party. Excessive consumption of alcohol and its effects upon bodily functions ensures that the stag party provides ‘time’ and ‘space’ out of those contexts in which men and their bodies are expected to be controlled and rational. Thurnell-Read notes, as do we, the expectation for such behavior and its evident predictability despite it being ‘characterized as spontaneous and impulsive by individual groups’ (Thurnell-Read 2011: 988). Thurnell-Read’s work on stag parties has been important in developing social scientific understanding of this area. In this paper we contribute to this developing understanding by focusing upon the role and function of consumer culture in the stag party; something that Thurnell-Read’s work does not address. Thurnell-Read’s work focuses upon the intersections of place and space with masculinity: the creation of meaning and group identities within the context of the stag party. In contrast to this situationally focused analysis, we are keen to extend here a perspective that examines broader economic and cultural forces and their consequences for subjectivity. Our data suggests that these are not just masculine affirming behaviours that emerge as

situational accomplishment within a given context; although we too appreciate the significance of context during the stag party. Rather, deviant behaviour that emerges in response to expectations of what should be done during the stag party, which has been shaped, in part, by the structuring forces of consumer capital (Briggs 2013). It is our contention, based upon the data gathered, that emotions such as regret and humiliation, and the very real prospect of experiencing these, figure significantly in the context of the stag party and the deviant behavior that often occurs; as they have also been found to do in other critical studies of consumer culture where the prospect of experiencing regret and insignificance for refusing to engage in its practices are particularly powerful (see Smith and Raymen 2015). We will now introduce our data, followed by a discussion of the stag party, concomitant deviant behaviours, and their relationship to consumer culture.

### **Stag dos (and don'ts): social expectations and commercial realisations**

What became fairly clear to us while present in the consumer spaces and contexts in which stag parties take place, is that a shift in individual and group expectations around appropriate behavior creates quite intense and palpable emotional pressures that are experienced by the participants. Several individuals within the groups we observed, in some cases the 'stag' himself, would quietly express doubts about what the 'best man' and the rest of the group were insisting should be done during the stag party; yet these doubts rarely altered the activities that were ultimately engaged in.

During one stag party we attended in a town in the north of England that was made up of just four men in total, it became clear very early on in the evening that the best man felt obliged to ensure that the group were heavily intoxicated. The choice of venues to drink in were in most cases selected on the basis of the drinks offers available,

with a buy two for the price of one offer often enough to persuade the group to enter. In each pub and bar we visited the best man plied us with drinks, which in each case were followed by a 'shot' (a small amount of beverage with high alcohol content), reiterating to the group that this is "what we should be doing on a stag do". When the possibility of frequenting a "titty bar" (lap-dancing club) was raised by the best man, the groom to be confided in us his doubts about whether he wanted to attend such a venue; even after four hours of heavy drinking and sexual innuendos uttered by the best man, the 'stag' was still uncomfortable with the idea. Upon finishing our drinks we were led by the best man into a very poorly lit area of the town populated by groups of female sex workers congregated on street corners, smoking and offering their services to us; to which we politely declined. Walking slightly ahead of us the best man continued to beckon us excitedly with his hand, eventually leading us to a lap-dancing club which we each paid £15 to enter. The remainder of the evening was spent in this venue. While the best man and another member of the group paid for several private dances with various women, drunkenly celebrating together as they returned, the groom to be spent the rest of the evening declining offers from various women for private dances, but did not reveal his desire to leave to the best man or the rest of the group.

Some initial reflections on these observations that took place early on during data collection, revealed some important themes to us, particularly the issue of why – even in the face of reluctance – individuals engage in activities against their wishes. Even though the groom, by his own admission, does not wish to see half-naked dancing women, let alone pay them, he continued to engage in the activities forced upon the group by the best man: doing what is expected of him, spending money on what he is expected to, and going to places where he is expected to go.

Subsequent data collection on a separate stag party we attended in a large European city re-affirmed and also developed some of these early analytical insights. During this particular party the first 24 hours were spent consuming alcohol in various bars and later on in the evening in several night clubs, with only brief breaks from the drinking to change clothes and eat food. By the evening the general effects of the alcohol consumption, combined with individual member's desires to visit particular venues and the congestion of the city's night-time economy, resulted in the group being separated into smaller factions until the early hours of the morning. The issue of deviant and risky behavior, as well as social and physical harm, emerged strongly during this stag party we observed, as the following field notes describing some of the quite chaotic and concerning events of the night attest:

It's 5am. I have only been asleep for two hours. The incessant ringing of Jim's (the best man) phone finally forces me out of sleep. I slowly open my eyes which feel uncomfortable with fatigue. My mouth is dry and filled with a sickly sweet taste. I sit up wincing as the pain of my hangover slowly spreads across my head. Jim is laid next to me, his head at the opposite end of the bed to mine. He removes the sheet covering his face and answers the phone:

"Gaz?" he asks.

In the silence of the apartment, Gaz's voice is just about audible:

"Fucking hell Jim, where are you?"

"I am in bed. Why? Where are you?" Jim replies.

"Outside the apartment, but I cannot get in. Someone let me in, I'm genuinely fucking scared mate. I do not know what has happened to me in the last few hours"

Jim goes to the intercom. Several minutes later Gaz enters: bleary eyed, with visible traces of vomit on his shirt. Intrigued by the commotion the other men emerge from their rooms and an audience of pale, mostly muscular and tattooed bodies in boxer shorts gather around Gaz in the dimly lit communal area of the apartment. Gaz proceeds



to tell us the events, from what he can remember of them, from the previous several hours. He described becoming separated from the group. At this point his memory became hazy and he described then remembering waking up in a hotel reception area, covered in vomit, with a member of the hotel staff stood over him. Gaz was ejected from the hotel and wandered around the city's streets alone in search of the apartments. Unable to find them he fell asleep on a bench and woke up with a local man attempting to remove his phone from his pocket:

“I just snatched my phone off him and fucking ran ...”

As Gaz relays his vague recollections of the night at certain points the other men present laugh hysterically at his misfortune. When Gaz finishes telling the group what happened he turns to one of the other men present and says:

“It's a horrible horrible place (European City), I am telling you I have seen it”

The room erupts in laughter.

As we have begun to discuss already following the work of Thurnell-Read (2011), the gendered social expectations evidently present during stag parties appear from our data to meld with commercially driven imperatives that market conceptions of ‘enjoyment’ and the ‘good life’. What this seems to entail within the context of the stag party is an obsessive compulsion to enjoy and over-indulge in hedonistic consumption in the limited time available, which is, in the context of night time leisure, underpinned by *jouissance* – pleasure that can extend into pain and discomfort (Briggs 2013; Lacan 2002). The following day of this stag party was spent reminiscing on the previous night's antics in an attempt to piece together what happened using the various testimonies of each individual. Aside from Gaz's experiences outlined above, another member of the group was robbed in the street and had his money stolen, three others fell asleep in a shop doorway, and one fell over hitting his head on the floor, which left a

deep gash on his face. Gaz was evidently quite shaken by his experience and confided in us his fears of potential repercussions from his behavior (namely arrest by local police). Yet, Gaz's experience was re-constructed by the group into an adventure: a character enhancing experience in which he emerged heroically from adversity as the leading man in an anecdote that would live on within the group's memory. On several occasions during the rest of the weekend Gaz anxiously sought reassurance that he "hadn't done anything wrong" and that "everything would be okay". Gaz's quite intense paranoia was consistently rejected by the group as unfounded and responded to with statements like: "forget it pal", "fuck it", "it does not matter", "no one will be bothered about it". His concerns were quashed under the weight of the group's re-working of the night, which re-casted his experience as one that he could re-tell to friends, or even his children and their children; undeniable evidence that he had 'lived' and would not need to suffer the indignity later in life of feeling regret over what could have been.

We argue then on the basis of the data presented so far that there is an overwhelming emphasis placed upon the construction of personal and group stories – regardless if they result in positive or negative experiences – and even regardless of whether the 'stag' is aware they are happening, as field notes from our observations further attest:

To my left, a group of men on a stag party stumble out of the bar where we drink; each dressed in some sort of fancy-dress costume. As they come out, they all point at a half-naked man, the stag, who sits on the floor with his face on his arms. They lift his head up and he still doesn't seem to recover; he remains seated and his mouth gapes open as if he is asleep. One member of the group reaches into his pocket and pulls out a red marker pen and writes something on the slumped stag's forehead. The stag sits there and doesn't move as the giggles turn to outright laughter; even the waitress at the bar joins in. I go over to see what they have written and as I arrive the waitress adds

something on his chest: she writes 'cockless' while scribbled in capital letters on his forehead is 'SHITCUNT'. The group is now in hysterics and it transpires the stag has lost his costume; hence the reason he is half naked. Shortly after, as the laughing continues, the stag seems to be waking up and raises a docile smile at his party. He gets up and high fives his friends who refrain from telling him about the offensive graffiti they have applied to his face.

### **Moral suspension, the exploration of fetishes, and the kudos of the wrong**

Our more formalised interviews with individuals who had organized a stag party through their role as 'best man', revealed further the role that extreme shaming, humiliation and deviance often plays in the stag party experience for all those involved; not just the stag. As one of our interviewees, Ralph, who works in the motor industry and has attended several stag parties, on one occasion as the best man, revealed to us. Despite being aged in his late thirties, Ralph, like some of Smith's (2013) more mature respondents discussed earlier, possesses a strong attachment to night time leisure and consumption in this milieu. He often frequents his local night time economy and spends quite substantial amounts of his money on alcohol and recreational drugs. He recently attended a stag party that took place over a weekend on a Spanish Island. As we had found during our observations of some stag parties, a huge emphasis was placed by certain members of the group upon prolonged 'binge' drinking, which began at the airport and was followed by several drinking games on the plane that involved offending some of the female members of the cabin crew. When they arrived at their accommodation they immediately headed for the area's notorious night-time economy and targeted one member of the group with a campaign of persistent, and quite extreme, pranks that aimed to humiliate him. Ralph, and several other members of the group, 'spiked' this individual's drinks with strong spirits to such an extent that he eventually

collapsed onto the floor unconscious. While unconscious he soiled himself and the group tied him to a door at their accommodation using cling film.

Quite extreme forms of such degradation and humiliation that are self-inflicted and actively engaged in by men present on stag parties also emerged during an interview with one of our other participants, who we have called Lee. Lee is aged in his early thirties and works in the finance sector. He has recently organized and attended a stag party for one of his close friends. Below he reflects upon some of the stag parties he has attended during the last several years, emphasizing particularly his willingness to engage in sometimes extreme sexually deviant behavior during these:

Lee: On one of my work mate's stag dos we went to the strippers, some people ended up shagging hookers [sex workers], I were pressing my balls [testicles] up against restaurant windows. I'm not talking posh restaurant windows [laughs]...

Later on in the interview Lee returned to these issues in a discussion of a different stag party:

Lee: That stag do was absolutely on the money...one of the kids was eating urinal cakes, straight from the urinal, horrific isn't it? We went into another bar and that kid ate another urinal cake [laughs]...that's when I was putting straws in my ass [laughs]... he was squatting underneath me pretending to drink out of it [laughs]

Lee showed us photographs of these incidents during an interview with him that were taken using an attendee's phone. As Lee intimates, this stag party was 'on the money' as it featured a series of particularly grotesque and sexually deviant behaviours that pushed

the normative levels of transgressive behaviour that these men expect on such occasions into the realm of the absolute extreme. Lee's experiences reveal the willingness of some individuals to self-degrade and humiliate during the stag party which he emphasized to us was for his own and the group's amusement.

### **The future's past**

Despite the sense of genuine adventure that emerges from our data, what happened was also underlined by a certain predictable inevitability. These brazen and potentially harmful experiences were the 'kinds' of experiences these men intended, whether entirely consciously or not, to have before the stag party had begun. Lee's comments below during an interview re-affirm the broad analytical point we are making here:

Lee: If 60 year old Lee were looking back at me, I want to be able to say 'yeah I did that'. And you know what, I've got plenty of time to be reserved...plenty of time to be mature... I'm still relatively young, I'm going to be with all my mates, so it's the right thing to do to be a bit lary...as soon as you get married your priorities have got to change...the stag do, its saying, if you've not already done all of these outrageous things, then here is your chance. Make sure you do it now, cos you are never going to get this chance again... when you are married, that is it, that's the end of it. And then your friends have got to come along with you for the ride haven't they? And they've got to show that camaraderie...otherwise if they are all sat there and they're all being quite pleasant like it's just a normal day...you are thinking fuck this, this is my last chance, you would feel really let down by the group wouldn't you?

As Lee indicates, the injunction to take *enjoyment* to its extreme, particularly while you are young, in spaces of consumption has become a quite firm expectation. So firmly, we would contend, that the possibility of not doing so is very difficult for individuals to conceive while they are in those spatialized and temporal contexts. As Lee states this is the “right thing to do”. To not do so would risk experiencing deep regret about what could possibly have been. The injunction is to grasp these precious moments so they can be carried into the future and cherished through memory at a later stage in the lifecourse when it is perceived that age, familial and work responsibilities will have removed the possibility for such moments and experiences. It is our tentative contention that identity is increasingly not just constructed through reflexively examining and memorialising the past, but in a process of reflexively examining the past while it is still the future; before it has happened. Individuals transport themselves into an *imagined* future, reflecting admirably upon an *imagined* past. This is a speculative process that informs the subject’s present sense of identity, as someone who will seize future opportunities, live future life to the full, and not reflect upon the *future’s past* with rueful rumination and regret. However, what our research suggests is that such a process is ultimately flawed, on the basis that there is little, if anything, which is truly enigmatic or unknown about such reflexive imaginings. The social activities and deviant behaviour these men engaged in as part of this process of identity formation was, and is, heavily commercialised. The global reach of advanced capitalism’s consumer and leisure corporations structures such enjoyment and possibilities within specific commodified consumption practices (Briggs 2013).

### **‘This is my stag night I shall be acting like a stag!’ Discussion**

This article has made use of ethnographic methods in an attempt to develop current knowledge around the growing popularity and significance of the stag party amongst British men. Given the number of participants in our research we are not in a position to generalize our findings to all men who engage in stag parties and we are aware that some men’s stag parties will not necessarily involve excessive consumption of alcohol within the spatialized context of the night time economy. However, given the pervasiveness of this and some of the deviant activities present within the data we have collected, and the resonances of what we have found within some other critical literature on the night time economy and consumerism (see Briggs 2013; Smith 2013; Winlow and Hall 2006; 2009), we do wish to make several tentative points about the stag party experience and its relationship to consumer culture.

The consequences of having not ‘enjoyed’ yourself during the temporal moment of the stag party seemed to prey on our respondents minds quite considerably. Evidently, the social company, the space and moment in time of the stag party provide a context for homo-social interaction and camaraderie between men; through which, behavior typically considered ‘masculine’ and often colloquially referred to as ‘laddishness’, which, in this situation, entail excessive drinking, deviant behaviour, as well as the objectification and consumption of women emerge. We argue that what dovetails this is potent consumerist ideology, which has a significant role in setting up ideological motifs for life. These men construct a sense of liberation as a means to permit them to undertake risky and extreme behaviours. Engagement in ‘hyper consumption’ (Briggs 2013) and deviance was believed to be indicative of doing what was ‘right’ in these circumstances away from sometimes monotonous employment and

before the impending constraints that they perceived would accompany marriage and domesticity.

As revealed in our data, to 'enjoy' in this context is predicated upon excessive consumption of alcohol and occasionally transgressive behavioural experimentation that involves an inversion of acceptable behavioural etiquette and possibly indicates, as others have observed, a continuation of aspects of infantile narcissism into 'adulthood' that is, in part, driven by pervasive consumerism (Hall et al 2008; Hayward 2012). We argue that these men are merely reproducing exaggerated forms of behaviour which are expected of them and which they expect of themselves in a pocket of available time to celebrate. The stag party is another short space in time socially and commercially constructed for temporal blowouts which often results in deviant behaviour. There is a kudos attached to wrongdoing - a *kudos of the wrong* - despite the potentially painful and harmful consequences (Briggs 2013; Lacan 2002), which reflects the importance of the social occasion to assemble something that it is believed will be of subjective and collective use in a future which has not happened yet (*future's past*). A subjective investment in this can be fragile and potentially physically and psychologically harmful; yet still, the participants view it as worthwhile, or simply engage in it under the additional weight of subjective and peer/group expectations that emanate within the spatialized context of the stag party. We suggest then, that this is a consumerist leisure context in which deviance, as well as forms of social, psychological and physical harm, can become largely expected and normalized.

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