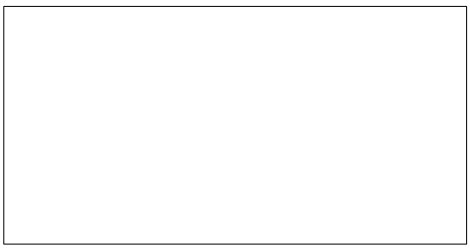

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'Lad culture' in higher education: agency in the sexualisation debates

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on research funded by the National Union of Students, which explored women students' experiences of 'lad culture' through focus groups and interviews. We found that although laddism is only one of various potential masculinities, for our participants it dominated social and sexual spheres of university life in problematic ways. However, their objections to laddish behaviours did not support contemporary models of 'sexual panic', even while oppugning the more simplistic celebrations of young women's empowerment which have been observed in debates about sexualisation. We argue that in their ability to reject 'lad culture', our respondents expressed a form of agency which is often invisibilised in sexualisation discussions and which could be harnessed to tackle some of the issues we uncovered.

Introduction

> *If the girl you've taken for a drink... won't 'spread for your head', think about this mathematical statistic: 85% of rape cases go unreported. That seems to be fairly good odds. Uni Lad does not condone rape without saying 'surprise'.*
>
> (Uni Lad, cited in Morris 2012)

In early 2013 during the finals of the Glasgow University Union Ancients Debate, reports emerged of misogynistic heckling directed at Cambridge University debaters Rebecca Meredith and Marlena Valles, with women spectators who came to their

defence also targeted for abuse. Afterwards, Meredith and Valles created an anonymous survey soliciting experiences of sexism on the university debate circuit. This revealed that the problem was widespread, with women students throughout the UK and elsewhere reporting verbal harassment and in some cases sexual assault (Meredith 2013). This news came at the peak of recent media interest in sexism among student communities, with a variety of articles on the phenomenon of 'lad culture' citing activities such as sports initiations, 'pimps and hos', 'geeks and sluts' and 'slag 'n' drag' parties, the sexual pursuit of women freshers (termed 'seal clubbing' in one institution) and the alleged practice of 'slut-dropping', where men offer lifts home to women, but leave them miles away from their destinations (Bates 2012, Kingsley 2012, Sherriff 2012).[i] Seen by some as harmless fun, 'lad culture' was criticised by others for at best being dismissive and objectifying towards women and at worst for normalising sexual assault. Some commentators linked it to a broader 'sex object' culture, evidenced by examples of events such as student beauty contests, wet T-shirt competitions and nude calendars (Glendinning 2004, Waldram 2010, Andersson 2011).

'Lad culture' is a potentially problematic term, implying a homogeneity and cohesiveness which may not necessarily be found across communities or over time, and suggesting deterministic links to masculinity which we do not necessarily wish to endorse[ii]. The behavioural descriptor 'laddish', however, has a long history. It first emerged in the 1950s, in reference to the adolescent-inspired masculinity seen in the pages of the newly founded *Playboy* (Beynon 2002, Chinn 2006). It resurfaced in the 1990s to describe the middle class fetishisation of working class machismo and jack-the-lad behaviour embodied in the UK by 'new lads' Noel Gallagher, Frank Skinner and David Baddiel, and represented in *Loaded*, the first UK 'lads' mag' (Knowles 2004). In the mid-2000s, the same epithet was applied to magazines such as *Nuts* and *Zoo*.

Research has shown how engagement in laddish behaviours can be contexualised within in- and out-group relations among men, and may emanate from complex psychological and interpersonal motivations as well as a more general desire for

manly success (Dempster 2009, 2011; Gough and Edwards 1998). For example, Jackson and Dempster (2009) discuss how fear of failure (or avoidance of anything labeled 'feminine' – see Jackson 2003) can lead some boys and young men to conform to the laddish imperative for minimal educational effort. However, masculinities are also socially constructed, and particular socio-economic contexts have shaped laddism in its various incarnations. For instance, the 'lad' masculinity of the 1950s has been positioned as a reaction against the dominant 'family man' role which developed as Western countries attempted to adjust to post-war social and economic conditions (Chinn 2006). The 'new lads' of the 1990s have been located as a cultural retort to the 'new man' androgyny of the 1960s, 70s and 80s, linked to the backlash against feminism and gains in women's rights (Beynon 2002). The contemporary 'lad culture' we examine sits within a continuation of these trends, and can also be interpreted as a means of reclaiming territory in the context of recession and increased competition between the sexes (NUS 2013, Phipps 2013).

Described as founded upon a trinity of 'drinking, football and fucking' (Edwards 1997, p82 cited in Dempster 2009, p482), contemporary laddism is seen as young, hedonistic and largely centred on homosocial bonding. This often consists of 'having a laugh', objectifying women and espousing politically incorrect views (Francis 1999, Knowles 2004). Within the 'sexualisation' debates, laddism has been linked with the phenomenon of 'raunch' or 'sex object' culture, which is associated with the mainstreaming of the erotic industries and the normalisation of sexual violence (Levy 2006, Walter 2010). For example, recent research by Horvath and Hegarty (2012) found that members of the public could not differentiate between the language used by 'lads mags' and that of convicted sex offenders. As a renewed form of sexism, laddism can be seen as a defensive response to women's perceived success; and there is a large body of research illustrating how sexism and sexual harassment functions to enable men to reclaim power and space (Welsh 1999, Bennett 2009, McLaughlin et al 2012). In the current economic and political context laddism is gaining a great deal of social and cultural power and has been described as the template masculinity for young British men (Dempster 2009, 2011), although it is also 'socially situated, fluid, and contextually bound' (Dempster 2011, p648, see also

Gough and Edwards 1998) and there may be variance between laddish behaviours in different social and educational settings, as well as amongst specific class and ethnic groups (Jackson and Dempster 2009).

In late 2012, we were commissioned by NUS to conduct qualitative research on 'lad culture' at UK universities. This functioned partially as a follow-up to the *Hidden Marks* survey (NUS 2010), which had revealed a high prevalence of sexual harassment and violence against UK university women. 'Lad culture' was positioned as a factor scaffolding this violence, and as indicative of the persistence of gendered structures and cultures in HE. Our research aimed to provide a qualitative examination of the phenomenon, through extensive literature review and focus groups and interviews with 40 women students. Our report, entitled *That's What She Said* (NUS 2013), was launched by NUS on International Women's Day 2013.

Our participants were recruited from Higher Education Institutions, students' unions and student groups across the UK. We conducted four focus groups in major cities in the North East, North West and South West of England and in Scotland, and interviews were arranged with students from a range of English HEIs. Although our sample was self-selecting, we made efforts to achieve diversity through some targeted recruitment, with varying levels of success.[iii] The majority of respondents were undergraduate students aged between 18 and 25, but some were postgraduates and two were over 30. All were cisgendered women, although some expressed ambivalence in relation to their gender identities. Almost 80 per cent identified as heterosexual, while the remainder reported a variety of different sexual orientations such as queer, gay or lesbian, bisexual, pansexual and 'undecided'. Giving an insight into the social context of the laddism we are discussing here, most defined their ethnicity as white British and described themselves as middle class, although there were a number of other ethnicities and class positions represented.[iv] Six participants identified as disabled. 16 participants were in a relationship, and 18 defined themselves as single or 'dating'. Details of participant demographics are presented in Table 1.[v]

The focus group method allowed us to witness the negotiation of perspectives and ideas around 'lad culture' (Wilson 1999), facilitated agenda-setting by participants rather than researchers, and helped to mitigate any potential discomfort or power imbalances due to weight of participant numbers and the fact that the groups were often organised for women who were friends (Bevan 2011). Each group lasted approximately 90 minutes and had between four and six participants, who were encouraged to share experiences and ideas in a semi-structured format. 19 students in total took part in the focus groups. The remaining 21 participants were asked to take part in semi-structured interviews, which were used to explore issues in more depth and allow each woman space for her own experiences and voice (Kitzinger 2007). Fifteen of the interviews were conducted in person (5) or over Skype (10). They lasted around an hour and involved one, or occasionally two, participants. The remaining six interviews were conducted via Email, with participants asked to respond as fully as they could to 10 questions (one participant chose instead to submit a free narrative). We adopted a feminist approach to the research, viewing our participants as collaborators and attempting to establish a friendly rapport (Oakley 2005, Kitzinger 2007).

'Lad culture' on campus

Our research suggested that laddism is one of multiple potential masculinities and if it constitutes a culture it is one which students (mostly men but also women – see also Jackson 2006) may dip in and out of, but that it can have far-reaching impacts on their identity construction and experience. For our participants it was primarily found in the social sphere, which they identified as the key site for the operation of 'campus culture' more generally. Although not engaged in by all men, laddish values and behaviours were thought to dominate here, especially extra-curricular activities and nightlife. Participants made links with sport and alcohol, confirming other studies (Gough and Edwards 1998, De Visser and Smith 2006, Clayton and Harris 2008, Dempster 2009, 2011). Laddish behaviours included misogynist banter, objectification of women and pressure around quantities and particular forms of sexual interaction and activity.

One of our interviewees (19) described an incident in which she attended a sports social and saw a member of the rugby team dressed in a vest reading 'Campus Rapist' on the front and 'It's not rape if you say surprise' on the back. She also recounted an episode in which a woman walking home across her campus was accosted by twenty naked rugby players. Finally, she related a story about members of the rugby team locking a member of the netball team in a coach toilet and throwing pornography magazines at her. These incidents illustrate the laddism which many of our participants identified in sports teams and societies especially: over half had such stories to tell. They emphasized initiations, examples of which included students drinking until they were sick and then being forced to drink their own vomit, urinating on their teammates, licking beer from each other's testicles and inserting hard-boiled eggs into their rectums. Some were more extreme, as described by a focus group participant (K):

> *They got the new freshers to line up in a row completely naked. Then the three guys with the smallest penises were taken five miles away and abandoned and they had to find their way back. [In another example] someone had to take loads of roofies*[vi]*, go take the entire bottom half of their clothes off, and run through this famous anal rape area of a park. And if they got to the end without passing out, it was impressive. And if they didn't, then they would just pass out and be left.*

Many participants also discussed the nighttime economy and the objectification of women in campus-based and independent social spaces. Club nights, students' union themed parties and nationwide events such as the *Carnage* pub crawl were described in particularly negative terms, as being 'cattle markets' which were often focused on preying upon freshers. There was a feeling that nightclub promoters and student night advertisers were at least partially responsible through publicising cheap alcohol and the promise of sexual activity. One focus group participant (P) said:

> *In first year there were definitely club nights which were advertising this image of slutty girls… trying to have this image of girls who are going to put out whatever, using them as bait for the guys to come*.

Another focus group participant (K) referred to a night called 'Horny', which was advertised with leaflets depicting scantily clad or topless girls, and an event entitled 'Tequila' which promoted itself through unsolicited sexual texts. A third (Q) described an advert for a student night which depicted a woman with duct tape across her chest and genitals and tied to a wall by her ankles and wrists.

In interpersonal contexts, almost half our participants referred to laddish jokes or banter which made them feel uncomfortable, with themes ranging from 'everyday' sexism to more extreme (and in some cases sexually violent) statements. There was a sense of pressure to engage in a high frequency of sexual activity and disdain towards committed relationships. One interviewee (13) identified a 'race' amongst groups of men to be 'the person who's the most open about sex, and the person who talks about it most'. She recounted that men and women who expressed discomfort around this were often dismissed as 'squares' and 'virgins'. There was discussion of masculine hierarchies based on levels of sexual experience, and the assumption that women would always be sexually receptive.[vii] As one focus group participant (H) said:

> *If you go out and you're…like being hit on all the time and a lot of the time if you say 'no', people are like, 'oh why are you frigid?'*

'Lad culture' was also thought to influence the dynamics of personal relationships, for example through pre-defining who should be found attractive, positioning partners as an inconvenience or 'extra baggage' (Interviewee 8), and shaping sexual expectations. One focus group participant (I) said:

> *There is no place for a diversity of attraction. Because as a pack you have to have the same mentality because otherwise you are not a pack. You get shit from the other members of your group if you get with someone who they consider to be ugly. You get teased or other stuff. So it's very narrow minded as to what a woman is.*

Another focus group participant (K) reported that students in relationships could be ostracised, and an interviewee (14) similarly identified pressures to avoid or end committed partnerships and 'play the field'. It is interesting to reflect here upon

research on laddism in educational contexts, which has linked it with both fear of failure (Jackson and Dempster 2009) and fear of the 'feminine' (Jackson 2003). In social and sexual settings this may also be relevant, with laddish behaviours masking fears of rejection or intimacy.

Two-thirds of our study participants talked about sexual harassment and violence, describing it as a normal part of university life and as at least partially produced by 'lad culture'. As one interviewee (10) said:

> *I don't know anyone, any of my female friends who haven't had some kind of encounter that was harassment whether it be verbal or physical since they've been at university.*

Participants repeated specific comments which had been directed at them, for instance: 'with that lipstick you'd make my cock look like a barber's pole' (Focus Group Participant Q); or 'get [your] minge out' (Interviewee 8). An interviewee (7) reported that a nightclub doorman had offered to let her into a club without identification if she showed him her breasts, with support from a nearby group of men. Incidents such as these mainly involved the heterosexual women in the sample, although one of our queer respondents had experienced laddish street harassment in a different form, in comments 'about what my gender is and that kind of thing.'

For some, verbal harassment had become physical, for instance in the following incident described in our focus groups (Participant I):

> *I've been pushed down the stairs of a bus before because I stood up for a girl that a pack of lads were picking on in quite a sexually violent way and then no one did anything and then all the guys started chanting, 'she doesn't want to have sex with you' because I was standing up for this woman who they got their penises out on the bus [in front of] and started being 'wahaay' and I was like 'I'm sorry, fuck off! That's not okay,' and then they pushed me down the stairs.*

Another focus group participant (K) recounted an incident in a club where both she and a friend had experienced 'literally just hands just groping us as we walked along'.

A few participants had sexual assault stories to tell, most concerning people they knew rather than themselves, although it is possible that the focus group setting in particular was not conducive to personal disclosures. One focus group participant (P) referred to:

> *A friend who had some guy that even put his hand down her pants on the dance floor. And she was a really quiet girl and she didn't say anything. I've heard of a few friends who have had things like that happened that have gone past a joke. I think guys think it's okay to do that.*[viii]

Another (H) said that she knew 'a lot of people that have sort of been very drunk and up for it and passed out and someone hasn't known when to stop.'

One of our interviewees (9) recounted a story about two mutual friends which encapsulated many characteristic aspects of violence within student communities:

> *We are friends with this guy and [my friend] fell asleep in his bed when she was quite drunk and she woke up to find him fingering her…she was obviously extremely distressed about this, left immediately, came over crying…but she doesn't want anyone to know about it…she doesn't want anyone to feel negatively about him…She says 'oh well he's still your friend…I don't want it to become my word against his or [have] anyone turning their back on him or anything like that'. She says that quite a few of her friends especially from other universities have had situations like that.*

Furthermore, there was a consensus that action in relation to such incidents, especially within institutions, was rare. This is echoed by data from the Hidden Marks (NUS, 2010) project, which found high levels of sexual harassment (68%) and very low levels of institutional reporting (4%).

Troubling the 'sexualisation' debates: 'sexual panic' versus 'sexual celebration'

As feminists we believe data analysis is always subjective (Letherby 2011), and since we found these data incredibly shocking could easily have developed our interpretation, as others have done, by drawing upon prevailing moral panics about 'sexualised' cultures and victimized young women. However, our data resisted such straightforward explanations, causing us to reflect anew on recent debates about

young people and sexualities. The contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities is characterised on one side by a shift to more permissive attitudes and proliferation of sexual texts and experiences, and on the other by outrage at the incursion of the 'obscene' into public life (Attwood 2006, pp78-9). Discussions of how this relates to girls and young women sit within a framework juxtaposing what we will term a 'sexual panic' discourse consisting of populist and rather deterministic feminist critiques (often of the radical persuasion) of 'sex object' or 'raunch' culture (see Levy 2006, Banyard 2010, Walter 2010) which dovetail with neoconservative projects, against what we will call a 'sexual celebration' discourse identified in academic postmodern and third-wave emphases on sexual empowerment and self-expression, which some commentators (Gill and Donaghue 2013, Phipps 2014) have associated with neoliberalism.

Students rarely figure as a specific group within such debates, partly perhaps due to the force of the moral panic around the sexual abuse of girls. However, campus communities in particular house large concentrations of young people, the majority living independently for the first time, many of whom are likely to experiment with sex and sexualities. Our data seemed to present to us a new purchase on the rather polarized discursive and political arena around 'sexualisation', sketching a group of young women who interacted critically with laddish activities and behaviours but who in doing so confounded both 'sexual panic' and 'sexual celebration' narratives.

Within the 'sexual panic' discourse, sexualised cultures currently determine young people's and in particular girls' and young women's sexualities. Such critiques often rest on the assumption that sex at a young age is dangerous and damaging and tend to incorporate judgments on promiscuity, positing that girls and young women need to be protected. As part of this, there may be moralising calls for a return to virginity and abstinence (for further discussion of this see Carline 2011, Coy and Garner 2012, Epstein et al 2012, Egan and Hawkes 2012, Ringrose and Renold 2012). However, although some of the more shocking moments in our data certainly positioned 'lad culture' as potentially psychologically and physically threatening, in its entirety the dataset did not exhort a diffuse 'panic' around sex. Indeed, all our participants were

sexually active, with almost half identifying as single or 'dating' and none expressing discomfort in relation to sex in general or casual sex in particular. Rather, their complaints targeted the laddish values which framed the sexual attitudes and behaviours they described. Furthermore, many highlighted the double standards evident in the sexual 'liberation' around them (see also Gavey 2012) and how these limited their sexual agency, with one interviewee (9) opining that it was 'seen as a negative thing if girls want to have sex and I think that's really bad and not empowering at all'. Another (interviewee 2) similarly said: 'Boys go out and have sex and they're seen as studs but if it's a girl they're slags, that's not fair.' Such comments suggested that sexualised 'lad cultures' may at least partly emanate from unease with women's sexual self-actualisation.

The discomfort expressed by many of our participants was less bound up with sex than with sex*ism*, confirming suggestions that 'lad culture' may in fact merely represent 'sexism with an alibi' (Williamson, 2003, Gill 2011). For example, one of our interviewees (10) served as president of her university's pole dancing society but objected to the heteronormative and conservative models of femininity she observed in the sex industry and which she felt were endorsed by 'lad culture':

> All women should look a certain [way], all women should be waxed, really thin, have big boobs and should be there to service the man and it should all be about the man, and if you don't look that way they're like 'what's wrong with you? Are you a freak?'

The same interviewee (10) also described as 'quite bizarre' the unspoken rule that

> If a guy decides a girl is his, whether she likes him or not, no one else is going to get with her because they all know that the leader of the pack has decided, he kind of owns them.

Although sexualised cultures factored into this participant's analysis of such attitudes, she made distinctions between trends for 'people [to be] more sexually free or open' and what she saw as a blurring of the boundaries 'between what's appropriate and what's just degrading', which she identified as being driven by sexism: gendered practices of objectification and possession and a masculinised construction of sexual pleasure.

Further to their uneasiness with such neoconservative constructions of genders and sexualities, our participants also protested what we see as the neoliberal values shaping their sexual communities (for a fuller discussion of this see Phipps and Young forthcoming 2014). These were expressed in competitive and consumerist behaviours such as counting conquests, giving women marks, and the now legendary 'fuck a fresher' enterprise. One interviewee (8) said:

> One particular group [of lads] used to compete to see how many numbers they could get of girls in a night - they used to put them on tissue paper "so the girls can't text us and get clingy" – [and then] throw these tissues away.

Another (2) cited banter about 'notches on the bedpost', and said that men she knew 'made it their mission' to sleep with large numbers of girls because they were keeping score. A focus group participant (J) described a club promotion company searching for new staff and rating women students out of 10 for their 'sexiness factor', and an interviewee (17) related that she was often berated on nights out for 'not wearing sexy enough clothes'. These narratives evoked the neoliberal and post-feminist requisite that young women must be constantly 'up for it' (Gill 2008, 2011), highlighted by focus group participant H's complaints (presented in the previous section) about being repeatedly 'hit on' and called 'frigid' if she said no.

Our data revealed a convergence within 'lad culture' of forms of retro-sexism which limit young women's range of sexual expression and postfeminist and neoliberal rationalities that require women to perform constant availability and which turn sexual 'agency' itself into a form of regulation (see also Gill 2008, Gill 2011). Gill and Donaghue (2013) have linked the latter with the 'sexual celebration' discourse to which our discussion will now turn, and the views presented by our respondents certainly offered a counterpoint to simplistic glorifications of young women's sexual empowerment which have been associated with this narrative (for instance by Coy and Garner 2012, Gill 2012). Although it focuses on young women's positive engagements with contemporary sexual cultures, texts and practices[ix], the 'sexual celebration' discourse has also been reproached (for example by Ringrose and

Renold 2012, Gill 2012, Peterson and Lamb 2012) for conflating empowerment with sexuality and sexual pleasure and accepting uncritically the idea that young women especially perform their identities via the vocabulary of sex. It often sits within broader frameworks associating contemporary sexual cultures with democratization and progress (see for example McNair 2002). There is frequently an idealization of adolescent girls' sexualities and focus on subjectivities in isolation from framing structures (particularly that of consumer capitalism), and as Lamb and Peterson (2012) contend, an incorporation of contemporary forms of 'sexiness' as given. The celebration of sexually liberated femininities has also produced a reluctance to talk about violence and abuse for fear of constructing women as victims (Coy and Garner 2012).

Challenging this narrative, our research suggested that there might exist at least a significant minority of women who are *not* empowered by sexualised 'lad cultures' but who are far from being passively victimised by them. Although a few of our respondents were able to laugh off laddish behaviours, none felt completely at ease with 'lad culture' and many actively opposed it. One interviewee (6) strongly objected to 'vulgar conversations about the way women look…all about sex, and whether a women would be worthy of fornicating with.' Another (interviewee 8) said, 'personally I've had experiences where I've pissed off some [lads] because I won't flirt with them or buy into it.' She recounted a story from her first year in which a male student had approached her on a bus and said 'get your minge out' and she had subsequently confronted him and made him apologise. The views expressed by our participants were corroborated more broadly in a Twitter conversation curated by the Everyday Sexism project in response to our report, in which almost 300 tweets were posted by both women and men criticizing laddish behaviours (Everyday Sexism 2013). These perspectives were also echoed in the earlier and more extensive *Hidden Marks* survey (NUS 2010), in which 68 percent of over 2000 women students had been subject to conduct such as banter, wolf-whistling, catcalling and groping, and at least half of these specified that this had caused discomfort.[x]

Interestingly, such detractors might not be intelligible as sexual agents within the framework of 'sexual celebration': instead, they might be positioned under the rubric of sex-negative radical feminism (for further discussion of this stereotype see Lamb 2010, Snyder-Hall 2010, Phipps 2014). Indeed, this characterisation of both our participants and ourselves was evident in some media quarters after the release of our report, as we were described as prissy, prudish, Puritanical and bitter (see for example Hayes 2013, Rivlin 2013, Tremayne 2013). However, we recognise agency and bodily autonomy in our respondents' refusal to cooperate with prevailing sexualised norms. For us, our data provided concrete examples of the point often made (but not so often substantiated) by critics of the 'sexual panic' discourse, that children and young people engage actively and critically with contemporary sexual cultures (see for example Attwood and Smith 2011, Bale 2011). Nevertheless, we fear that our participants would not necessarily figure as agentic within such accounts, which often rest on models of sexual empowerment that require the celebration of contemporary sexualised norms. Our data show the shortsightedness of such interpretations, presenting a snapshot of a group of independent, intelligent young women expressing their personal and political objections to the 'lad cultures' around them. There has been discussion in recent years about the project to develop a 'sex positive' feminism which moves on from the 'sexualisation' debates and escapes the unproductive dichotomies of the 1980s and 1990s 'sex wars' (Gill 2011). In order to achieve this, it is necessary to honour differences in attitude and experience, without writing off those who criticize sexualised cultures as moralistic prudes.

Indeed, the agency identified in saying 'yes' to sexualised texts and practices can only be meaningful if there is equal space and respect accorded to those who say 'no'. However, unlike many contemporary conceptualisations which have been critiqued as resting upon neoliberal and postfeminist constructions of the free and autonomous, ever-rational individual (Burkett and Hamilton 2012, Gill and Donahue 2013), the agency we observed in our participants was often achieved through struggle. Although some were confident in challenging laddish behaviours others described difficulties in doing so, with one focus group participant (Q) telling us 'you

get shouted down and told that you are talking crap and that you are obviously in need of sexual release', and adding that she had been told 'all the time how I don't have a sense of humour and all this kind of stuff and how I hate freedom of speech'. An interviewee (5) spoke about how the marginalization she already experienced as a BME and disabled woman had prevented her from speaking out about 'lad culture' for fear of being dismissed. Many also reported that sexual harassment was often minimised, which made it difficult to challenge it. As one interviewee (13) said: 'It's "take it as a compliment" is what everybody says when you complain about it.' In these moments our data presented an alternative to the more facile models of agency which often characterise 'sexual celebration' accounts, highlighting some of the difficulties of rejecting prevailing sexual norms. However, these complexities may be why such agency can often be taken up as victimhood in the context of 'sexual panic', or dismissed as repression and juxtaposed against more celebratory attitudes, within debates around sexualisation.

Conclusion

Our qualitative study shed light on women students' experiences with 'lad culture' and added depth to existing bodies of literature on both laddism and sexual harassment and violence in higher education. Although laddism should be seen as only one of a variety of available masculinities and while the behaviours our respondents described are certainly extreme, there was a definite feeling that these dominated the social and sexual side of university life. Our participants highlighted problems with misogynist banter, objectification of women and sexual pressure and harassment in the cultures around them. However, although the women in our study objected to 'lad cultures', this did not constitute a 'sexual panic'. Moreover, neither did they fit contemporary trends towards 'sexual celebration': indeed, within these they could easily be defined as sexually repressed. In contrast, we see them as agentic in their ability to engage critically with the sexual cultures and communities around them.

Underlining such agency, recent news reports have cited a growth in university feminist societies, positing that they may be emerging at least partly in response to

burgeoning 'lad culture' (Hilton 2013, Pearce 2014). Indeed, of the 34 of our participants who discussed their relationship to feminism, 27 identified as feminists, which may suggest that women who object to or resist 'lad culture' are more likely to claim a feminist identity.[xi] In response to our research, approximately 75 percent of UK students' unions adopted 'zero tolerance' policies around sexism and sexual harassment (information provided by NUS) and a number of grassroots campaigns emerged, for instance targeting particular club nights or 'naming and shaming' perpetrators on social media (Young-Powell 2013, Bates 2014). Such criticism of 'lad culture' is not reserved for women: many men distance themselves from its excesses or disapprove of it entirely as a bogus performance of machismo which masks anxiety (Dempster 2009, 2011). Indeed, this was seen recently in a Twitter chat curated by NUS Scotland and the White Ribbon Campaign under the #ImNotThatLad hashtag, in which young men posted their objections (NUS Scotland 2014). There is a need to harness such critical perspectives and resistances, and in February 2014, NUS convened a summit on lad culture, attended by students of all genders, where a committee aiming to develop a national strategy was launched (Young-Powell and Page 2014).

We recognize however that in confining action to student groups, we risk playing into neoliberal constructions of individual accountability and young women in particular as hyper-responsible, especially in the sexual arena (for further discussion see Burkett and Hamilton 2012). More also needs to be done, then, at institutional and macro-political levels: universities need clear policies and procedures on gender equality, sexual harassment and violence, preferably facilitated and supported by relevant government departments.[xii] With this in mind, it is disappointing that there were no governmental or institutional speakers at the NUS summit mentioned above (Young-Powell and Page 2014). The increasing neoliberalisation of UK higher education may be partly to blame (see also Phipps and Young 2014): in the US, where higher education markets are well established and despite a legislative framework which mandates the publication of campus crime statistics, institutions have been criticised for covering up sexual harassment and violence, or encouraging students not to speak out, in order to preserve reputation in a highly competitive

field (Sack 2013). We need to take the opportunity afforded by our report to try to influence a cultural change in our higher education institutions and combat the silence and inaction around sexual harassment and abuse (see Phipps and Smith 2012). Although it may be true that there is no longer a single locus of 'great Refusal' (Foucault 1978, p95), we are not yet ready to abandon the idea that with institutional and political backing, the 'plurality of resistances' (Foucault 1978, p95) displayed by our research participants and other critics of 'lad culture' could potentially be mobilized into coordinated action to combat sexism in our universities.

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Table 1: participant demographics

ID	Sex/gender	Age	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Ethnicity	Nationality	Class	Disability?	Year
1	Female	22	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Working/middle	Yes	PG
2	Female	21	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Lower middle	Yes	UG 3
3	Female	19	Bisexual/asexual	Single	Eastern European Jewish	British	Middle	No	UG 2
4	Female	32	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	PG
5	Female	20	Heterosexual	Dating	Black British	British	Working	Yes	UG 3
6	Female	32	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Working	No	PG
7	Female	22	Queer	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 3
8	Female	20	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 3
9	Female	-	-	In a relationship	White British	British	-	-	UG 3
10	Female	22	Heterosexual	Single	British Asian	British	-	-	UG 3
11	Female	18	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Lower middle	No	UG 1
12	Female	22	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Upper middle	No	UG 4
13	Female	20	-	Single	White European	European	-	-	UG 1
14	Female	22	Heterosexual	Engaged	White British	British	Middle	No	PG
15	Female	20	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Working	No	UG 3
16	Female	21	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	-	No	-
17	Female	20	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 2
18	Female	20	Bisexual	Single	Mixed (Chinese and White British)	British	Middle	No	UG 3
19	Female	25	Queer	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 2
20	Female	24	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	-	No	PG
21	Female	22	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 3
A	Female	19	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 2
B	Female	20	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 3
C	Female	-	-	-	White British	British	-	-	UG 4
D	Female	19	Undecided	Single	Mixed (White and Black Caribbean)	British	Working	No	UG 1

ID	Sex/gender	Age	Sexual orientation	Relationship status	Ethnicity	Nationality	Class	Disability?	Year
I	Female	-	-	-	White British	British	-	-	UG 3
J	Female	-	-	-	White British	British	-	-	UG 4
K	Female	19	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 2
L	Female	23	Heterosexual	In a relationship	Chinese	British	Working/middle	No	UG 2
M	Female	21	Heterosexual	Single	White British	British	Middle	No	UG 1
N	Female	19	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	Yes	UG 1
O	Female	20	Heterosexual	Single	Asian	Chinese	Middle	No	UG 1
P	Female	22	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	-	-	PG
Q	Female	22	Heterosexual	In a relationship	White British	British	Middle	No	PG
R	Female	22	Heterosexual	Single	White British	English	Middle	Yes	PG
S	Female	22	Pansexual	In a relationship	White British	British	-	Yes	PG

Year – PG = postgraduate, UG = undergraduate (followed by year number)

[i] It should be noted however that there has only been one reported incident of this.

[ii] However, this term was chosen by NUS to encapsulate the focus of the research and was by many of our participants, and it is in this context that we use it.

[iii] We were particularly disappointed not to be able to access more non-white students, or students from Wales and Northern Ireland.

[iv] The fact that white women dominated our sample reflects the ethnic bias in UK higher e in 2011/12, BME students were 18.8% of all UK-domiciled students (Equality Challenge Ur may also reflect the fact that 'lad culture' is predominantly found in mainstream social spa may exclude students of other ethnic backgrounds and nationalities (indeed, this was a pc the two international students who took part in our study).

[v] Most, but not all, participants chose to answer all the demographic questions; the figure here are taken from those who did.

[vi] Roofies or Rohypnol is an intermediate acting benzodiazepine used as a hypnotic, sedat anticonvulsant, anxiolytic and skeletal muscle relaxant drug and commonly used in drug-fa sexual assault.

[vii] It should be noted here that such standards largely operated in heteronormative contex of our queer respondents (interviewee 3) felt that her identity had perhaps allowed her to pressure than her heterosexual peers in this area: 'you can say 'no I don't want to becaus that ends the conversation pretty quickly' (interviewee 3).

[viii] This sounds like an example of 'underhanding', described in a recent Guardian article as practice in which 'a boy stands behind a girl and tries to put his fingers inside her' (Young- 2013).

[ix] For examples of such perspectives, see Smith's (2007) study of the pleasures of reading porn, Holland and Attwood's (2009) discussion of the mainstreaming of pole dancing, and Thompson's (2010) and Grondin's (2011) analyses of contemporary 'moral panics' around abuse.

[x] Respondents were asked if they had ever experienced any of a range of different behavi sequence of separate questions, but the suffix 'which made you feel uncomfortable' was the question relating to comments with a sexual overtone (since it is possible that some w not experience discomfort as a result of these). Therefore, levels of discomfort were prob higher than 34 percent of respondents, since other behaviours in the list included groping intrusive sexual questions.

[xi] This obviously constitutes a bias of our research: however, since our study did not aim t representative this does not invalidate our findings. There is no definitive information on young women in Britain identify as feminists, although recent reports (Redfern and Aune 2013, Pearce 2014) have suggested that this number is increasing, especially amongst stu may mean that our sample is not atypical. We should make a note here about privilege: m sample identified as middle class and the majority were from Russell Group universities (a 'bold, hilarious feminists of Pearce's 2014 article). It has been suggested by Duschinsky (2 others that objections to sexualised cultures can be a form of prejudice against perceived class vulgarity influencing middle class sexualities. However, in our study we believe this v rather reductionist interpretation which would risk minimising experiences of sexual hara violence.

[xii] There are a number of potential models from the US, where many universities are requi sexual violence prevention programmes and where research and initiatives in this area ha history, which could be usefully piloted here (Phipps and Smith 2012).