

**New Zealand viewers of *Geordie Shore* talk casual sex and binge-drinking**

by

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## **Abstract**

In the current ‘postfeminist’ cultural climate, women are increasingly invited to be confident, free, open and ‘up for it’ and to take part in domains typically considered masculine, such as drinking alcohol and having casual sex. Some understandings of this ‘new’ femininity position women’s participation in cultures of intoxication and sexualisation as a form of social progress, liberation, empowerment and choice. However, women’s engagement with these practices is far from straightforward and some argue that they are faced with an ‘impossible’ task of balancing postfeminist demands of an ‘up for it’ femininity with traditional discourses of feminine respectability and reputation. The reality television show, *Geordie Shore*, where female and male characters engage in casual sex and heavy drinking is a site in which some of these contradictions of post-feminism are played out. While previous studies have analysed women’s participation in cultures of intoxication and sexualisation, this project makes a significant contribution to existing research by exploring how *both* men and women engage with these phenomena. Therefore, in this thesis I examine how 23 young adults, living in Christchurch, New Zealand respond to representations of women’s *and* men’s drinking and casual sex on *Geordie Shore*.

Two mixed gender and two gender specific focus group discussions were analysed using a discourse analytic approach informed by feminist post-structuralism. Participants’ lived experiences and social context informed their readings of representations of men’s and women’s casual sex and drinking on *Geordie Shore*. For male participants, the ‘laddish’ sexual practices represented on *Geordie Shore* were contrasted to men’s casual sex in ‘real life’ where having numerous sexual partners could be read as problematic. While the majority of male participants positioned themselves as accepting of women with numerous sexual partners,

female participants were aware and critical of a continuing sexual double standard. Drinking and sartorial practices in the night-time economy on the show were further contrasted to participants' lived experiences and their own identities as 'Kiwis.' Participants were critical of how women's heavy drinking was represented on the show. From a New Zealand context, they drew on dominant discourses of drinking as a masculine domain. Women's drinking in 'real life' was acceptable only to a certain 'limit' set by a standard of masculinity.

While previous research has suggested that engaging in casual sex and heavy drinking are mainly contradictory terrains for women, I argue that male participants also faced some constraints in their involvement in such practices. Although casual sex and heavy drinking are 'requirements' of masculinity, male participants in this research discussed ambiguous 'limits' around 'handling' their alcohol and an 'acceptable' number of sexual partners. Through this, they challenged dominant discourses of masculine sexuality and drinking.

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# **Chapter One**

## **Introduction**

Variously known as ‘the sexualisation of culture,’ ‘mainstreaming of sex’ (Attwood, 2010), ‘striptease’ (McNair, 2002), ‘pornified’ (Paul, 2005), or ‘raunch’ culture (Levy, 2005), a proliferation of sexual discourse and imagery has become prevalent across Western societies (Coy, 2009). While traditionally sex was seen as a private matter, intimate details around sex and sexuality are now more openly discussed in the public sphere (McNair, 2002). Moreover, the notion of sex as a means of reproduction, or as part of lasting romantic relationships, is being replaced by the idea that sex is instead for “play and pleasure” (Attwood, 2010: xv).

Feona Attwood argues that the sexualisation of culture involves:

a contemporary preoccupation with sexual values, practices and identities; the public shift to more permissive sexual attitudes; the proliferation of sexual texts; the emergence of new forms of sexual experience; the apparent breakdown of rules, categories and regulations designed to keep the obscene at bay; [and the] fondness for scandals, controversies and panics around sex (2006: 79).

Significant social changes during the twentieth century such as the entry of women into the work force and the improving social status of homosexuals catalysed the development of this less conservative, more open, sexualised Western society (McNair, 2002). The rise of neo-liberal<sup>1</sup> consumer culture, as well as technological developments and the growth of a global media system have also propelled the increase and availability of sexualised material (McNair, 2002; Evans et al. 2010).

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<sup>1</sup> Neoliberalism is a policy model that shifts responsibility from the state to the individual (Ong, 2006).

This saturation of sexual content is occurring across all media forms, including magazines, advertising, music videos and, of significance in this thesis, television (Coy, 2009; McNair, 2002; Poulin & Claude, 2010). Indeed, since the early 1990s, there has been a shift from generally sexually conservative content on television programming, to a proliferation of reality shows<sup>2</sup> that no longer leave intimate sexual content and behaviour to the private realm (Press, 2014; Balkin, 2004; Streitmatter, 2004; Cato & Carpentier, 2010). MTV has become a key site for such sexualised television and is hugely popular, particularly among the 12 to 24-year-old demographic, and viewed in 342 million homes worldwide (Wood, 2017; Stern, 2005; Ali, 2001). Throughout the 2000s MTV produced a number of reality television shows that represent young men and women engaging in casual sex and heavy drinking, including *A Shot at Love*, *Ex on the Beach*, *Are You the One?* and *The Valleys*.

One show that was received particularly well, becoming “MTV’s highest-rated series in both cable and broadcast television in the summer of 2010” (Klein, 2014: 150), was *Jersey Shore* (2009). Set in Seaside Heights, New Jersey, eight ‘Guidos’ and ‘Guidettes’<sup>3</sup> spend a summer living, partying and drinking together (Bond & Drogos, 2014). Casual sex and hooking-up<sup>4</sup> are key elements in the series. As Manninen points out, “[s]exual activity is the end goal in almost every single episode of Jersey Shore – very little of which occurs in intimate loving

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<sup>2</sup> What constitutes ‘reality’ television has been debated (Montemurro, 2008) but can broadly encompass an array of seemingly unscripted TV programs that feature “ordinary people as contestants, participants, and subjects” (Oullette, 2013: 4). Due to editing and production techniques scholars have questioned the extent to which reality television can be ‘real’ (Cummings, 2002; Roth, 2003) and to which participants are ‘authentic’ (Couldry, 2004; Crew, 2006; Hill, 2005). Reality television research is organized into themes of “production, analysis of content (including themes of diversity, social issues, ethics) and audience reception” (Montemurro, 2008: 93).

<sup>3</sup> ‘Guidos’ and ‘Guidettes’ are an Italian American subculture (Klein, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> The term ‘hook-up’ refers to casual or one-off sexual encounters outside of a committed relationship (Kalish & Kimmel, 2011).

relationships” (2016: 58). From *Jersey Shore*, came the United Kingdom’s version *Geordie*<sup>5</sup> *Shore* in May 2011 (Wood, 2017). *Geordie Shore* (2011) set in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, is formatted in a similar fashion to *Jersey Shore*, with eight housemates living and partying under the same roof. The show has been hugely popular, often achieving over a million viewers per episode (Wood, 2017). The first season centred on characters Gary, Charlotte, Jay, Holly, Greg, Sophie, Vicki and James. Now, at season sixteen, some past characters have left and new ones joined, but the premise of *Geordie Shore* has remained much the same – partying, drinking and sex.

Upon its release, the show received mixed reactions from the public. Newcastle’s MP, Chi Onwurah, did not respond well describing *Geordie Shore* as “bordering on pornographic,” unrepresentative of Newcastle and that, “[b]y putting these young people in this situation, it is encouraging them to lose all their dignity” (cited in Moss, 2011). The show was also received poorly by Newcastle locals who criticized *Geordie Shore* for perpetuating “regional stereotypes of the white working class, [and] fuelling the hate figure of the ‘CHAV’” (Wood, 2017: 41). After its first episode, more than 4,000 local Newcastle residents called for the show to be cut and more than 24,000 people joined a Facebook page named ‘RIP Geordie Pride’ (Daily Mail, 2011; Wood, 2017). However, despite these reactions, *Geordie Shore* is still on air and continues to receive high ratings (Wood, 2017). Scholars have speculated that pleasure in watching *Geordie Shore* or similar programming may derive from viewer judgement of the ‘out-of-control’ behaviour represented on the show (Douglas, 2013; Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017). Audiences may feel a sense of superiority over the characters on *Geordie Shore*, where

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<sup>5</sup> ‘Geordie’ is the regional name for people from Newcastle (Wood, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> The term ‘Chav’ is associated with stereotypical notions of the white working-class in British culture (Tyler, 2008).

“at least (middle-class) viewers can be reassured that they have better taste and moral judgement” (Wood, 2017: 42). As Susan Douglas comments:

[R]eality TV shows use idiotic, arrogant, or self-destructive behaviors which we are urged to judge and which are designed to make us feel much better about ourselves: however dumb or selfish we were today, at least we weren’t like *that* (2013: 149).

To date, there has been little academic analysis of *Geordie Shore*, particularly in relation to how viewers make sense of its content. Scholars have pointed to the need for further study of *Geordie Shore* and MTV, for example, Misha Kavka notes that “MTV represents an interesting case for future study” (2012: 180), and Anne Graefer comments that shows such as *Geordie Shore* exert “considerable influence on contemporary popular culture” (2014: 105). Thus, *Geordie Shore*, heavily critiqued for its representations of men’s and women’s casual sex and heavy drinking is a critical area of study. It is a key site in which the contradictions of contemporary femininity are played out, where female characters engage in ‘hook-ups’ and binge-drinking, but are often judged by a different set of criteria to the male characters, both by fellow cast-mates and the public. As Helen Wood claims, “it is the [*Geordie Shore*] women rather than the men who are questioned about their public sexual exploits” (2017: 49). As such, it is an important site to explore how viewers respond to, challenge and negotiate gendered representations of drinking and casual sex.

The ‘hook-ups’ and drinking as represented on *Geordie Shore* are relevant to a large body of literature on the culture of intoxication<sup>7</sup> and sexualisation of culture. Scholars have noted that such terrain deserves further research, Rosalind Gill for example, comments:

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<sup>7</sup> The culture of intoxication involves “drinkers intentionally drinking to intoxication and viewing this behavior as socially acceptable” (McEwan et al. 2010: 15).

There is an urgent need for research that explores the gender politics of sexualisation, especially in the wider context of the resurgence of sexism in recent years, alongside the emphasis upon women's active participation in – indeed empowerment – through sexualised culture (2012a: 492).

This thesis contributes to this research gap by exploring the ways in which young New Zealand adults and university students engage with representations of casual sex and drinking on *Geordie Shore* and how this often involves drawing on their own experiences of these practices. Most previous research has explored representations of gender and sexuality on reality television shows through textual or content analysis (e.g., Douglas, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kavka, 2015; Anderson & Ferris, 2016; Wood, 2017). This research instead explores how viewers understand such representations. Furthermore, previous research has predominantly explored the debates and challenges for young women in participating in cultures of intoxication and sexualisation, while side-lining men's experiences and/or understandings of these issues (e.g., Evans et al. 2010; Gill, 2012a; Griffin et al. 2012; Evans & Riley, 2013; Stepney, 2015). This thesis therefore contributes to this body of research by engaging men in such debates, exploring how they read representations of masculinities and femininities in the context of an increasingly sexualised, binge-drinking<sup>8</sup> culture.

This chapter introduces the key bodies of literature that inform this thesis, the sexualisation of culture and culture of intoxication. Firstly, to justify my own approach to this research topic, I provide an overview of the theoretical and methodological debates within the sexualisation of culture. I discuss mainstream psychological research on the sexualisation of culture and its proposed 'harms' of sexual media content on young women and girls. I then discuss some of

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<sup>8</sup> Binge drinking involves "short term heavy-drinking behavior" (McEwan et al. 2010: 17).

the critique of such approaches from cultural theorists who have suggested a more complicated understanding of the sexualisation of culture. I next introduce the culture of intoxication, and some of the debates within this literature. I address how this research contributes to previous scholarship and conclude the chapter by providing a thesis outline.

### **The sexualisation of culture: Theoretical and methodological debates**

The increase in representations of sex across Western societies, or the sexualisation of culture, have prompted growing popular, academic and feminist debates, as well as being an emerging policy issue (Coy, 2009; Gill, 2012b). Firstly, the very meaning of the term ‘sexualisation,’ and what it encompasses, has been debated (Gill, 2011; Gill, 2012a; Gill, 2012b; Coy & Garner, 2012). There is no unitary understanding of sexualisation across disciplines and “much of the time different parties are not even talking about the same thing” (Gill, 2012a: 492). Of further dispute is the possible meanings or ‘impacts’ of sexualisation for women and young people. Across and within disciplines there are a range of varied and complex understandings of the sexualisation of culture. Some cultural research explores themes of feminine agency, pleasure and empowerment (e.g., Attwood, 2004, 2011; Smith, 2007; Holland & Attwood, 2010), while others regard discourses of ‘empowerment’ as a way of disguising continued sexism (Winship, 2000; Levy, 2005; Donaghue et al. 2011). A further position, of policy and mainstream psychological research, raises concern over the possible harms or ‘effects’ of sexual content, especially on women and young people (e.g., Strasburger & Donnerstein, 1999; Papadopolous, 2010; American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010).

In mainstream psychological research<sup>9</sup>, there is concern that young people will incorporate what they see on TV and the media into “their own personal views, which in turn can influence their personal development” (Cato & Carpentier, 2010: 274; Bandura, 2001). For example, the American Academy of Paediatrics released a policy statement on “sexuality, contraception and the media,” citing a series of studies promoting the idea that the media has “powerful influence on adolescents’ sexual attitudes, values, and beliefs” (2010: 577). According to the report, there is a correlation between watching sexual reality television and belief in a sexual double standard, “that men are sex driven and that men and women are sexual adversaries” (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2010: 577). Bradley Bond and Kristin Drogos’ (2014) also argue there is a correlation between watching reality television and sexual attitudes among young people. They conducted a survey of 342 undergraduate students (ages 18 to 23) and found that “exposure to *Jersey Shore* was positively related to permissive sexual attitudes” (Bond & Drogos, 2014: 118). Age was a moderating variable, with younger viewers (age 18 to 20) more likely to have permissive sexual attitudes than 21 to 23-year-olds (Bond & Drogos, 2014). The study “also revealed a positive relationship between permissive sexual attitudes and sexual activity” (Bond & Drogos, 2014: 122), indicating that viewers may perceive the sexual behaviour on the show as normative, and re-enact it in their own lives. Other studies have also argued for significant relationships between viewing sexual content on TV in general and young persons’ attitudes about sex (Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006; Riddle & De Simone, 2013; Greeson & Williams, 1986).

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<sup>9</sup> Mainstream psychology, involving scientific measurement and empirical methodology, is the research approach taken by many psychologists. This mainstream approach does not include other areas of psychology, such as critical psychologists, feminist informed-scholars or social constructionists who have critiqued these approaches to the study of gender and sexuality (Rogers & Rogers, 2001; Bjork, 2011).

Within this mainstream psychological literature there is growing fear that young people are internalising particular media messages around appearance (thinness for women and muscularity for men), sexuality (a normalisation of casual sex and women as sexual objects), as well as gendered stereotypes (men as dominant and aggressive, women as subordinate) (Papadopoulos, 2010). There is also concern that exposure to sexual media content can lead to self-objectification and sexualisation for both men and women (Papadopolous, 2010; Ward et al. 2016). Furthermore, the *American Psychological Association (APA) Task Force Report on the Sexualisation of Girls* (2007), argued that the sexualisation of culture has harmful effects on cognitive development, self-esteem, physical and mental health, sexuality, and attitudes and beliefs for adolescent girls. Linda Papadopoulos' review on the *Sexualisation of Young People* (2010), also claimed a connection between the sexualisation of culture and sexualised violence and harassment. Papadopoulos claims that there is “a clear link” between viewing sexualised images and “a tendency to view women as objects and the acceptance of aggressive attitudes and behavior as the norm” (2010: 11). She lists several psychological studies that suggest that the sexualisation of culture encourages men to internalize media images of women as subordinate “and as appropriate targets for sexual violence” (Papadopoulos, 2010: 67). According to Papadopoulos “sexualisation devalues women and girls sending out a disturbing message that they are always sexually available” (2010: 74).

Cultural theorist Rosalind Gill poses that “quantitative psychological research has been valuable in drawing critical attention to sexualisation, highlighting shifts over time in the volume and nature of ‘sexualising’ material, and opening up important questions about the potentially harmful effects of exposure to sexualised images” (2012a: 487-488). However, Gill and others are critical of the theoretical positions and methodologies employed in such research. Mainstream psychological research tends to be informed by positivist assumptions

alongside quantitative survey methods and content analysis, looking for correlations or cause and effect relations between TV viewing and sexual attitudes. Catania et al. (1990) argue that survey methodology can be a problematic research tool for investigating sexual topics. Sexuality, sexual behaviour and attitudes are difficult to put into survey items, as the terms and meanings are often ambiguous and interpreted differently by different people (Catania et al. 1990). Content analysis has additionally been critiqued. Gill (2012a), for example claims that content analyses are flawed in that they use a singular meaning of sexualisation and may depend on the subjective opinion of the researcher coding the material. According to Gill, these studies may miss the wider picture, “seeing ‘sexualisation’ as residing in single, readily identifiable images treated separately from wider features of the texts in which they are embedded” (2012a: 488). Furthermore, content analyses “ignore the difference between levels of meaning (e.g. manifest versus latent meanings<sup>10</sup>) and tell us little about the images they examine, except how frequently they occur” (Gill, 2012a: 488). As Gill argues “sexualisation is far from being a singular or homogenous process; different people are sexualised in different ways and with different meanings and, moreover, many remain outside or excluded from what McNair has called the ‘democratisation of desire<sup>11</sup>’ operating in visual culture” (2012a: 492).

Much mainstream psychological research uses a media ‘effects’ approach which has been problematized by numerous scholars (e.g., Livingstone, 1996; Gauntlett, 2001; Gill 2012a). David Gauntlett (2001), for example, argues that ‘effects’ research is often overly speculative

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<sup>10</sup> Manifest content refers to the “visible [and] obvious components” of a text, while latent content refers to the “underlying meaning of the text” (Graneheim & Lundman, 2003: 106). According to Graneheim and Lundman, “[b]oth manifest and latent content deal with interpretation but the interpretations vary in depth and level of abstraction” (2003: 106).

<sup>11</sup> A term developed by Brian McNair (2002) to explore the proliferation of sexual imagery and content, and increasing accessibility of pornography, in contemporary society. McNair (2002) argues that this increase in sexualised content is positive, creating a more open and liberal society.

and based on contrived artificial laboratory simulations, lacking real life context. Furthermore, this ‘effects’ research often assumes that media viewers are “passive dupes who unquestioningly and uncritically absorb media messages ‘hypodermically’ injected into them” (Gill, 2012a: 488). According to Gill (2012a), it is often assumed that the sexualised content in the media directly ‘effects’ its viewers, without any consideration of other contextual factors that may influence viewers’ engagement with the media. The subject of ‘media influence’ is often seen as a “*tabula rasa*,” that is “asocial, acultural, and even asexual” (Gill, 2012a: 488). Critics like Gill argue that gender, socio-cultural factors and social settings are all likely to influence how viewers make sense of sexual media content, but these are widely ignored in more ‘scientific,’ ‘positivist’ research strategies (Gill, 2012a). As such, psychological ‘effects’ studies may miss the more complex ways that people engage with and experience sexualised media content (Gill, 2012a).

Other research from critical sexualities, sociology and cultural studies “present[s] audiences as active, knowledgeable, sophisticated and critical users or consumers of media” (Gill, 2012a: 489). Using social constructivist or post-structuralist theoretical frameworks, this scholarship regards gender and sexuality as culturally and socially produced, rather than an objective reality (Farvid & Braun, 2006). Sara Bragg and David Buckingham, for example, argue that the media can be seen more as “tools to think with … rather than sources of oppression or manipulation” (2010: 131). They critique positivist psychological research that looks for direct cause and effect associations and argue that “the formation of sexual identity is a complex process, which is unstable, insecure, always under construction in ways that cannot be explained by mechanistic psychological notions of role modelling or sexual socialization” (Bragg & Buckingham, 2010: 131). This scholarship often uses qualitative research methods such as “interviews, participant observation and the use of a variety of visual methods … and other

ethnographic practices,” enabling an understanding of the diverse ways in which people experience sexualised media content (Gill, 2012a: 489). Thus, because viewers’ engagement with sexualised media is complex and ambivalent, then to understand a particular text, such as *Geordie Shore*, consideration of how viewers make sense of its representations is urgently needed. As Beth Montemurro points out:

Much of what has been written on reality television is commentary; and although a significant amount of this is informed by textual analysis, more empirical research needs to be conducted to interpret the meaning and impact of this genre (2008: 97).

To date, much previous research on representations of sexuality and gender on reality television analyses the content of shows, rather than viewer engagement (e.g., Riddle & De Simone, 2013; Bond & Drogos, 2014; Anderson & Ferris, 2016). This is particularly apparent in research on *Geordie Shore* where to date, there is only one study that incorporates viewers (Graefer, 2014). However, Graefer’s (2014) study is based only on the response of online ‘fans’ and those who commented on the *Geordie Shore* official Facebook page. Many people watch *Geordie Shore* that would not think to voice their opinions on a Facebook fan page devoted to the show. Montemurro notes that “audience analysis has been limited primarily to online populations, who may differ from those who watch reality shows but do not interact on other levels” (2008: 101). By exploring how viewers talk about *Geordie Shore* outside of the online sphere, this thesis enables a more in depth analysis of participants’ complicated and ambivalent understandings of the show, in particular, the representations of casual sex and drinking.

Such complex and often contradictory understanding of sexual media has been the focus of social scientific and cultural studies research on the sexualisation of culture. Unlike mainstream psychological and ‘effects’ research that often points to the ‘harms’ of sexualised media

content, cultural research on the sexualisation of culture is more varied. Some feminist scholars, such as Ariel Levy (2005), argue that it contributes to gender inequality by women objectifying themselves, while others, point toward its more progressive or even empowering potential (Holland & Attwood, 2010). From a feminist perspective, Levy argues that the sexualisation of culture, or “raunch culture” (2005: 3) is pervaded by women making sex objects of themselves and other women. She claims that postfeminist discourses of ‘empowerment’ and ‘liberation’ are a way of disguising continued sexism and female objectification. From Levy’s perspective:

Raunch culture is not essentially progressive, it is essentially commercial ... [r]aunch culture isn’t about opening our minds to the possibilities and mysteries of sexuality. It’s about endlessly reiterating one particular- and particularly saleable- shorthand for sexiness” (2005: 29-30).

However, others argue that the sexualisation of culture is potentially progressive, or even empowering (McKee, 2009; McNair, 2002; Holland & Attwood, 2010). In his books *Mediated Sex* (1996), and *Strip tease Culture* (2002), Brian McNair argues that rather than a signifier of a regression in feminism, ‘strip tease culture,’ as he calls it, reveals the advances of feminism and gay rights in contemporary society. In McNair’s account, the media has created a culture in which “public nakedness, voyeurism, and sexualised looking are permitted, indeed encouraged as never before” (2002: ix). Rather than viewing the increase in sexualised material as harmful, McNair argues that the sexualisation of culture has enabled greater diversity of discourses around gender and sexuality, and as such is “democratizing” (2002: 205). Conventional media stereotypes toward women and homosexuals have been replaced by a more “complex and satisfying representational diversity” (McNair, 2002: 205). From this

perspective, the media represent plural sexualities and as a result present more diverse and liberating ideas around sex, gender and sexuality (McNair, 2002).

Other scholars also take a more optimistic view on the sexualisation of culture, arguing that it is not necessarily objectifying or harmful for women and may instead have a multiplicity of meanings understood within different contexts (Attwood, 2011; 2004; Smith, 2007). These scholars often work within a feminist post-structuralist theoretical approach where Attwood (2011), for example, argues that the processes of sexualisation are complex and by no means straightforward. Attwood (2011) suggests that we need to look at the wider frameworks where sexualisation takes place and its meanings and understandings within that context. She argues for “a broader consideration of the ways in which the body, technology and the self are represented and experienced in contemporary Western societies” (2011: 18). Women cannot be seen only as passive victims, but also as active consumers of sexualised material:

a whole series of signifiers are linked to connote a new, liberated, contemporary sexuality for women; sex is stylish, a source of physical pleasure, a means of creating identity, a form of body work, self-expression, a quest for individual fulfilment (Attwood, 2006: 86).

In analysing the possibility of the potentially ‘empowering’ aspects of the sexualisation of culture for women, Samantha Holland and Feona Attwood (2010) interviewed women who took pole dancing classes for recreational purposes. Pole dancing is located as part of the sexualisation of culture as it has traditionally been associated with sex work and is seen as an issue of concern in public debate (Holland & Attwood, 2010). However, according to Holland and Attwood (2010), in contemporary society, pole dancing has taken on a new meaning and is used by some as a form of exercise. The authors found that, rather than experiencing the

sexualisation of culture as harmful for constructions of gender, “women understand femininity as far more complex than media representations suggest” (Holland & Attwood, 2010: 177) and that “women who use pole dancing as a form of exercise experience it as extremely positive” (Holland & Attwood, 2010: 181). The interviewees used terms such as “power” or “empowering” in describing their pole dancing experiences (Holland & Attwood, 2010: 181). For these women, engaging in the sexualisation of culture is a matter of personal ‘choice’ where they can feel “sexy” and “powerful” (Holland & Attwood, 2010: 181).

Other scholars have also documented potentially empowering aspects of the sexualisation of culture (e.g. Smith, 2007; Whitehead & Kurz, 2009; Cato & Carpentier, 2010). Clarissa Smith (2007), for example, analysed female readers’ engagement with the women’s ‘soft-core’ pornography magazine, *For Women*. She argues that, unlike previous research that focusses on the harmful ‘effects’ of pornography on ‘female victims,’ women can instead gain pleasure from reading women’s pornography and there is no single reading of porn, but multiple readings. According to Smith, women’s pornography can enable “a dialogue on agency and sexual freedom: the right to stake a claim to experiences of pleasure and good and bad sexual practice” for the female reader (2007: 226).

Some feminist scholars have attempted to move beyond this binary of ‘empowerment’ or ‘objectification,’ and “rather than taking up a position of ‘for’ or ‘against’ sexualisation,” explore the diverse meanings and complexities of the term (Gill, 2009; Harvey & Gill, 2011; Gill, 2008; Evans et al. 2010). These scholars are particularly critical of neo-liberal ‘postfeminist’ discourses that frame women’s participation in the sexualisation of culture as an ‘empowering’ personal ‘choice.’ They argue that discourses of ‘choice’ and ‘agency’ cannot be understood without reference to the social and historical context in which such apparent

‘choices’ are made (Gill, 2007a). This scholarship explores the way that women’s participation in the sexualisation of culture has become a particularly contradictory terrain to inhabit, as they are expected to be ‘sassy’ and ‘up for it,’ yet still constrained by more traditional discursive framings of a ‘respectable’ feminine sexuality. Like Gill and others, I also want to complicate this binary of ‘for’ or ‘against’ sexualisation. With the reality television show *Geordie Shore* as a focus, this thesis explores how viewers read contemporary representations of sexually agentic ‘up for it’ women, both on the show and in their everyday experiences, in complex and ambivalent ways.

As well as exploring women’s contradictory expectations within the sexualisation of culture, it is also important to bring men into discussions of sexualisation. Despite increasingly sexualised portrayals of men in the media (Cohan & Hark, 1993; Jeffords, 1994; Nixon, 1996), scholars researching the sexualisation of culture have directed their attention primarily to portrayals of femininity. As Maria Garner argues, discussion has mainly explored “the potential meanings and impacts [of sexualisation] for the lives of women [and] girls … meanwhile, consideration of men and masculinities remains scarce or only thinly sketched across the field” (2012: 325). While women’s negotiations of the sexualisation of culture are important, they do not “occur in a vacuum” (Coy & Garner, 2012: 294) and men’s understandings of this phenomenon should not be dismissed.

In Gill’s (2009) analysis of ‘six pack’ advertisements, she argues that depictions of men, like women, are becoming increasingly sexualised. According to Gill a specific type of male body is represented in advertising, that is, “an idealized and eroticized aesthetic showing a toned, young body” (2009: 143). Here men’s bodies are positioned to be “looked at and desired” (Gill, 2009: 143). Further studies also reveal that men’s bodies in the media have become

increasingly muscular, and like women's bodies are becoming objectified (Duggen & McCreary, 2004; Daniel & Bridges, 2010; Hatoum & Belle, 2004; Rohlinger, 2002). This toned muscular male body is characteristic of men in *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore*, who "flaunt 'hard' pumped bodies born through working at the gym" (Wood, 2017: 45). Terms in *Jersey Shore*, such as "ripped," "built" or "gorilla juicehead," it is argued, contribute to the objectification of the male body (Flynn et al. 2015: 175). Flynn et al.'s content analysis of MTV reality shows found that both men and women on such shows expose "highly idealized" bodies, where "more than half of men's bodies were coded as muscularly lean" (2015: 173). Furthermore "men tended to expose their bodies to a higher degree than women" (Flynn et al. 2015: 173). Flynn and colleagues argue that their findings "demonstrate a growing focus on male body image and objectification" (2015: 173).

While representations of men's bodies have become increasingly sexualised, Gill (2009) is critical that they are being objectified in the same way as women, who she argues, face greater scrutiny. For Gill, there are still differences in how masculine and feminine sexualities are represented in the media that are "likely to be read in radically different ways because of long, distinct histories of gender representations and the politics of looking" (2009: 143). The representations of 'sexy' women and men in advertisements "have different meanings, different histories and are constructed in radically different ways" (Gill, 2009: 154). It is thus important to engage men in discussions about the sexualisation of culture, "to explore their roles in reproducing and potentially resisting gender inequality" (Garner, 2012: 330). In reality television such as *Geordie Shore*, it is both women *and* men who engage in casual sexual practices, as well as heavy drinking. As such, it is necessary to examine how female as well as male viewers make sense of such representations.

### The culture of intoxication

The binary debate of ‘for’ or ‘against’ sexualisation, has also been discussed in relation to women’s increasing alcohol consumption. While a post-feminist discourse presents women’s drinking as a sign of social progression and a step toward equality (Rolfe et al. 2009), policy discourse frames women’s drinking as a social problem (Casswell et al. 2002). The casual sex on *Geordie Shore* is often associated with heavy drinking, as Draper comments in the *Daily Mirror*, “the *Geordie Shore* cast consume 1,300 bottles of booze in ONE series” (2017). Such ‘binge-drinking’ or “heavy episodic alcohol use” (Wechsler et al. 2010: 203) depicted on the show, is part of a broader trend known as “the culture of intoxication” (Measham & Brain, 2005: 262). Research on the culture of intoxication has explored changes to the alcohol industry and ‘night-time economy’<sup>12</sup> where young people, especially women, are drinking “more alcohol than ever before” (Lyons & Willott, 2008: 694; Bailey et al. 2015).

Previous research in the United Kingdom has explored how (mainly female) participants make sense of the culture of intoxication, and women’s participation in it (Griffin et al. 2012; Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015). New Zealand’s drinking culture is similar to Britain, “where there is a general tolerance of drunkenness, a lack of concern about physical and mental well-being in relation to alcohol and a reluctance to limit alcohol” (Lyons & Willott, 2008: 696). As in the United Kingdom, over the past 20 years New Zealand has also experienced an expansion of the night time economy and the relaxation of alcohol laws (Hutton et al. 2013). The public and policy construction of ‘binge-drinking’ as a social problem has led to a plethora of New Zealand research on harm reduction and health campaigns to reduce alcohol consumption (e.g.,

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<sup>12</sup> The ‘night time economy’ refers to the “alcohol and leisure industry in the night-time city” (Shaw, 2014: 89).

Dacey & Barnes, 1998; Casswell et al. 2002; Casswell & Maxwell, 2005; Kypri et al. 2009; McCreanor et al. 2008; Hutton, 2012). Such research attempts to “quantify specific drinking behaviors, motivations, and intervention strategies” (Workman, 2001: 428).

However, more recent research in New Zealand, has analysed gender differences in drinking and the changing subject positions available for women (e.g., Lyons & Willott, 2008; Willott & Lyons, 2012; Hutton, Wright & Saunders, 2013; Hutton et al. 2016). In New Zealand, up until the 1960s, alcohol was mainly consumed by males and the country was characterized by male dominated activities such as “rugby, racing and beer” (McEwan et al. 2010: 16). Since the late 1960s, however, women’s alcohol consumption has increased in New Zealand (Ministry of Health, 2007; McEwan et al. 2010). Like Britain, New Zealand is a neo-liberal society, which emphasizes individual responsibility and self-regulation (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008). Therefore, women in New Zealand, as in the United Kingdom, also face contradictions between postfeminist neoliberal discourses of ‘choice’ where they can drink and act like men, while still being informed by “notions of a respectable femininity” (Hutton et al. 2013: 455). This thesis further explores such gendered constructions of alcohol consumption. With representations of drinking on *Geordie Shore* as a focus, this research analyses how participants read and negotiate differences in men’s and women’s heavy drinking.

Although alcohol consumption is a gendered domain, typically seen as a marker of masculinity, research on the culture of intoxication to this point has mostly explored representations of women’s drinking (Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015; Griffin et al. 2012; Hutton et al. 2013; Griffin et al. 2006). Because young women are now playing a more active role in a culture of drinking to excess than ever before (Bailey et al. 2015), it is still necessary to explore how they negotiate their, and other women’s participation in this terrain. However, it is also important to

find out how men make sense of representations of women's drinking. As Antonia Lyons points out, “[t]here remains a paucity of research into the multiple and complex ways that men are constructing their gender identities, particularly *in relation* to women and to recent increases in women's consumption” (2009: 402). Furthermore, while men's drinking may not be susceptible to the same level of judgment as women's (Bailey et al. 2015), they are also part of this drinking culture. In reality television shows such as *Geordie Shore*, it is both women and men who engage in heavy drinking, as such this thesis contributes to research by exploring how men make sense of such representations.

As well as incorporating men into discussions of drinking and casual sex, this project also provides a New Zealand context to understandings of ‘hook-ups’ as represented on *Geordie Shore*. The sexual content on *Geordie Shore* is relevant to a large body of research on ‘hook-up culture,’ where it is thought that casual sexual encounters, without any expectation of further relational commitment, are replacing more traditional forms of dating (Paul et al. 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002; Manning et al. 2006; Bogle, 2008; Heldman & Wade, 2010). Although young New Zealanders are taking part in this ‘hook-up culture’ (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Beres & fervid, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013), the majority of previous research has explored ‘hook-ups’ and casual sex on American campuses (Paul et al. 2000; Bogle, 2008; Bradshaw et al. 2010). New Zealand, like other Western nations, has experienced a shift in representations of sexuality, where discourses of casual sex have become commonplace (Farvid & Braun, 2013). The current project therefore provides a contribution to previous research by exploring how young men and women engage with and make sense of contemporary representations of ‘hook-ups’ and casual sex from a New Zealand context.

With the ever-growing popularity of reality television (Hill, 2005; Pozner, 2010), this research responds to Montemurro's call for further research on how viewers interpret and make meaning of these shows, helping to "make sense of their significance and acceptance at this time in culture" (2008: 100). Through analysing how viewers talk about representations of drinking and casual sex on *Geordie Shore* and in their own experiences, this thesis builds upon previous literature on the sexualisation of culture and culture of intoxication. This research highlights how dominant discourses of gendered sexual practices and drinking are drawn on, negotiated and contested as participants discuss such representations on a reality show and in their everyday lives.

### **Thesis outline**

In the following chapter, I discuss the theoretical framework employed in this thesis, feminist post-structuralism. I provide an overview of traditional discourses of sexuality, such as the male sex-drive discourse and feminine sexual passivity discourse (Hollway, 1984), as well as newer or 'postfeminist' discourses of women's 'empowerment' and 'choice' in participating in the sexualisation of culture. I discuss some of the tensions for women in negotiating post-feminist demands of an 'up for it' femininity and more traditional discourses of feminine respectability in the sexualisation of culture and culture of intoxication.

In chapter three, I provide an overview of the methodological procedure in conducting this project. I discuss the advantages of employing focus groups to conduct research on sensitive topics such as casual sex. I address participant recruitment, the benefits of using pre-existing groups of friends and the socio-demographics of participants followed by an outline of the procedure for how the focus groups were conducted. I offer some reflections on the focus group

process and conclude the chapter by describing the discourse analytic method employed in this thesis.

In chapter four, I explore how participants talk about casual sex and relationships, as represented on *Geordie Shore* and in their everyday lives. Participants' talk about women's casual sex was complex and informed by the focus group context. In mixed-gender groups or with a female researcher present, most male participants positioned themselves as accepting of women's casual sex while female participants were aware and critical of a sexual double standard. Men's casual sex was also made sense of ambivalently. Although participants enjoyed watching representations of men's casual sex on *Geordie Shore* they framed this as 'unrealistic' and were critical of men with numerous sexual partners in "real life." Male participants complicated the dominant discourse that men are praised for casual sex while women are ridiculed, claiming that men can also face some critique and be termed a 'fuckboy'<sup>13</sup>. They positioned themselves in line with a more 'sensitive' version of masculinity and provided new ways of thinking about masculine sexuality.

In chapter five, I analyse participants' talk about drinking and sartorial practices in the night-time economy, both on *Geordie Shore* and in their everyday lives. Again, participants positioned their own lived experiences as different to how masculinity and femininity were represented on *Geordie Shore*. Male participants positioned their own style as 'Kiwis' as more 'manly,' while female participants positioned themselves as having a more 'middle-class' or 'respectable' dress than represented on Newcastle's *Geordie Shore*. Participants in mixed

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<sup>13</sup> In Nancy Sales discussion of Tinder and 'hook-up culture' she defines 'fuckboy' as "a young man who sleeps with women without any intention of having a relationship with them or perhaps even walking them to the door post-sex. He's a womanizer, an especially callous one, as well as a kind of loser" (2015: 6).

gender group two positioned drinking in “real life” as the “opposite” to drinking on *Geordie Shore*. Drawing on dominant discourses of masculinity and drinking, they positioned men in “real life” as more frequently engaging in heavy drinking than women. Women’s participation in a culture of intoxication was acceptable only within a certain ‘limit,’ set by a standard of masculinity. For both young men and women, there was ambiguity around the ‘limits’ to extreme drinking.

In the final chapter of this thesis I provide some conclusions about how young men and women make sense of representations of casual sex and drinking on MTV’s *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives. I discuss how participants had complicated and ambivalent understandings of gendered drinking and casual sex, drawing on multiple and contradictory discourses. While previous research has mostly analysed the challenges for young women in participating in a culture of intoxication and sexualisation of culture, I suggest that involvement in such terrain is also complicated for men. I argue that despite a requirement among young people to take part in a culture of heavy drinking and ‘hook-ups,’ for participants in this research how to ‘appropriately’ participate in such terrain was ambivalent.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Discourse, sexuality, postfeminism and the culture of intoxication**

This chapter explores the theoretical framework that informs this thesis, feminist post-structuralism (Weedon, 1987). I begin the chapter by introducing the concept of ‘discourse’ as understood by Michel Foucault, followed by an overview of the multiple and competing discourses of sexuality that circulate society. I address previous research that analyses the contradictions between traditional discourses of women’s casual sex and alcohol consumption (emphasising feminine reputation and respectability) and ‘postfeminist’ discourses of an active and ‘up for it’ femininity. I then present existing textual analyses that have explored discourses of gender and sexuality in reality television shows *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore*. Finally, I discuss previous research that analyses how viewers of reality television negotiate such discourses. I argue that feminist post-structuralism is an appropriate theoretical framework to employ in this thesis to explore the multiple and contradictory subject positions that participants take up as they discuss representations of casual sex and drinking on *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives.

#### **Discourse, subjectivity and power**

The conception of discourse as employed in this thesis, originates from French philosopher, Foucault (1972), who was concerned with the relation between discourse, subjectivity and power/knowledge. Foucault’s (1972) theory of discourse refers to broad systems of meaning or knowledge that shape our understandings of the world. Any object or event can only be made sense of through the available discourses concerning that object or event (Gavey, 1989). Chris

Weedon defines discourses as “ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and the relations between them” (1987: 108). Discourses are culturally and historically specific, taking on different meanings and offering different subject positions depending on their social context (Foucault, 1972; Weedon, 1987). From a Foucauldian perspective, meaning is constituted through language (Foucault, 1972; Gavey, 2005). Therefore, the discourses that circulate a given historical or cultural context will regulate what can and cannot be said and therefore what knowledge is available (Foucault, 1972; Gavey, 2005).

Discourses not only construct how individuals view the world around them, but also their perception of ‘self.’ From a feminist post-structuralist perspective, discourses are multiple, offering numerous and competing ways of “giving meaning to the world” (Gavey, 1989: 464). Discourses therefore offer multiple, contradictory and competing subject positions and possibilities for forming personal identity which individuals can ‘take up’ (Hollway, 1984; Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1992). These subject positions will constitute how individuals behave, act and make sense of themselves and the world (Gavey, 2005). As such, “individuals are never outside cultural forces or discursive practices but always ‘subject’ to them” (Baxter, 2003: 25). Individual subjectivity is therefore governed by socially and historically specific discourses and the forms of power that constitute them.

Discourses vary in their authority and accessibility, where dominant discourses are more powerful within a society and more likely to constitute individual subjectivity (Weedon, 1987). These dominant discourses appear ‘natural’ and are often regarded as ‘common sense’ and as an objective ‘truth’ (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989). While seemingly ‘natural,’ from a Foucauldian (1975) perspective, such dominant discourses are in fact socially and historically

constructed and perpetuate existing power relations, such as gender inequality. It is therefore through the circulation of dominant discourses that the subtle workings of Foucault's (1975) 'disciplinary power' are exercised. In Foucauldian theory, traditional sovereign forms of power that operate through overt force, are intersected with this less obvious, indirect form of power that operates through "subtle coercion" and invisibility (Foucault, 1975: 137). Foucault argues that this form of disciplinary power works as a far more effective means of control, "produc[ing] subjected and practiced bodies, 'docile bodies'" (1975: 138). For Foucault, power is everywhere, and "[t]hrough a myriad of techniques of observation, measurement, reward, and punishment, pressure is brought upon people to strive to conformity" (Gavey, 2005: 87; Foucault, 1981). Through the invisible workings of disciplinary power individuals not only subject themselves to the scrutiny of others, especially 'experts,' but also come to self-regulate their own behaviour (Foucault, 1975; McHoul & Grace, 1993; Burr, 1995).

Dominant discourses of sexuality and gender play a crucial role in regulating and maintaining power relations, such as gender inequality (Weedon, 1987; McHoul & Grace, 1993). Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1981) reveals how 'truths' regarding sexuality are socially and historically constructed and embedded in power relations. The subtle workings of power are evident, for example, in traditional framings of masculine sexuality as 'active' and driven by an innate biological drive, and feminine sexuality as 'passive' (Hollway, 1984). Such discourses work to construct men's and women's sexualities as inherently different, where "men are the subjects of the male sexual drive discourse [and] women are its objects" (Gavey, 2005: 104; Hollway, 1984). This 'male sex drive' discourse is prevalent in the media, appearing in magazines, TV shows, self-help books and even education (Hollway, 1984; Gonick, 1997; Potts, 2002). Because dominant discourses of sexuality have become taken for granted, 'common sense' assumptions, women and men may subconsciously experience themselves and their sexuality

in relation to these traditional discourses of heterosexuality (Gavey, 2005). By framing men as ‘naturally’ active and as the subjects of sex, and women as its objects, dominant discourses therefore work to maintain male hegemony.

Although dominant discourses, such as the ‘male sex drive,’ are most likely to constitute subjectivity, they are not over determining and individuals are not necessarily “at their mercy” (Baxter, 2003: 31). How an individual understands their sexuality and gender is contingent on a range of multiple and competing discourses circulating society, such that “discourses do not determine people’s subjectivity in any unitary way” (Gavey, 2005: 131). Thus, while individuals are positioned by discourse, they also position themselves within discourse, and are therefore capable of defiance. As such, the subject of feminist post-structuralism is:

a thinking, feeling subject and social agent, capable of resistance and innovations produced out of the clash between contradictory subject positions and practices. She[/he] is also a subject able to reflect upon the discursive relations which constitute her[/him] and the society in which she[/he] lives, and able to choose from the options available (Weedon, 1987: 125).

Thus, prevailing and ‘common sense’ discourses are subject to contestation and resistance (Weedon, 1987). Masculine and feminine identities are not seen as fixed by ‘natural’ attributes, they are instead, “rather fragile and haphazard, subject to a variety of influences and often torn by contradictions” (Weeks, 1986: 58). Individual subjectivity is therefore influenced by a range of competing discourses and as such can be inconsistent, multiple and contradictory (Gavey, 2005).

### **‘Postfeminist’ discourses of sexuality**

Women’s subjectivity has become a particularly contradictory terrain, influenced not only by traditional discourses, but also new, alternative and ‘postfeminist<sup>14</sup>’ discourses of feminine sexuality. There has been a shift in public discourses of femininity from women as passive objects of the male gaze to active participants and sexual subjects in the sexualisation of culture (Evans et al. 2010; Gill, 2007a). Across all media forms is this new image of an ‘active’ and ‘empowered’ femininity, from “reality TV shows to best-selling books by porn stars, to the prominent display of the Playboy Bunny logo” (Cato & Carpentier, 2010: 272). In this framing of feminine sexuality, a “fun, fearless, female” is presented, where sex is portrayed as “egalitarian” and “emancipated” (Farvid & Braun, 2006: 296). This new, discursive construction of femininity portrays “a young, attractive, heterosexual woman who knowingly and deliberately plays with her sexual power and is always ‘up for it’ (that is, sex)” (Gill, 2008: 41). This ‘up for it’ femininity is evident in *Geordie Shore* where both male and female characters are represented as active and desiring sexual subjects. For example, on casual sex or ‘pulling<sup>15</sup>,’ character Vicky Pattison<sup>16</sup> comments, “lock up your sons, lock up your dads, lock up your grandads! No one’s safe cause tonight I am pulling!” (cited in Davis-Cole, 2017). Such framings of femininity are situated within the context of a ‘postfeminist’ culture which suggests

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<sup>14</sup> Postfeminism is a contested term in feminist cultural analysis, “used variously and contradictorily to signal a theoretical position, a type of feminism after the Second Wave, or a regressive political stance” (Gill, 2007b: 148). Themes within postfeminism include “the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualization of culture and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference” (Gill, 2007b: 149).

<sup>15</sup> According to the online Urban Dictionary (2009a), pulling “means to hook up with someone or make out with them, often at a party or nightclub.”

<sup>16</sup> Vicky Pattison is an original *Geordie Shore* housemate. In the show’s opening credits, she introduces herself as “a Geordie girl with a VIP edge” (Donovan, 2011).

that there is no longer a need for a feminist movement as gender equality has been achieved (Cato & Carpentier, 2010). This construction of feminine sexuality portrays women's participation in the sexualisation of culture as a personal 'choice,' and women are positioned as "active, empowered, above influence and beholden to no one" (Gill, 2007a: 74).

### **From 'passive objects' to 'active subjects' and the problem of 'choice'**

While an active rather than passive feminine sexuality may at first be seen as a signifier of advances in feminism, some scholars have raised concerns about this construction. Firstly, some argue that such postfeminist discourses of 'active' women are exclusionary (e.g. MacDonald, 1995; Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009; Evans, et al. 2010), and women who are not white, heterosexual and beautiful by conventional Western standards are not included. Thus "only some women are constructed as active desiring sexual subjects" (Gill, 2003a: 103).

Secondly, some scholars have critiqued the way that this 'active' and 'empowered' new femininity is presented as a personal 'choice' for women (e.g., Gill, 2003a; Gill, 2007a, 2007b; Evans et al. 2010). Gill, for example, argues that through discourses of choice and autonomy, "sexual objectification can be (re)presented not as something done to women by some men, but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects" (Gill, 2007b: 153). As such, rather than being objectified in media representations, women are instead being 'subjectified' (Gill, 2003a). This notion of 'choice' is complicit with a postfeminist neoliberal discourse of the self-regulating citizen and is bound up with relations of power (Foucault, 1975; Weber, 2009). Here, power shifts "from an external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze," working *in and through subjects* (Gill, 2003a: 104; Harvey & Gill, 2011). Thus, under a guise of discourses of 'choice,' 'empowerment' and 'pleasing themselves,'

women are presented as making sex objects of *themselves*, where “to a much greater extent than men, women are required to work on and transform the self, regulate every aspect of their conduct, and present their actions as freely chosen” (Gill, 2007b: 164). According to some scholars, discourses of women’s ‘empowerment’ and ‘choice’ in participating in the sexualisation of culture encourage acceptance of postfeminist assumptions that gender equality has been achieved and feminism is no longer needed (Gill, 2008; McRobbie, 2009).

Gill (2007b) further critiques postfeminist discourses of women’s ‘choice’ in participating in the sexualisation of culture in that the cultural and social conditions in which such ‘choices’ are made are ignored. Gill argues that while women do make choices, “they do not do so in conditions of their own making” (2007b: 72). She points out that if women were truly just ‘pleasing themselves,’ dressing and acting by way of their own personal ‘choice’ then “surely there would be greater diversity, rather than growing homogeneity organized around a slim yet curvaceous, toned, hairless, young body” (2008: 44). While such discourses of ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ may frame women as active, knowledgeable and autonomous, women are actually under great societal pressure “to ever narrower judgements of female attractiveness” (Gill, 2007b: 74). A framework of personal ‘choice’, therefore, ignores the wider context in which beauty ideals are normalized and internalized (Gill, 2008).

### **Technologies of sexiness and sexual double standards**

As has been discussed to this point, how women experience and make sense of both traditional and new discourses of femininity is complex, contradictory and embedded in relations of power. It is argued that engaging with postfeminist discourses of femininity is conflicting for many women, as their subjectivity is influenced by a multitude of other discourses that circulate

society. Hillary Radner has developed the term ‘technologies of sexiness’ to describe the newly developed ‘up for it’ femininity, where “the task of the Single Girl is to embody heterosexuality through the disciplined use of makeup, clothing, exercise, and cosmetic surgery, linking femininity, consumer culture and heterosexuality” (1999: 15). Gill further draws on this concept, which she refers to as ‘the sexual entrepreneur,’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011) to suggest that contemporary women are expected to exhibit a particular kind of sexuality:

For young women today in post-feminist cultures, the display of a certain kind of sexual knowledge, sexual practice and sexual agency has become normative – indeed, a ‘technology of sexiness’ has replaced ‘innocence’ and ‘virtue’ as the commodity that young women are required to offer in the heterosexual marketplace (Gill, 2007b: 72).

Harvey and Gill (2011) explore this notion by examining the female ‘sexual entrepreneur’ in reality show, *The Sex Inspectors*<sup>17</sup>. Through a textual analysis of the show, Harvey and Gill (2011) find that women are faced with endless contradictions around this new ‘active’ femininity. While women’s sexual activities are framed under a neo-liberal postfeminist guise of ‘empowering,’ ‘pleasing oneself,’ and as a ‘choice,’ these sexual acts are in fact more about pleasing their male partner, and hide continued boundaries around femininity (Harvey & Gill, 2011). According to Harvey and Gill, “such a contradictory mode of femininity intimately entangles the struggles and gains of feminism and sexual liberation with the neoliberal incitement to constant self-improvement through hyper-consumption” (2011: 64). Similarly, in Farvid and Braun’s (2006) textual analysis of *Cleo* and *Cosmopolitan* magazines they also found that although women’s sexual encounters were framed around ‘liberation,’ the reality was around pleasing men. Similar conclusions have been drawn in relation to pole dancing

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<sup>17</sup> *The Sex Inspectors* is a UK reality TV show where heterosexual couples are given tips to improve their sex lives by an “expert” host (Harvey & Gill, 2011).

where, although within postfeminist discourse it is constructed as liberating and empowering, “it is [still] tied into a culturally historical context that situates it as sexist and objectifying” (Griffin et al. 2012: 194). Gill highlights these conflicts for women around their positioning in the sexualisation of culture:

On the one hand, young women are hailed through a discourse of ‘can-do girl power’, yet on the other hand, their bodies are powerfully reinscribed as sexual objects; women are presented as active, desiring social subjects, but they are subject to a level of scrutiny and hostile surveillance which has no historical precedent (2007b: 163).

Not only is this scrutiny and hostility faced by women in terms of their expectation as ‘sexperts’ (Harvey & Gill, 2011), but this scrutiny is also apparent in the long lasting ‘sexual double standard,’ where the practice of casual sex has become a contested site for women (Griffin et al. 2012). Angela McRobbie argues that, within postfeminist discourse “the freedoms associated with masculine sexual pleasures are not just made available but encouraged and also celebrated” for women (2009: 83). No longer constructed as “passive and responsive” to male desire, women’s sexuality is now positioned as “desirous” and “pleasure-focused” (Farvid et al. 2016: 2). This active feminine sexuality is also known as the ‘permissive discourse,’ where women are regarded as just as ‘naturally’ sexual as men (Hollway, 1984). The ‘permissive discourse’ is apparent, for example, in the marketing of sexual products, where women’s sexuality is framed as “fashionable” and “fun” (Attwood, 2005). Within this postfeminist discourse of feminine sexuality, engaging in casual sex is regarded as “acceptable, and even desirable” for women (Farvid et al. 2016: 1).

However, while postfeminist or sexually permissive discourses position women as gaining control over their sexuality and allude to “sexual equality between men and women,” through

interviewing women about their understandings of casual sex and the sexual double standard, some research has found that traditional discourses of sexuality, such as ‘the male sex drive,’ persist and the practice of casual sex is a contradictory site for women to negotiate (Stewart, 1999; Farvid et al. 2016: 2; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Griffin et al. 2012). Women are expected to uphold both traditional and postfeminist discourses, “travers[ing] the fine line between sexually desiring and oversexed ‘slut’” (Farvid et al. 2016: 1). A gendered double standard still exists whereby casual sex is “endorsed as a key marker of masculinity in men” but “derided as a signifier of undesirable sluttishness in women” (Griffin et al. 2012: 185). Traditional discursive framings of a sexually active masculinity and passive femininity therefore still circulate in society, contributing to individual subjectivity and understandings of sexuality (Potts, 2002; Hollway, 1984; Jackson & Cram, 2003). Such traditional framings of feminine sexuality call on women to self-regulate their own behaviour in a way which reinforces these discourse (Foucault, 1975; Weedon, 1987). As Nicola Gavey argues, women in heterosexual encounters are “engaged in self-surveillance, and are encouraged to become self-policing subjects” (1992: 328). Feminist scholars have defined such practices, knowledges and strategies to regulate women’s behaviour as “technologies of reputation” (Gavey, 1992; Stewart, 1999). Here, “women are encouraged to take up subject positions wherein concern for their reputations is paramount” (Stewart, 1999: 375).

Women’s sexual behaviour is therefore continuously monitored and scrutinized “in a way that male sexuality is not” (Farvid et al. 2016: 3). Women face constant contradictions in what is expected of their sexuality, where they are seen as both prudish and “sexually uptight” (Farvid et al. 2016: 2), or “promiscuous and easy” (Crawford & Popp, 2003: 13). Renold and Ringrose (2011) term these contradictions between maintaining a ‘good,’ ‘respectable’ sexual reputation, while still enacting a postfeminist discourse of being ‘up for it,’ as ‘schizoid subjectivities.’

Thus, feminine subjectivity has become “an increasingly difficult and even impossible space to occupy” (Griffin et al. 2012: 186). *Geordie Shore* is a site in which the contradictions of contemporary femininity are played out where, although expected to be ‘up for it’ and engage in casual sex, female characters are at times ridiculed by the public or other housemates for their sexual practices (e.g. “she’s a massive flirty slag” (Charlotte<sup>18</sup>, cited in Coutts, 2017)). In the current project, researching the ways in which viewers engage with the show enables me to explore how young men and women negotiate these contradictions, both on the show and in their own lives.

### **Gender, sexuality and the culture of intoxication**

Debates and contradictions around this postfeminist ‘up for it’ femininity, and gendered/sexual double standards, have also been discussed in relation to the culture of intoxication (Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015; Griffin et al. 2012; Hutton et al. 2013; Griffin et al. 2006). The culture of intoxication is characterised by a shift in young people’s alcohol consumption over the past two decades. While heavy drinking has traditionally been regarded as a masculine act, and seen as unfeminine, women are now playing a more active role in a culture of heavy drinking (Griffin et al. 2012). Women’s increased involvement in the culture of intoxication is characterised by changes in the drinks’ industry and alcohol marketing strategies that draw on postfeminist discourses of women’s autonomy and empowerment (Bailey et al. 2015). Like sex, binge-drinking is a main aspect of *Geordie Shore* for both male and female characters. As

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<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Crosby is an original *Geordie Shore* character, first appearing on the show at only 20 years-old (Dear, 2017).

character Chloe Ferry<sup>19</sup> comments “we drink anything that’s handed to us. The girls love a glass of wine. I get told to stop drinking by producers” (cited in Fitzpatrick, 2017).

As with the sexualisation of culture, women’s participation in the culture of intoxication is fraught with tensions and is “a key arena in which the contradictions and dilemmas of contemporary femininity are played out, navigated and struggled with” (Griffin et al. 2012: 186). Despite women’s increased alcohol consumption, traditional gendered discourses of drinking are reproduced when women’s alcohol consumption is scrutinized and regulated in a way that men’s is not (Stepney, 2015). In the media and public discourse, women’s drinking in particular is framed as problematic, as “irresponsible, dissolute, and a social problem” (Bailey et al. 2015: 748). Thus, although women are called on to participate in the culture of intoxication, to be ‘up for it’ ‘free’ and ‘fun,’ their drinking is “still located in patriarchal discourse” (Bailey et al. 2015: 754). How women dress when they drink is also a fraught domain. For example, in Bailey et al.’s UK research women were called on to exhibit a particular kind of hypersexual display of femininity, “that involves wearing short tight-fitting outfits, high-heeled shoes, long hair (usually blonde), and lots of makeup” (Bailey et al. 2015: 748). This hypersexualised femininity is evident in *Geordie Shore* where the women wear a lot of make-up and minimal clothing.

There exists then a paradox for young women, between discourses of freedom and hedonistic alcohol consumption, and traditional discourses around feminine respectability (Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015). On the one hand, women dress in a hyper-sexualised way and drink to intoxication by ‘choice’ and have fun doing so, as is the postfeminist assumption. McRobbie

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<sup>19</sup> Chloe Ferry became a main *Geordie Shore* character in season ten, 2015. Chloe is regularly seen “getting ‘mortal’” on the show (Radiotimes, 2018).

refers to this as the ‘phallic girl,’ who adopts the freedoms associated with masculinity within the night-time economy, “including heavy drinking, swearing, smoking, getting into fights, having casual sex, flashing her breasts in public … enjoyment of lap-dancing clubs and so on” (2009: 83). However, traditional gendered double standards still exist and exhibiting a postfeminist ‘up for it’ femininity is “a thin tightrope to walk, it asks of girls that they perform masculinity, without relinquishing the femininity which makes them so desirable to men” (McRobbie, 2009: 84). Therefore, young women still risk being judged for behaving in a traditionally ‘unfeminine’ manner, associated with heavy drinking. Griffin et al. highlight some of the tensions and contradictions for women in the culture of intoxication:

They are exhorted to be sassy and independent – but not feminist; to be ‘up for it’ and to drink and get drunk alongside young men – but not to ‘drink like men.’ They are also 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’ (2012: 184).

Through qualitative interviews, some research has explored how young women negotiate and experience this culture of intoxication and the dilemmas and contradictions embedded in a postfeminist discourse of a hypersexualised ‘up for it’ femininity (Griffin et al. 2012; Stepney, 2015; Bailey et al. 2015). For example, Bailey et al. found that “traditional notions of gender, sexuality and femininity are still in place” (2015: 755), and women are aware of a pervasive double standard regarding female sexuality and drinking. The authors found that public displays of drunkenness were gendered. While men could be drunk in public, for women this was constituted as “really not a good look,” and “unfeminine” (Bailey et al. 2015: 753). Thus, while getting drunk can be an acceptable norm amongst groups of men (Clayton & Humberstone, 2006), “women find it difficult to manage the loss of respectable femininity associated with extreme drunkenness” (Bailey et al. 2015: 749). Stepney found further

contradictions to which women had to negotiate within the night-time economy, for example, “wearing particular clothes, such as a short skirt, was seen as both empowering and sexually attractive while at the same time shameful and shocking” (2015: 70). Thus, like the sexualisation of culture, the culture of intoxication is another terrain which women struggle to negotiate.

### **Discourses of gender and sexuality in *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore***

Such shifts in women’s drinking and sexuality are represented on reality television shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore*. According to Cato and Carpentier, “sexual imagery has reached an all-time high” on television in general, and particularly on reality shows (2010: 272). The content of such shows has become so highly sexual that some scholars have even drawn parallels between reality television and pornography (e.g., Longstaff, 2013). On *Jersey Shore*, Andrea Press comments that “sexual behavior and hook-ups are one of the main narrative threads” (2014: 215). Drinking is also a key element of such shows, where *Geordie Shore*, for example, involves “an endless cycle of heavy drinking, having sex, fighting, crying, and partying” (Graefer, 2014: 107). Representations of drinking and casual sex on *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore* are informed by both traditional and postfeminist discourses of gender and sexuality.

In relation to gender, Amanda Klein (2014) has analysed the way that male and female characters in *Jersey Shore* redefine traditional femininity and masculinity. According to Klein (2014), the ‘guido’/‘guidette’ identities in *Jersey Shore* both conform to, as well as stray from, conventional discourses of femininity and masculinity. While caring for one’s appearance is typically associated with femininity, in *Jersey Shore* it is also highly prioritized by male

characters and within guido subculture it becomes a signifier of masculinity (Klein 2014; Kavka, 2015; Anderson & Ferris, 2016). Typically feminine behaviour such as “incessant grooming, fastidious dress codes, double ear-piercings, and even cooking and cleaning” becomes redefined as masculine (Klein, 2014: 162). According to Klein “within the confines of guido subculture … such grooming habits are marked as indicative of heterosexual masculinity” (2014: 162). Furthermore, while cooking and cleaning is typically associated with femininity, according to Anderson and Ferris’ (2016) content analysis of the show, it is the men who perform 75% of the domestic tasks.

While the traditional image of the Italian woman is one who cooks, cleans and look after her family, Klein argues that the women in *Jersey Shore* “disrupt conventional expectations for Italian American femininity by refusing to cook or clean for their male housemates” (2014: 151). Female cast members of *Jersey Shore* disrupt discourses of traditional femininity, Italian or otherwise, for example, “in almost every episode female cast members belch loudly, urinate outside, discuss their breast size, fall down due to extreme intoxication, [and] vomit on camera” (Klein, 2014: 159). While Italian women are expected to be “clean, demure, [and] quiet,” *Jersey Shore* women have no fear of peeing in public and even flashing their genitals (Klein, 2014: 159). Thus, femininity in *Jersey Shore* is redefined as “loud, messy, lusty, gluttonous, and self-serving” (Klein, 2014: 161).

However, while male and female characters disrupt dominant discourses of femininity and masculinity, at the same time, research has pointed to how they also display traditional gender conventions that reinforce ‘common-sense’ understandings of gender and sexuality (Klein, 2014; Anderson & Ferris, 2016). For example, Klein (2014: 156), comments that there are still elements of “previous models of masculinity that generate violence, sexual aggression, and

other such behaviors” in *Jersey Shore*. She uses the example of housemate Vinny, who kicks out two “potential bedmates” and aggressively grabs female cast member Snooki to come to bed with him. The female characters also, at times, embrace traditional aspects of Italian femininity (Klein, 2014). A great deal of time and effort goes into the women making themselves look attractive. For example, they make themselves sexually available for marriage by “adopting conventional models of femininity in their dress and hair styles. They wear their hair long and usually dye it a shade darker than their natural color, in accordance with their Italian heritage. Makeup must be bright and noticeable with an emphasis on the eyes, lips, and nails” (Klein, 2014: 159).

Although at times the women’s physical appearance in *Jersey Shore* may conform to traditional Italian conventions of femininity (Klein, 2014), Press (2014) argues that their hyper-sexualised dress sense and behaviour still goes against the grain of the “ideal” middle-class neoliberal citizen. This is also discussed in research on the United Kingdom’s version, *Geordie Shore*, where “all of the women have excessively long ‘mermaid’ hair extensions, extended false finger nails, eyelashes, high-definition and exaggerated eyebrows, some breast augmentation and deep orange tans” (Wood, 2017: 45). While previous literature on reality television has often explored the makeover genre and how individuals, mainly women, are called on to self-regulate under a guise of neoliberal ‘free choice’ and ‘personal responsibility’ (e.g., Heller, 2007; Weber, 2007; Weber, 2009), in both *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore*, women’s clothing, makeup, and behaviour complicate the neoliberal discourse of makeover TV, instead a ‘vulgar’ and ‘improper’ femininity is constructed (Press, 2014; Wood, 2017). Wood’s research on the female characters in *Geordie Shore* found that rather than calling on women to enact a conventional ‘respectable,’ middle-class femininity, *Geordie Shore* characters “are the opposite to the self-regulating, good, neoliberal citizen,” instead, “they are ungovernable,

abject, revolting subjects who operate without shame” (2017: 41). While a “natural look” is usually desirable of middle-class femininity, a working-class hyper-sexualised ‘ladette’ type of femininity is portrayed in *Geordie Shore* where “we see young women in skimpy dresses with prominent cleavage and big mermaid hair. Their spray-on-tan tips into orange and their false eyelashes and fake nails complete the highly artificial look” (Graefer, 2014: 109; Wood, 2017). Such a femininity is contrasted to the “ideal of clean, white, middle-class feminine respectability” (Graefer, 2014: 109).

As well as women’s physical appearance in *Geordie Shore* and *Jersey Shore*, their sexuality is also portrayed as excessive and disruptive of traditional discourses of feminine sexuality (Wood, 2017; Manninen, 2016; Kavka, 2015; Press, 2014). In relation to *Geordie Shore*, Wood suggests that “stories about sex are presented as fun and not in any way shameful” (2017: 49). This is also the case in *Jersey Shore*, where sex is presented as “casual” and “fun” (Press, 2014: 212). According to Wood (2017), while traditionally, working-class women have been taught to associate sexual activity with shame, this is not the case in *Geordie Shore*. Instead, women in *Geordie Shore* present a “‘hyper’ sexual subjectivity” (Wood, 2017: 49) informed by the postfeminist discourse of an ‘active’ rather than passive sexual femininity.

However, despite women portraying a carefree, casual attitude around sex on these shows, Wood (2017) highlights some of the contradictions that female characters face. There is tension between “sexual activity and monogamous heteronormativity,” where women in *Geordie Shore* appear to be casual about sexual activity, yet if someone they have ‘pulled’ previously then brings home another girl, they show great distress. We are often shown them having emotional breakdowns and exhibiting “drink-fuelled, out-of-control anger” (Wood, 2017: 51). According to Wood, “if sexualised culture is made hypervisible on *Geordie Shore*, then so too

are its contradictions; that the girls are simultaneously ‘up for it’ and ultimately bound by scripts of femininity, and monogamous heteronormativity generates and hypes up the production of madness” (2017: 51). The tensions mentioned previously around women’s positioning in the sexualisation of culture are therefore apparent in *Geordie Shore*, where:

women must perform a sexually liberated consumer driven sexuality as well as hold on to a longing for a monogamous relationship, through which the constant reiteration of those tensions serves only to further reinforce compulsory heteronormativity (Wood, 2017: 51).

According to research on such television, a sexual gendered double standard persists where “recreational sexuality plays out differently for men and women” (Press, 2014: 212; Douglas, 2013). Press has argued, for example, that the characters in *Jersey Shore* reinforce the sexual double standard “about the different meanings sexual activity has for men versus women, and the different sexual behaviors we can, and should, expect from each gender” (2014: 209). While men in *Jersey Shore* sleep with multiple women over a series of nights out, when a female cast member does the same, her behaviour is harshly judged by the other characters (Press, 2014). Women in these shows are therefore subject “to a set of judgements that the men escape” (Press, 2014: 213). Through textual analysis of the gendered double standard in a specific *Jersey Shore* episode, Press troubles the postfeminist discourse that women have been sexually ‘liberated,’ as women’s sexual behaviour is judged by “a different set of values” to men’s (Press, 2014: 214). The women in *Jersey Shore* face continuous contradictions where “restrictions of a misogynistic culture are operative alongside ostensibly ‘accepted’ and realized feminist ideals of equality and opportunity” (2014: 216). Douglas further supports these findings, commenting that “young women in particular are expected to look ‘hot’ yet damned if they’re ‘sluts’ … *Jersey Shore* … simultaneously blasts and reinforces the sexual

constraints imposed on women, a contradiction many young women confront every day” (2013: 155). Thus, such textual analyses indicate that sexuality and gender as represented on *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* are contradictory, embedded with both traditional and postfeminist discourses of femininity. This thesis brings viewers into this discussion to explore their understandings and readings of such representations.

### **Viewer engagement with reality TV**

Unlike textual analyses, viewer engagement studies explore how viewers themselves challenge and negotiate various discourses of gender and sexuality as represented in shows such as *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore*. The few studies on viewer response to such television have found that female viewers struggle to balance the demands of a new ‘active’ sexual femininity, with traditional discourses around feminine ‘respectability’ (Press, 2014; Graefer, 2014). Studies on viewer engagement with reality TV have explored what the appeal of such shows might be, particularly when they have been so heavily criticized for exhibiting bad, immoral behaviour (Kavka, 2015). Such scholars have analysed *why* viewers may watch such shows, often framed in public discourse as ‘trash TV’ (Graefer, 2014; Douglas, 2013). Douglas, for example, questions how *Jersey Shore* received such high ratings when, in her opinion, the show:

is dreadful: it is structurally formulaic, the characters cartoonish, their behaviors crude, often anti-social, and repetitive. Each episode consists of recurring déclassé elements like excessive drinking often resulting in vomiting, grind dancing in bars, fist fights (among the women as well), multiple sexual encounters, and melodramatic conflicts over the most trivial issues (2013: 149).

Douglas suggests that perhaps the pleasure in watching this “trashy” reality TV is through “ironic viewing,” where the “superior” viewer can laugh at the character’s actions (2013: 148).

While the behaviour on *Jersey Shore* is so “over the top,” with “endless scenes of hot tub hooking-up, bar brawls, public drunkenness, relentless interpersonal conflict and displays of total ignorance” viewers may “simultaneously mock and distance [themselves] from the cast members, yet hunger to know what on earth they might do next” (Douglas, 2013: 150). Further research has suggested that the appeal of such shows could be voyeurism, vicarious living or an escape from reality (Hill, 2005; Andrejevic, 2004; Skeggs & Wood, 2012).

Some research has suggested that female viewers may gain pleasure and amusement through watching women on these shows depart from conventional norms and societal pressures around gender and sexuality (e.g., Douglas, 2013; Graefer, 2014). Douglas (2013), for example, suggests that the appeal of the women on *Jersey Shore* to other young women may be that they stray from neoliberal Western norms of beauty. Character Snooki<sup>20</sup>, for example, “is the polar opposite of the tall, svelte blondes who dominate the fashion magazines and Victoria’s Secret ads” (Douglas, 2013: 151). Graefer’s (2014) online research of fan response to female characters on *Geordie Shore*, also found that although *Geordie Shore* women stray from conventional femininity, viewers did not necessarily view this adversely. Instead, viewer’s feelings about women on *Geordie Shore* were ambiguous and complex, with feelings of “contempt and disgust” but also “laughter and mirth” (Graefer, 2014: 118). *Geordie Shore* women were read by viewers as “loveable and pleasurable” (2014: 107), while at the same time invoked “unease and fear” (2014: 109). Thus, the hypersexual performance of women in *Geordie Shore* “engenders pleasure and disgust at the same time” (Graefer, 2014: 111).

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<sup>20</sup> Snooki is an original *Jersey Shore* cast member. Measuring 4-foot-9 inches, she has been described as “busty and short waisted with small legs” or by housemate Mike as, “a spray-painted Chihuahua” (cited in Horyn, 2010).

Another key finding in Graefer's (2014) study was that viewers responded positively to the fun and quirky character, Charlotte. Perhaps, Graefer (2014) suggests, this is because Charlotte often presents herself in an 'un-sexy,' uncontrolled way. As mentioned previously, women face difficult and contradictory demands of postfeminist; they are to be sexually available and 'up for it' while at the same time maintain respectable standards of femininity (Gill, 2007a). Graefer comments that "these impossible demands put a lot of pressure and frustration on women of all social positions and Charlotte seems to provide an alternative space where these imperatives of contemporary femininity are rendered invalid" (2014: 115). Thus, Charlotte becomes an "affective figure" (Graefer, 2014: 115) whereby viewers can experience pleasure, even celebration, in rebelling against the demands of a 'proper' femininity:

Charlotte is not fixed as an 'improper' form of femininity created to make other bodies feel contempt and disgust, but rather that her 'flaws' can make her loveable. They can serve as affective entry points through which she becomes easy to relate to for some groups of viewers (Graefer, 2014: 117).

Further research on reality television has highlighted the sexual double standard for female viewers and characters (Press, 2014; Zurbriggen & Morgan, 2006). In Press' (2014) research on the sexual double standard for women in *Jersey Shore*, focus group interviews reinforced that in watching such shows women face an uncomfortable tension where they are criticized for following either a traditional discourse of feminine respectability or a postfeminist discourse of 'active' sexuality. According to Press, viewers were concerned about being stereotyped and "severely criticized" (2014: 220) if they did exercise sexual freedom, like the women on *Jersey Shore*, and were aware of a pervasive gendered sexual double standard. Viewers were therefore "torn between the influences of feminism and the influences of either

a prefeminism that mandates conservative sexual behavior for women or postfeminist reaction against the assumption of feminist identity that essentially mandates the same thing" (Press, 2014: 222). Thus, viewer responses to hyper-sexual displays of femininity in reality shows are complex. As such, the current project aims to explore such complexity by analysing how young men and women make sense of representations of feminine sexuality on *Geordie Shore*. I analyse how participants draw on, contest and negotiate traditional sexual double standards.

## Conclusion

The sexualisation of culture and culture of intoxication are key sites in which women negotiate the contradictions of a 'postfeminist' femininity. Although women are increasingly invited to take part in such 'masculine' domains, to be 'up for it,' drink alcohol and have casual sex, traditional discourses of feminine respectability and reputation have not disappeared. In this research, employing a feminist post-structuralist understanding of subjectivity as ambiguous, contradictory and complex enables me to explore multiple and contradictory subject positions as viewers respond to representations of masculinity, femininity, sexuality and drinking on *Geordie Shore*. Through use of this theoretical framework, I explore how participants draw on, challenge and negotiate dominant discourses of drinking and casual sex. To analyse the various discourses that participants draw on, I employ a focus group methodology, as discussed in the following chapter.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Methodology**

This chapter provides an overview of the methodological approaches used in this research. I begin the chapter by addressing the research strategy employed in this project and its appropriateness for researching ‘sensitive’ topics, such as casual sex. I discuss participant recruitment and the benefits of using focus groups of pre-existing friends. I provide an outline of the basic socio-demographics of participants and the procedure for how the focus groups were conducted. I next offer some reflections on the effectiveness of focus group methodology in this research. Finally, I address the analytic procedure employed to analyse the data from the focus groups.

#### **Focus groups**

The primary data source for this study were four focus groups of tertiary students, or young people who are part of student networks, aged 18-24 years. There was a men’s group a women’s group and two mixed gender groups. A focus group interview is a qualitative research technique involving a group discussion on a specific topic (Wilkinson, 1998; Frey & Fontana, 1993). Martha Carey defines focus groups as a “semi-structured group session, moderated by a group leader, held in an informal setting, with the purpose of collecting information on a designated topic” (1994: 226). Group members are encouraged to discuss the topic as freely as possible so that, to a certain degree, the interaction between the group resembles a ‘natural’ conversation (Overlien et al. 2005). Focus groups vary in size, from as few as four to as many

as 12 participants (Krueger & Casey, 2009). The purpose of a focus group is the collection of personal experiences, views and beliefs (Carey, 1994; Kitzinger, 1994).

A key feature of feminist post-structuralist theorising is that the production of meaning is socially and historically constructed and made available through the various discourses that circulate society (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989; Potts, 2002). Many feminist post-structuralist scholars have used focus groups to explore the ways that, through ‘talk,’ participants draw on, challenge and contest contextually specific discourses of gender and sexuality (e.g., Gavey, 1992, 2005; Frith & Kitzinger, 1998; Potts, 2002; Vares, 2005). Deborah Cameron (1997) argues that ‘talk’ in focus groups can reveal how men and women ‘do’ gender and produce gender differentiation in conversation. Through ‘talk,’ Cameron (1997) argues, people constitute themselves as gendered subjects. In a focus group context, participants may draw on, challenge and position themselves in relation to dominant and/or alternative discourses of gender, sexuality and drinking that circulate society. As such, focus groups provide a context specific understanding of the “ways in which social inequalities are produced and perpetuated through talk” (Wilkinson, 1999: 77).

A key feature of focus groups that distinguishes them from other data gathering methods, such as one-to-one interviews, is the use of interaction between group members, or collective discussion, to generate data (Wilkinson, 1998; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Frith, 2000). Several researchers highlight this interactive nature as a key benefit of focus groups (e.g., Morgan, 1992; Kitzinger, 1994; Smith, 1995; Smithson, 2000). In focus groups participants are encouraged to talk to one another “asking questions, exchanging anecdotes, and commenting on each other’s experiences and points of view” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 4). Focus groups thus provide access to “collective meanings” whereby understandings of a topic are shared and

discussed between group members (Warr, 2005: 221). The interactive nature of focus groups also allows the researcher to explore how meaning is co-constructed between participants (Wilkinson, 1998; Carey, 1994) where “the way people talk about their experiences depends on who they are talking to, what shared knowledge can be assumed, and what kinds of reactions they anticipate” (Frith & Kitzinger, 1998: 307). Thus, rather than studying the individual in isolation, as with one-to-one interviews, focus groups provide the opportunity to study “the individual in social context” (Rubin & Rubin, 1995: 95).

The interactive nature of focus groups is particularly important for this research as watching TV shows such as *Geordie Shore*, is often a social activity, at times generating discussion amongst viewers (Stern, 2005). Participants may make sense of representations of casual sex and drinking on *Geordie Shore* through talking with and observing other people, and acting on those understandings in the focus group context (Kitzinger, 1994). As Frith and Kitzinger comment, “talk is always occasioned and produced in a context, in interaction with others – and that participants are orienting towards the questions, concerns, assumptions, interpretations and judgements of others producing their talk” (1998: 317). A focus group technique therefore provides access to this group discussion and interaction. As Danielle Stern argues, “the discussion of television should … be interactive, allowing for subjects to share ideas and generate discussion” (2005: 4).

Focus groups provide a context for support, shared experiences and agreement between group members which can encourage participation and self-disclosure (Frith, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994; Kosny, 2003). In focus groups participants are provided with the opportunity to discuss their own views and experiences as well as hear the opinions and beliefs of others (Frith, 2000; Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Carey, 1994). If participants agree with one another, or have similar

experiences, then this can lead to more elaborated information than is possible in a one-to-one interview (Frith, 2000). As Jenny Kitzinger points out “being with other people who share similar experiences encourages participants to express, clarify or even to develop particular perspectives” (1994: 112).

Participants do not always agree with one another or share similar experiences in focus groups. Differences and contrasting opinions between individuals within the group are also likely, however this also provides useful data (Kitzinger, 1994; Frith 2000; Overlien et al. 2005; Wellings et al. 2000). Just as when participants give the ‘right’ answer, as when others agree with them, they are also called on to elaborate on their opinion by other participants when they give the ‘wrong’ one (Kitzinger, 1994). Diversity amongst participants can therefore encourage individuals to clarify their point of view in relation to other perspectives in the group, resulting in more detailed information (Frith, 2000; Kitzinger, 1994). Thus, if participants hold differing opinions they can challenge each other in a way that the moderator cannot so that “participants may be forced to say more about a particular issue or to defend their position” (Frith, 2000: 288). Focus groups therefore offer the researcher an understanding of how views are expressed, disputed and defended in a particular focus group context (Overlien et al. 2005).

Another benefit of using focus groups for this research is that the balance of power and control is shifted from the researcher to the participants. Many researchers have critiqued one-to-one interviews where power is in the hands of the researcher rather than researched (Wilkinson, 1999; Peplau & Conrad, 1989; Campbell & Schram, 1995; Oakley, 1981). Wilkinson, for example argues that in one-to-one interviews “the interests and concerns of research participants [are] … subordinated to those of the researcher” (1999: 66). In contrast to one-to-one interviews focus groups are a relatively non-hierarchical method, the researchers power is

reduced and participants can assert their own agendas (Wilkinson, 1999), making them “feel important and empowered” (Carey, 1994: 240). In focus groups the researchers’ control is “diffused by the very fact of being in a group rather than a one-to-one situation” (Frey & Fontana, 1993: 26). As such, the research participants have more control of the direction of the conversation than the researcher, and can discuss the themes that are most important to them, perhaps generating new or unexpected information (Wilkinson, 1998; Wilkinson, 1999; Kosny, 2003). This shift in the balance of power enables “participants to speak in their own voice [and] to express their own thoughts and feelings” (Wilkinson, 1999: 71).

### **Researching ‘sensitive’ topics and focus groups**

Some topics covered in this research, such as casual sex, are considered ‘sensitive’ topics. Wellings et al. define sensitive topics in research as the “disclosure of behaviours or attitudes which would normally be kept private and personal, which might result in offence or lead to social censure or disapproval, and/or which might cause the respondent discomfort to express” (2000: 256). Discussion about sex could potentially cause some discomfort, and is not something that everyone can talk about with ease. As Kelley and Byrne point out, “anything having to do with sex causes a great many people to feel embarrassed” (1992: xiii).

Some researchers have raised concerns that the public nature of focus group discussions will inhibit disclosure of such ‘sensitive’ or personal experience and feelings (e.g., Suyono et al. 1981; Hollander, 2004). It has been argued that discussion of sensitive topics could be constrained by peer pressure, dominant personalities or by participants only expressing “socially desirable” ideas (Stewart & Shandasani, 1990: 17; Pugsley, 1996; Wilkinson, 1998). However, while disclosure of sensitive material in a focus group may at first seem unlikely, a

growing body of literature suggests that focus group discussions in fact enhance the discussion of sensitive or emotional material (Morgan & Krueger, 1993; Frith, 2000). Some focus group research suggests that people may be more likely to self-disclose personal material in a group setting than in a one-to-one interview (Farquhar, 1999; Carey, 1994). As Hannah Frith argues, “a group setting may provide the ideal conditions under which individuals feel comfortable discussing some of the most intimate and personal details of their lives” (2000: 290). For example, shared experiences in focus groups can enable participants to overcome embarrassment by providing mutual support, encouraging participants to speak out or discuss things they “would not normally share” (Kosny, 2003: 543). This was the case in Kitzinger’s (1994) research where group members facilitated the discussion of ‘taboo’ subjects, such as oral sex. Here, less inhibited participants could “break the ice” for quieter participants or if one person revealed sensitive information this encouraged others to self-disclose (Kitzinger, 1994: 111).

Many feminist researchers have highlighted the ways that focus groups are particularly useful for researching complex issues that may involve contradictory feelings and experiences, such as gender and sexuality (e.g., Zeller, 1993; Kitzinger, 1994; Pugsley, 1996; Frith & Kitzinger, 1998; Frith, 2000; Warr, 2005). Focus groups have successfully been used, for example, to research sexual terminology (Mitchell & Wellings, 1998), intimacy in romantic relationships (Warr, 2005), young people and sexual knowledge (Pugsley, 1996), gendered double standards (Ringrose et al. 2013; Jackson & Cram, 2003) and sexual decision making (Gilmore et al. 1996; Kline et al. 1992). For these reasons, focus groups were an appropriate methodological tool for researching the ‘sensitive’ topics involved in this project, such as casual sex.

## **Selection and recruitment of participants**

In this research, I intended to recruit participants who had at least seen some episodes of *Geordie Shore*, although they did not have to identify as fans. As *Geordie Shore* is screened on MTV, a channel targeted at young viewers (Toonkel, 2017), I aimed to recruit participants between the ages of 18 and 24. Furthermore, as discussion would involve binge-drinking as represented on the show and potentially in participants' own experiences, I wanted to target a key age bracket in New Zealand's culture of intoxication (McEwan et al. 2010). The 'hook-ups,' casual sex and drinking as represented on *Geordie Shore* are relevant to some tertiary students. Indeed, previous US research has found, 'hook-ups' are particularly prominent among college students (e.g., Flack et al, 2007; Fielder & Carey, 2010). As Elizabeth Paul comments, "while casual sexual interaction occurs in many different social and developmental contexts, the casual sexual practice of the 'hookup' is especially characteristic of late adolescent Western college students" (2006: 141). Furthermore, tertiary students in New Zealand (and other Western nations) also "have a reputation for hazardous drinking which surpasses that of their non-student peers" (Kypri et al. 2002: 457). Therefore, I intended to recruit young New Zealand students to explore how they make sense of the drinking and casual sex as represented on *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives as tertiary students.

Once this project was reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, I recruited participants through snowballing technique or 'referral chains' and personal networks. Snowballing involves mention of the study from one person to another and has been particularly effective for researching sensitive topics (e.g. Gibson, 1996; Fry & Dwyer, 2001; Streeton et al. 2004). As Liamputong (2011) argues, possible participants may

be more likely to take part in a study if someone they know is also participating, or has already participated, particularly in relation to sensitive topics.

To help quell the possibility of discomfort in discussing casual sex and drinking with strangers, an objective of this project was to recruit pre-existing groups of friends as participants. By pre-existing groups, I refer to “people who are already acquainted through living, working or socializing together” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 8). In existing social groups, participants may be more comfortable discussing personal information about their everyday lives (Warr, 2005; Farquhar, 1999). Pre-existing social groups may enable freer debate and for participants to share their experiences in a relaxed environment (Bailey et al. 2015). This was the case, for example, in Elizabeth Kissling’s study, where groups of adolescent girls discussed menstruation with their friends, providing “the only context in which … girls are truly comfortable talking about menstruation” (1996: 492). Kissling argues that “talking about menstruation, or other taboo or uncomfortable topics, seems to increase solidarity among friends and decrease their discomfort with the topic” (1996: 493).

Previous research has found that existing social groups often provide richer data and require less moderator intervention than groups of people who do not know each other (Kosny, 2003; Barbour, 2007). Focus groups of friends may be “more interested in talking to one another and hearing each other’s experiences” (Kosny, 2003: 542) and may be more likely to contradict and build upon each other’s comments than groups of strangers (Wilkinson, 1998). This was the case, for example, in Kitzinger’s (1994) research on media messages about AIDS. Here, “friends and colleagues could relate each other’s comments to actual incidents in their shared daily lives. They often challenged each other on contradictions between what they were *professing* to believe and how they actually behaved” (Kitzinger, 1994: 105). Focus groups of

friends provide a social context for a more ‘natural’ discussion of how ideas and knowledge are formed (Kitzinger, 1994; Wilkinson, 1998; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). As Kitzinger concludes from her study, “[b]y using pre-existing groups we were sometimes able to tap into *fragments* of interactions which approximated to ‘naturally occurring’ data” (1994: 105).

To recruit pre-existing groups of friends I approached people who I knew had friends or acquaintances who watched *Geordie Shore*. I explained the project to this initial contact person asking whether they would be willing to ask their friends if they would be interested in participating and to pass on my email address. I then waited for their friends to contact me, and sent them the information sheet (see appendix A). If this second contact agreed to participate I asked them to ask their friends or flatmates if they would like to join the discussion and to pass on the information sheet. Once I had a group of participants I organised a time that would suit everyone in the group. In some groups, participants showed up with an extra friend or flatmate. In this case, I gave them an information sheet to read before the start of the discussion. This method was successful, and within two months, four focus groups of pre-existing social groups were held with tertiary students and young adults.

Twenty-three tertiary students and young adults took part in this study. Four focus group meetings were conducted. The size of each focus group ranged between five to seven participants, a number “large enough to gain a variety of perspectives and small enough not to become disorderly or fragmented” (Rabiee, 2004: 656). Some research has found that, as well as size, the gender dynamic of focus groups also affect the conversation (Wight, 1994; Green et al. 1993; Hollander, 2004). For example, Jocelyn Hollander argues that male focus groups place pressure on men to “demonstrate their masculinity” and discourage “narratives that would call their masculinity into question” (2004: 625). Hollander further argues that in mixed

gender focus groups “men will tend to dominate unless the task at hand is perceived to be specifically linked to women” (2004: 616). Thus, in this research the gender dynamic of each group was considered as having an important influence on the discussion. I therefore conducted two mixed gender focus groups (MF1, MF2), a men’s group (M) and a women’s group (F). By having male only, female only and mixed-gender groups I could explore how different gender compositions affected the discussion. Furthermore, as previous research has analysed how casual sex (e.g., England et al. 2008) and heavy drinking (e.g. Smith & Berger, 2010) are experienced and made sense of differently by men and women, I wanted to further explore such potential differences.

### **The participants**

All participants in this project resided in Christchurch, New Zealand at the time of the study. In the first mixed gender focus group (MF1), participants consisted of three young women and three young men aged between 18 and 20 years. One woman was NZ European/Maori, while the other four participants were NZ European. Two of the women were studying toward a law degree, the other commerce. Two of the men were studying Engineering degrees and the other commerce. In the second mixed gender focus group (MF2), participants consisted of three men and two women aged between 22 to 24 years. All participants in this group either did not identify with a particular ethnic group or identified as NZ European. One man was studying towards a Master of Engineering Management, another towards a Master’s of International Relations and Diplomacy, the other was a boiler maker/commercial diver. One of the women was a commercial designer and the other was studying towards a Bachelor of Broadcast Communications. Participants who were not currently studying either lived with, or were still part of student networks.

The men's group (M) consisted of five young men aged between 22 to 23 years. One participant was Chinese, the other four were NZ European. Four of the participants were in their final year of their law degree and the other was studying towards a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. The final focus group, the women's group, consisted of seven young women aged between 21 to 23 years. One participant did not identify with a particular ethnic group, the other six were NZ European. One woman was working in event management, three were graduate engineers, one was studying towards a Master's in Medical Physics, another towards a Master of Engineering Studies in Fire Engineering, and another was studying towards a Master of Disaster Risk and Resilience.

### **Conducting the focus group discussions**

#### **Location**

Although it was not my initial intention, focus group discussions took place in the living room area of a Residential Assistant flat at a university hall of residence. I had initially planned to conduct the focus group discussions in the hall of residence common room, as I saw this as a comfortable environment. However, during the time of each focus group there were other staff members around and I was concerned that the discussion would be overheard and participant anonymity would be compromised. Furthermore, prior to commencing discussion in one focus group, a participant walked through the common room and indicated that he would feel more comfortable discussing *Geordie Shore* in a smaller, more confined space. The living area of a flat in the hall of residence, instead, therefore provided a more closed off and relaxed environment for participants. This was a comfortable setting with minimal distractions. I went

to the venue before each discussion, turned on the heater and tidied to make sure that the environment was cosy and comfortable. The hall is located close to university so participants did not have to travel far to get to this location.

Couches were situated around a small coffee table and during each focus group discussion participants were provided with pizza and soft drink. Previous research has found that people feel more relaxed if they have the chance to eat and drink together (Liamputtong, 2011; Carey, 1994). Food can also support pre-session chatting, and helps to “break the ice” (Carey, 1994: 230). Dietary requests were asked of each group prior to the meeting.

## **Procedure**

Prior to the start of each focus group discussion, participants were asked to fill out a socio-demographic questionnaire (see appendix C). The questionnaire was designed to gain some background context to the participants in each group, asking for their gender, age, ethnicity and what they were studying or currently employed as. The questionnaires did not ask for the participants’ names to ensure their confidentiality and anonymity. I next introduced myself and the research topic. My aim was to provide enough information so that participants felt comfortable with the topic, to create a relaxed atmosphere, and to provide some general ground rules for the discussion (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Here, I gave some information on the purpose of focus group discussions. I asked participants to attempt to discuss the topic as freely as possible and explained that there were no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ answers. Participants were asked to simply discuss ideas and issues that were important to them in *Geordie Shore*, and to direct their discussion towards each other, rather than to me. In my introductory comments, I reiterated some of the ethical concerns on the consent form, such as confidentiality. The issue

of confidentiality is particularly important when working with pre-existing groups, where “the temptation to ‘gossip’ may be strong if participants are part of the same social network” (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999: 17; Barbour, 2007). I therefore asked participants to be respectful of one another and to not repeat anything said within the discussion to outside sources.

I also asked for permission to audio record the session to capture participant comments as accurately as possible for transcription of the data later. I made it clear to participants that their names would be replaced by pseudonyms. I explained that participation was voluntary, and no one had to answer anything they did not want to, particularly in relation to the sensitive nature of certain topics. Here, I also felt it important to provide some information about myself and my own interest in the show. It was hoped that this self-disclosure (Zeller, 1993) would help participants to feel comfortable in discussing potentially embarrassing or sensitive material in *Geordie Shore* or their own lives. After explaining the purpose of the study, covering some ethical concerns and self-disclosing some information about me, I lastly asked participants if they had any questions about the upcoming discussion. Participants then signed and dated an informed consent form (see appendix B).

In one focus group, to start off the discussion, I asked participants to go around the group and briefly introduce themselves and the qualifications they were studying towards. My intention was to use such introductions to get participants talking, provide a sense of group cohesion, and to help differentiate the voices when I later came to transcribe the data (Barbour, 2007). However, I do not think this worked as a successful strategy, perhaps because participants already knew each other. Rather than making the environment more relaxed I think it made things seem more formal and I could sense that some participants were feeling slightly awkward about introducing themselves to their friends that they already knew. One participant

even remarked, “feels like an AA club aye?” (Louise, F). In the following focus groups, therefore, I decided to address the discussion guide (see appendix D) to facilitate the conversation, rather than have participants introduce themselves.

The discussion guide began with more broad questions about participant viewing practices of *Geordie Shore*, to more specific questions related to the research topic. The aim with my initial questions was to get participants discussing what was meaningful to them in the show, so that the discussion was participant rather than researcher driven. I did not rigidly stick to the guide and allowed participants to focus on what was of interest to them. If there were ever lulls in the conversation I would ask a question from the interview guide or prompt and probe participants. Occasionally I asked participants for extra clarification or expansion on previous comments. At the end of each focus group participants were given the opportunity to ask any questions. Alcohol and sexual health helplines were provided for participants should anything have unsettled them in the discussion. Focus groups lasted between one to one and a half hours.

I had three clips from *Geordie Shore* available to facilitate discussion if needed. Stimulus material has been used in previous focus group research on gender and sexuality to assist discussion (Frith, 2000; Gavey, 2005; Vares, 2005). For example, Gavey (2005) used the film *White Palace* to explore viewer responses to displays of an ‘active’ and agentic feminine sexuality. Similarly, in Tiina Vares’ (2005) focus group research on Viagra, participants watched episodes of *Sex and the City* and *My Family* beforehand to encourage discussion about men’s Viagra use. The clips in the current project were typical of *Geordie Shore* sexual and drinking practices. Clip 1, *Best Ever Mortal Moments* (2015), revealed the characters, both men and women, drinking to intoxication. It was hoped that this clip would spark discussion on the culture of intoxication and gendered debates about men’s and women’s drinking. Clips 2 and

3, *Buck Squad Gone Wild* (2015) and *Most Naked Geordie Shore Moments* (2016) represented some of the sexual practices on *Geordie Shore*. *Buck Squad Gone Wild* focused more on the men ‘pulling’ and *Most Naked Geordie Shore Moments* depicts both women and men in the show exhibiting nudity and engaging in casual sex.

In most focus groups the discussion was so lively that I did not need to show all three clips. In the mixed gender groups, (MF1) and (MF2), I showed each group one clip towards the end of the discussion, *Most Naked Geordie Shore Moments*, only to see if it might raise some final comments for participants. The men’s only group (M) was the longest discussion, with the recording device switched on for an hour and fourteen minutes. These participants had set their own agenda throughout most of the discussion and had covered a lot, I therefore did not feel it necessary to play any clips. The women’s only group (F) was the quietest of the four groups. The discussion started well, with each participant contributing to the discussion. However, after about 20 minutes, enthusiasm in the discussion seemed to fade. There were quite a few lulls in conversation in this group, I therefore decided to play all three clips. In this group, the clips worked as intended and helped to facilitate discussion.

### **Reflecting on the focus groups**

Focus groups worked as an effective methodology in this research, providing a context where participants could both support and encourage as well as dispute and contest the opinions of others. The men’s only focus group (M) was characterised by a particularly lively discussion and participants frequently asked each other to elaborate on their ideas in a way that I could not. Participants in this group were clearly comfortable with each other and enjoyed debate. For example, Peter (M) was having some trouble describing a woman who had had “50 sexual

partners.” After commenting “I would be like that girl obviously is pretty, like she’s pretty [...]”, he was called on by another participant, Henry to elaborate, who asked “she’s what though? Finish the sentence.” Here, Henry called on Peter to express his ideas more clearly in a way that I would have perhaps felt uncomfortable doing. Each focus group revealed differences in opinions and beliefs that may be reflective of wider incongruent beliefs and attitudes in society, and may say something about the social and historical construction of femininity, masculinity and sexuality.

As the group moderator, in each focus group I took a back seat in the discussion and allowed participants to discuss what was important to them in *Geordie Shore*. I tried to act more as a group ‘navigator’ than a leader (Gates & Waight, 2007). However, there were times where participants went off topic and I would have to steer them back to the research focus. For example, one focus group (MF2), somehow got onto the topic of how they had recently bought a flat kitten. Here I had to intervene and remind participants of the purpose of the research.

Furthermore, although in some theoretical approaches neutrality is seen as possible, it has been recognised in practice that moderators cannot claim to be completely objective (Liamputpong, 2011; Stokoe & Smithson, 2002). I found this was the case in the current project, particularly in the men’s only focus group (M) where the discussion was so humorous that, at times, I could not help but join in on the laughter amongst participants. Moreover, I would occasionally agree with participants on some of their ideas, such as favourite characters. I think this provided a more relaxed atmosphere and enabled participants to feel comfortable in expressing their ideas.

I also had to be aware of how my gender, age and ethnicity could influence each focus group discussion (Liamputpong, 2011; Barbour, 2007). Clare Farquhar argues that this self-awareness

is particularly important when researching sensitive topics. She states that it is necessary to consider “whether and how … potential sensitivity may be influenced by researcher identities” (Farquhar, 1999: 50). To create a comfortable environment for discussion, focus group researchers have recommended matching the characteristics of the moderator with the group they are researching (Barbour, 2007; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Pugsley, 1996). In Lesley Pugsley’s (1996) research with young people on sex education for example, a female postgraduate student in her mid-twenties helped moderate the focus groups as she was “able to interact with young people and feel ‘comfortable’ during discussions about sex and sexuality” (1996: 118). As I am a postgraduate student and am a similar age to most of the participants in this project, then participants may have felt more comfortable discussing casual sex and drinking than with an older researcher. Providing detailed and specific information about their own and others’ experiences of sexual practices and drinking, participants went above and beyond the levels of self-disclosure that I anticipated. One participant for example, Marcus (MF2), even discussed, with some detail, his experience of initiating a threesome.

My own presence as a female researcher, as well as the gendered composition of the focus groups, affected the dynamic of each conversation. Although Hollander’s (2004) research found that male focus groups encouraged normative gender expectations, this was not the case in the current project, perhaps due to my presence. In the men’s only group, for example, as well as traditional discourses of masculinity, participants also drew on different discourses of a more sensitive masculinity or a ‘new age guy’ (Vares, 2005). As speculated by other’s (Allen, 2003; Allen, 2005; Vares, 2005), men’s ‘talk’ may be less constrained with a female researcher than a male researcher. The gender composition of participants in each group also affected the data. In some focus groups, participants indicated that they thought the discussion would have been different had they been in a same-sex or mixed gendered group. For example, during the

women's only group (F), one participant, Georgia, said "this would be a strange chat to have if there were boys in this room." Similarly, after a mixed gender focus group (MF2) had concluded its discussion and the recording device was switched off, a participant said that she would have felt more comfortable elaborating on some of her views had there not been men in the room as well.

### **Analysing the data**

Analysis of focus group interviews involved a form of discourse analysis. From a feminist post-structuralist discourse analytic approach, participants' understandings of sexuality, gender and drinking are derived from socially constructed discourses operating within society (Weedon, 1987). Throughout the focus group discussions in this project, speakers drew on, produced, reproduced and positioned themselves within or against various discourses of gender, sexuality and drinking (Sunderland, 2004). Participant 'talk' was regarded as socially constructed within a research context, rather than as an indicator of a 'real' and 'objective' 'truth.' The focus group discussions in this project are not an indication of how all young New Zealanders make sense of representations of drinking, sexuality and gender on *Geordie Shore*, but rather represent the views of a small sub-set of young people from student networks in Christchurch. In my analysis, I focused on *how* participants talked about gender, sexuality and drinking on *Geordie Shore*. Through their talk, I analysed the discourses that participants drew on and how they positioned themselves and each other in relation to such discourses.

To identify the various discourses that participants drew on, I transcribed the audio recordings of the focus groups into written form verbatim. I then repeatedly read the transcripts looking for similarities, contestations and contradictions across the data. I generated an initial list of

codes, “the most basic segment, or element, of the raw data or information” relevant to my research question (Boyatzis, 1998: 63). I thereby categorized aspects of the data relevant to casual sex and drinking. Examples of initial codes were, ‘girls want relationships,’ ‘girls “trashy” dress,’ ‘girls more drunk than the men,’ ‘boys cheating,’ ‘binge drinking and NZ.’ I then explored relationships between codes to find broader themes, or “repeated patterns of meanings” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 86). I created several thematic maps of themes and sub-themes, examples of themes included: relationships, cheating, hooking-up, sexual double standards, characters’ appearance, character traits, gender differences in drinking, drinking double standards, trash television, scripting/editing, cultural differences in *Geordie Shore* vs NZ, and sexual objectification. As the premise of *Geordie Shore* involves casual sex, clubbing and heavy drinking, four key themes consistently came up in participant talk in each group: casual sex, relationships, heavy drinking, and dress in the night-time economy. These have become the key themes to which the following chapters are organised. Because these themes are large and complex, I then mapped out sub-themes, or “themes-within-a-theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2006: 92). For example, in relation to casual sex and relationships I had sub-themes of ‘women’s casual sex,’ ‘men’s casual sex,’ ‘number of sexual partners,’ and ‘emotional investment.’ In relation to binge-drinking and the night-time economy I had sub-themes of ‘drinking as part of NZ culture,’ ‘women’s drinking,’ ‘men’s drinking,’ ‘limits to drinking,’ ‘*Geordie Shore* men’s/women’s appearance in the night-time economy.’

I then examined these sub-themes to explore the various discourses of gender, sexuality and drinking (discussed in the previous chapter) that participants drew on and/or contested in their talk. I paid particular attention to how the same discursive object could be constructed differently by focus group participants. For example, in relation to ‘women’s casual sex,’ participants drew on postfeminist discourses of women’s choice and sexual freedom (e.g.

“she’s doing what she wants to do” (Marcus, MF2)), as well as more traditional discourses that frame women’s sexual expression unfavourably (e.g., “she’s pretty skanky” (Ben, MF1)).

The discursive context was significant to assessing participant objectives in constructing sexuality or drinking in a certain way. I asked Carla Willig’s questions of “What is gained from constructing the object [e.g. casual sex] in this particular way at this particular point within the text?” and “What is its function and how does it relate to other constructions produced in the surrounding text?” (2001: 115). For example, in mixed gender group two, the men positioned judgement toward women’s casual sex as an issue perpetuated by other women, meanwhile “no dudes actually give a shit” (Lewis, MF2). Through this framing, the men positioned women as responsible for gendered sexual double standards and worked to deny their own potential involvement.

I also considered the gendered dynamics of the focus groups in terms of how participants constructed drinking and casual sex. The women in the second mixed gender group for example, frequently seemed to moderate their opinions in response to the comments vocalized by the men in the room, with their objective being, perhaps to gain their social approval. For example, although the women in the group seemed aware of a sexual double standard, they often framed their comments in a way to not accuse the male participants of contributing to this (e.g. “I’ve heard some guys speak about her too, like that’s not you guys but [...]” (Sharon, MF2)). This was also the case in the second mixed-gender group’s discussions of drinking and the night-time economy where Annie only discussed her own heavy drinking (“half the time we’re pretty steamed as well” (MF2)), once she had heard the men’s favourable framing of women’s drinking as “impressive” (Charles, MF2). Similarly, in the men’s focus group, I speculate that they may have attempted to distance themselves from judgmental discourses

towards women's casual sex due to my presence as a female researcher. This is apparent, for example in Henry's comment that "some people," but not his own friendship group, "would second guess an interaction with a girl who's had 50 sexual partners" (M).

As feminist post-structuralism understands subjectivity as constructed in discourse (Weedon, 1987; Gavey, 1989) I also considered how the discourses of gender, sexuality and drinking that participants drew on offered them various subject positions to take up. Feminist post-structuralism claims that subject positions are "complex, shifting and multiply located" (Baxter, 2008: 248). As Judith Baxter poses, speakers can shift between subject positions "across a range of different speech events, within a single speech context, or literally within a few moments of interaction, it can even happen simultaneously, for example, being powerful or powerlessness in different ways at the same moment in time" (2008: 248). Participants in this research took up multiple and contradictory subject positions, frequently shifting their positioning in response to the comments from their peers, to the composition of the focus group or perhaps due to their own ambivalences. This is apparent for example in the second mixed gender groups discussion of women's drinking. At times, women's drinking was framed around discourses of the unacceptability of women's drunkenness. Lewis, for example, positioned the *Geordie Shore* women as unable to "handle their piss" and women's drinking as "more of a big deal" (MF2). In this same discussion, however, Lewis and other male participants also framed women's drinking as "impressive" (Charles, MF2) and "just the same as one of the boys getting gassed" (Lewis, MF2). Thus, despite initially drawing on discourses of gendered drinking double standards, male participants then attempted to downplay this, and instead framed women's drinking as the "same" as men's or as "impressive." By drawing on discourses of equality in terms of women's drinking, the men worked to downplay the subtler discourses that still frame women's heavy drinking as problematic.

A key aim of discourses analysis is “to explain the working of power on behalf of specific interests and to analyse the opportunities for resistance to it” (Weedon, 1987: 41). Thus, focus group transcripts were read carefully for contradictions and inconsistencies in participants’ talk to explore how they both reproduced as well as challenged discourses of casual sex and drinking. The subject positions made available through discourses enable or limit different opportunities for action and resistance. Of central interest in my analysis was how young men and women’s subjectivities are constructed within the discourses that they draw on and “to what extent their positioning within them creates or represses agency” (Jackson, 2005: 286). As Carla Willig claims, “by constructing particular versions of the world and by positioning subjects within them in particular ways, discourses limit what can be said and done” (2001: 111). Dominant discourses frame certain types of behaviour as acceptable and others as problematic. Although participants often drew on dominant discourses of gender and sexuality, they also drew on different understandings of casual sex and heavy drinking. For example, while traditional discourses of the male sex-drive (Hollway, 1984) pose that men seek casual sex and lack emotional attachment, participants in this research claimed that men, like women, can also “catch feels” (Lucy, F). Such shifting understandings of gender and sexuality provide opportunities for resistance to traditional discourses of gender.

As can be seen, a feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis enabled me to explore the complex and contradictory discourses that viewers drew on and contested in their discussions of casual sex and drinking. A focus on inconsistencies and contradictions in the data enabled me to explore resistance to dominant discourses of gender and different framings of masculine and feminine sexuality. Although this resistance has been explored as part of a small-scale and

localised project, it represents progress towards a larger pursuit of feminist post-structuralism, the challenging of dominant discourses of gender.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has discussed the advantages of using focus groups for discussions of gender, sexuality and drinking. Focus groups are characterized by their interactive nature and are particularly useful for researching sensitive topics. They were an appropriate methodological tool in this project where, as shown in the following chapters, participants engaged in lively discussions of casual sex and drinking. A feminist post-structuralist discourse analysis enabled me to unpack tensions in participant talk and to explore resistance to dominant discourses of gender. In the following chapters I attend to participant talk about casual sex and heavy drinking as represented on *Geordie Shore* and in participants' everyday lives.

## **Chapter Four**

### **“He’s such a fuckboy!” Negotiating the gendered sexual double standard**

*As we ask about girls’ agency in negotiating the cultural world, or about their space for action, we should ask about men and boys’ space for action in negotiating ways of being men (Garner, 2012: 328).*

The increased visibility of discourses of sexuality in Western culture has meant that the practice of casual, one-off sexual encounters has become more accepted for both men and women (Bordini & Sperb, 2013). Such non-committal sexual practices, also known as ‘hook-ups,’ have predominantly been the focus of US research amongst tertiary students and young adults (Paul et al. 2000; Bogle, 2008; Bradshaw et al. 2010). Yet, young people in other Western nations are also taking part in this ‘hook-up culture,’ including New Zealand (Heldman & Wade, 2010; Farvid, 2010; Farvid & Braun, 2013; Connor et al. 2013). Although both men and women engage in casual sex, previous NZ research has predominantly explored the challenges and experiences for women (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Farvid et al. 2016). This chapter provides an important addition to research about the gendered dynamics of ‘hook-up culture’ by exploring how *both* young women *and* men experience and make sense of casual sex (or ‘pulling’) within their student networks.

While much of the discussion guide was focused on ‘hook-ups’ on *Geordie Shore*, participants often talked about casual sex and relationships in their everyday lives. The chapter begins with an exploration of how participants discuss feminine sexual identity and practices, identifying some of the challenges that women encounter within ‘hook-up culture.’ It also analyses how

participants support *and* contest the dominant framing “that women are more relational and men more sexual” (Farvid & Braun, 2013: 371). The sexual double standard, where men are praised and women are ridiculed for casual sex, is also complicated by participants, who suggest that men can also face judgment for their sexual practices. Finally, an analysis of the men’s discussion of the term ‘fuckboy’ is presented.

### **“Oh she’s a fucking good bitch”: Participant framings of feminine sexual practices**

Casual sex, while defined in many ways throughout the literature, can broadly refer to “one-off or fleeting sexual encounters between recently met strangers, acquaintances, or friends” (Farvid & Braun, 2013: 23). Such ‘hook-ups’ may or may not involve sexual intercourse (Paul et al. 2000; Paul & Hayes, 2002) and can also include “touching, kissing, and oral sex” (Farvid & Braun, 2013: 360). In the context of an increasingly sexualised culture, representations of such one-off sexual encounters have become prevalent across all media forms (Farvid et al. 2016). Women’s participation in casual sex has become a particularly contradictory terrain (Beres & Farvid, 2010). While liberal, postfeminist and permissive (Hollway, 1984) discourses present women’s casual sex as “acceptable, and even desirable” (Farvid et al. 2016: 1), recent research in New Zealand (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003; Farvid et al. 2016) suggests that traditional discourses of a respectable femininity and a sexual double standard persist. As such, women are torn between discourses of sexual freedom and liberation and those of a respectable feminine sexuality.

The reality television show, *Geordie Shore*, is one of many mediums in which casual sex is a frequent occurrence (Wood, 2017). Participants in the focus groups for this project discussed representations and practices of feminine heterosexuality, both on the show and in their own

social networks. In this section, I explore how participants understand a sexually ‘up for it’ femininity as empowering and/or constraining for women. Participants’ responses were complex and contradictory, both drawing on, while at the same time resisting dominant constructions of feminine sexuality. The second mixed gender group illustrates this complexity in their discussion of Elouise, an acquaintance known to engage in casual, one-off sexual encounters. When participants were asked about their opinion of Elouise, they responded:

Lewis: She’s a good bitch  
Marcus: She’s doing what she wants to do  
Charles: Oh she’s a fucking good bitch  
Lewis: She keeps up with the lads, drinking, she can probably outdrink some of the lads  
Sharon: She had a pretty fast yardie<sup>21</sup>  
Annie: She’s pretty loose, in a good way  
Sharon: Nah but then again, I’ve heard some guys speak pretty badly of her as well  
Annie: Yeah I’ve heard some guys speak about her too, like that’s not you guys but [...] (MF2).

In some ways, the men in this group frame Elouise as autonomous and expressing her agency by “doing what she wants to do.” This draws on postfeminist, neo-liberal discourses (Davies et al., 2006) that position women as “sexually desiring agents” (Farvid et al. 2016: 2). The men in this group also view Elouise’s binge drinking and casual sex as “keeping up with the lads,” or “outdrink[ing] some of the lads,” and as such frame her actions approvingly. This finding has also been the case in previous research (e.g., Kraack, 1999; Young et al. 2005; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Dempster, 2011), where women can gain credibility by acting and drinking like men. However, while the men respond favourably to Elouise as ‘one of the lads,’ by affirming the relationship between drinking and masculinity or ‘laddish’ behaviour, they simultaneously question the appropriateness of women’s heavy drinking.

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<sup>21</sup> A ‘yardie’ refers to drinking a yard of beer out of a tall and slender glass (Lander, 1999).

There are further ambivalences when Lewis and Charles call Elouise a “a good bitch.” In the context of this focus group discussion this terminology is used as a compliment of sorts. This is consistent with the definition by the online Urban Dictionary (2017a) in which a “good bitch” is a “term of endearment” for “a girl or woman that is generally well-received with [sic] others.” However, while the meaning of ‘bitch’ has changed over time, it remains a negatively coded term (Budgeon, 2011) signifying “ill-temper, selfishness, malice, cruelty” (Gross, 1994: 150) and in relation to sexuality, a “carnal” or “promiscuous woman” (Gross, 1994: 151). Thus, while the men in the group attempt to frame Elouises’ drinking and sexual practice positively, their talk suggests that their understanding is more complex and fraught than this.

Annie responds to the men’s admiration of Elouise with the remark that “she’s pretty loose, in a good way.” “Loose” is a term traditionally used to signify promiscuity for women (Preston & Stanley, 1987). Thus, Elouise’s drinking is here linked to her sexuality. This potentially problematic framing of women’s drinking has also been found in previous research, where “drunken women are still constituted as sexually ‘loose’ and unfeminine” (Griffin et al. 2009: 459). However, perhaps to avoid being seen as judgmental by the men in the group, aware that they admire Elouise, Annie quickly follows this comment with “in a good way.” Sharon then directly addresses some of the challenges for women, specifically judgment and scrutiny from men, stating that “some guys speak pretty badly of her as well.” Annie agrees, also claiming to have “heard some guys speak about her too.” However, again, Annie is quick to justify her comment, adding “like that’s not you guys but [...].”

The gender dynamics in this focus group clearly impact on the talk, with the men setting the agenda and their understanding of Elouise dominating the discussion. This, according to Hollander, is common in mixed gender focus groups where “men’s preferred topics (and styles

of discussing these topics) tend to dominate conversation” (2004: 620). In this focus group context, there were three verbally dominant men and two women. Although Annie and Sharon are aware of a sexual double standard, they seem to shape their own comments in response to the men’s framing of Elouise. They position themselves in line with gender expectations of women as being agreeable and pleasing of others (Kanai, 2017), in which judgement toward Elouise is an issue for “some guys” but “not you guys.”

The men’s focus group also discussed recent constructions of the active, sexually desiring woman (Evans et al. 2010). As in the mixed-gender group, this focus group also complicates postfeminist discourses around women’s sexual practices. Again, the men’s discussion highlights the importance of social context. The following extract illustrates the way in which participants position themselves in response to their peers and a female researcher:

Peter: The nature of girls having sex with different guys doesn’t really concern me that much

Mike: Yeah nah the same

[...]

Henry: I think there would be some people who would second guess an interaction with a girl who’s had 50 sexual partners

Callum: I agree with him

[...]

Mike: I would second guess an interaction with a girl that’s had 50

[...]

Mike: I don’t think it would put me off someone who I otherwise liked, but you would be a bit more like, “uhh”

Peter: Well health things aside, like yeah well obviously you’d want to be a little bit like [...] but that’s the same for a guy as well like “oh yeah” like “bit ooh,” but if it’s all healthy then I wouldn’t really judge

Henry: You wouldn’t second guess a 50 [...]

Peter: Nah, I would be like that girl obviously is pretty like she’s pretty [...]

Henry: She’s what though? Finish the sentence

Peter: Yeah I know I’m trying to find the word there, I think like, yeah she’d be all good she’d be mean

Mike: She’d be very sexually experienced

Peter: She’d be sexually experienced, she’s free, she’s open, [and] she doesn’t have that many blockages (M).

Peter initially draws on a permissive discourse (Hollway, 1984), where women's casual sex is acceptable, claiming that "girls having sex with different guys doesn't really concern me that much." Here, both men and women are positioned as active and desiring sexual subjects. However, Henry challenges this postfeminist understanding of feminine sexuality, claiming that "some people" would not be so accepting. By claiming that "some people" would have reservations over "a girl who's had 50 sexual partners," Henry attempts to distance both himself and the other focus group members from a negative response to a woman having many sexual partners. It seems that in this focus group discussion there is a reluctance to talk critically about an active and desiring feminine sexuality, perhaps, in part, due to my presence. Louisa Allen argues that when discussing sexuality with a female researcher "young men engage in the management of their own sexual identities" (2005: 35). Similarly, in Vares focus group research with men, she speculates that the men may have attempted to perform a more "'politically correct' or less 'macho' enactment of masculinity in the context of a female interviewer" (2005: 206). The men in this focus group may be presenting themselves as accepting of active feminine sexuality, deeming this as something I wanted to hear. This is illustrated by the constant pausing in the conversation where it seems that the men may want to say something more but are being careful around the language they use.

Peter then draws on a sexual health discourse, where "if it's all healthy then I wouldn't really judge." Here, he positions health as his primary concern in relation to how he "judge[s]" feminine sexual practices. However, Peter's difficulty in explaining his understanding of "a girl who's had 50 sexual partners" suggests that health may not be his only concern. His struggle to "find the word there" indicates a difficulty in finding language to positively describe a woman with numerous sexual partners. Despite Peter's eventual description that "she'd be sexually experienced," "free" and "open," his hesitancy to articulate these words highlights

some of the tensions with this more positive framing, as well as being potentially difficult to talk about in a focus group context. It seems that the men in this group try to position themselves as accepting of women's active sexuality while tip-toeing around saying anything that might be perceived as judgmental. Perhaps, then, the men attempted to "publicly manage their masculine identity" (Allen, 2003: 232) due to the presence of a female researcher and as a reaction to the response from their peers.

In the above extracts the discussion has focused on women's casual sex in participants' everyday lives. The following extract from the women's focus group shifts more directly to feminine sexual practices in *Geordie Shore*. The women discuss the character Holly and her activities in season one. Holly first featured on *Geordie Shore* as the youngest character in the series, aged only 18 (Donovan, 2011). Although her hairstyle and look has frequently changed, she is often known as *Geordie Shore*'s "big-boobed redhead" (Lynn, 2014). An outgoing and loud character, in the show's opening credits Holly introduces herself as being "fit," "flirty" and having "double F's" (*Geordie Shore*, 2011). In the following conversation, the women's group discuss Holly's actions on her first night in the *Geordie Shore* house:

Scarlett: Did she pull her top off in the spa in her first night there or something?

Jess: She what sorry?

Scarlett: She went topless in the spa on her first night, I think that didn't make a good impression on the girls

Louise: I feel like that's kinda weird, cause all the guys would have been like "oh cool she's got her top off," but then the next day would have slagged her off about it

Jess: Yeah that's true they would have been the one's being like "get your tits out" and then the next day would have been like

Katie: Yeah judgey

Jess: Yeah like "ooh she got her tits out"

Alice: Well they told her to get her tits out

Jess: Exactly that's why it's not right (F).

Holly's "topless" behaviour is firstly framed as problematic, by "not mak[ing] a good impression on the girls." The conversation then turns to focus on the potential reactions of the male characters. The women in this group position the *Geordie Shore* men as having

contradictory expectations for how Holly should act. Louise speculates that the men would have initially responded approvingly of Holly's behaviour, however "the next day would have slagged her off about it." The other women in the group agree, claiming that the men "would have been the one's being like 'get your tits out'" while acting "judgey" later on. The extract ends with a final exclamation from Jess that this imagined contradictory response from the men is "not right."

In the above extracts, in part due to the focus group context, the men are cautious in how they talk about women as active sexual subjects. As such, they position themselves as noncritical of sexually agentic 'up for it' women. They challenge traditional assumptions about the passivity of feminine sexuality (Hollway, 1984), framing women's casual sex as "the same for a guy" or as a choice by "doing what she wants to do." Female participants however are aware of a sexual gendered double standard, explicitly discussing this in the women's only focus group. They regard men's responses, or imagined responses to feminine sexual practices, as critical and "judgey." Yet, although female participants are aware of this double standard, they are cautious of introducing this in a mixed-gender focus group.

### **Girls "catch feels" but guys don't? Complicating the male sex-drive discourse**

Conversations about relationships in *Geordie Shore* often turned into discussions about relationships in everyday life. Participants frequently drew on dominant discourses about men and women, in which women seek relationships while men are more sex-driven (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009). Such discourses of the male-sex drive (Hollway, 1984), support traditional constructions of masculinity where men are seen to be "assertive and successful with as many sexual partners as possible and to remain unattached and unemotional toward these partners

afterward” (Epstein et al. 2009: 415). However, participants also contested this discourse. In their discussion of “catch[ing] feels,”<sup>22</sup> they challenge traditional discourses of masculine sexuality:

Lucy: I think girls catch feels and then the guys don’t, maybe  
Alice: Nah I reckon it’s both ways  
Jess: Yeah maybe [it’s] just the rate at which they catch the feels  
Alice: I reckon guys just aren’t as open, guys still catch feels  
Jess: Yeah  
Lucy: Yeah  
Louise: Either that or you just aren’t on the same page, like he’s looking for something completely different to what you are (F).

Lucy initially draws on dominant gendered discourses in which women are more likely to develop emotional attachments or “catch feels” in their heterosexual relationships, while “guys don’t.” However, both in the language Lucy uses, and in the response from the rest of the group, this is contested. The term “catch feels” suggests that feelings are not natural or inherent to femininity, rather they are something that can be “caught.” This movement or transferability of emotion or “feelings” links to a recent body of literature around ‘affective practice,’ exploring the connection between the body and mind (e.g., Hemmings, 2005; Wetherell, 2012; Ahmed, 2014; Gray, 2017). Affect theorizing poses that emotion can move between people and considers the “transformative experience of feelings and emotions” (Gray, 2017: 8). In the above extract, Alice suggests that movement of emotion, or “catching” feelings, is “both ways,” that is, possible for both men and women to “catch.” She claims that “guys just aren’t as open” but can “still catch feels.” Thus, in one sense, the women in this group blur the gender binary, positioning men as also having emotional investments in their relationships. However, they suggest that, in comparison to women, men are less likely to be “open” about “catch[ing] feels.” This draws on traditional conceptions of masculinity, where men are thought to avoid

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<sup>22</sup> The expression ‘catching feelings’ involves “feeling romantic interest in your hookup partner” (Paul, 2006: 155).

discussion of feelings or emotionality (Seidler, 1989; Coates, 2003).

The second mixed gender group also discussed relationships and “feelings.” The following extract not only demonstrates ambivalence around whether men become emotionally invested in their relationships, but also the challenges in discussing this in a mixed gender context:

Lewis: The girls on the show keep on trying to do what the guys do in terms of going out and having casual sex, but then they get hung up on them

Annie: They get feelings

Lewis: And it’s just like well either pick one, go out and have casual sex or get into a relationship, like pick one, don’t try fuck around with being half way

[...]

Sharon: Oh I reckon that happens quite a lot in real life as well, like girls will get with someone casually and then they’ll get like, into them

Annie: Feelings

Lewis: Yeah

Sharon: And then for blokes it doesn’t happen that much

Lewis: But it kinda happens for dudes as well

Sharon: I don’t reckon girls get the impression that happens that much

Annie: Yeah

Sharon: There’s not many guys that would be like, “oh I was like getting with this girl and then I cut it off and now I actually reckon I should have not cut it off,” you don’t really hear blokes say that much, I reckon

Lewis: Well we will do repeat offending, like “oh yeah I’ll cut it off, oh shit boys I went back there”

Annie: That is such a classic guy thing

Lewis: I buckled, I buckled, fuck (MF2).

Casual sex in *Geordie Shore* is regarded by Lewis as a masculine norm, meanwhile the women in the show are positioned as “trying to do what the guys do.” However, the *Geordie Shore* women are seen as incapable of having casual sex in the same way as men as they “get hung up” or “feelings.” Sharon links the women’s behaviour on *Geordie Shore* to everyday life, suggesting that in general, women often want more from casual sex, “like girls will get with someone casually and then they’ll get like, into them.” Sharon frames this as in opposition to men, where “for blokes it doesn’t happen that much.” Here, as in the women’s only group, a dominant discourse is reproduced in the “relational imperative” (Hamilton & Armstrong, 2009: 593), where women want love, emotional closeness and committed relationships, while men

are seen to prefer non-relational sexual encounters (Epstein et al. 2009). This has been a consistent theme in previous research, where women are expected to be more interested than men in a relationship after a casual ‘hook-up’ (Bogle, 2008; England et al. 2008; Hess et al. 2015).

However, Lewis complicates this with his comment that after a casual sexual encounter “feelings” “kinda happens for dudes as well.” Some previous research has also found that men may seek emotional ties after a ‘hook-up’ (e.g., Manning et al. 2006; Pollack, 2006; Smiler, 2008; Epstein et al. 2009). Yet, in this focus group, the introduction of a more emotional form of masculinity is immediately shut down when Sharon comments, “I don’t reckon girls get the impression that happens that much.” Perhaps taken aback by Sharon’s dismissal of his claim, Lewis then attempts to realign himself with more traditional discourses of masculinity. He diverts the conversation from “feelings” to “repeat offending,” that is, mistakenly (“oh shit boys I went back there”) returning to previous sexual partners. Lewis positions returning to the same sexual partner, and thus the potential of becoming emotionally invested, as problematic to the “boys.” By framing a repeated sexual encounter with the same girl as “offending” behaviour, Lewis distances himself from his previous alignment with a more emotional type of masculinity. “Repeat offending,” could be perceived as typically more masculine behaviour than “feelings” or getting into a relationship, and is regarded as a “classic guy thing” by Annie. Although Lewis initially drew on a ‘softer’ (Allen, 2005) version of masculinity, where “dudes” can also “get feelings” he was policed back into traditional discourses of masculinity, such as lack of emotional commitment (Epstein et al. 2009), by the women in the group. In this focus group context, through their adherence to particular framings of masculinity and femininity, the women shut down his alternative understanding of masculine sexuality.

## **“Chicks always get judged on their number more than guys do”: Negotiating the sexual double standard**

As well as ambivalence around whether men can become emotionally invested in their relationships, participants also discussed the sexual double standard. In the next two extracts, participants reflect on this practice while discussing ‘pulling’ on *Geordie Shore*. In the first extract, the women’s group discuss the female characters’ talk about casual sex or ‘pulling’ in comparison to the men on the show. In the second extract, the second mixed gender group discuss the 29-year-old *Geordie Shore* character and “womaniser” Scott Timlin, also known as ‘Scotty T’ (Duke, 2017; Lawrence, 2017), before engaging in a general discussion of gendered differences in “number[s]” of sexual partners:

Scarlett: They [the women] didn’t actually really pull anyone though did they? But neither did the guys often

Georgia: Nah, the guys talk themselves up

Scarlett: Yeah they do

Alice: Yeah I feel like its equal kinda both ways but guys just like, yeah!

Moderator: They brag about it more?

Alice: Yeah, isn’t that society though, girls always round down and boys always round up

Scarlett: Yeah talk themselves up (F).

Annie: [...] Scotty T’s just going around all three of the new girls, imagine if a chick did that, around all three of the new guys you would [...] she would so get labelled

Moderator: Do you think?

Lewis: Yeah

Sharon: But that’s like real life as well

Moderator: How so in real life?

Sharon: Uh because, because

Annie: Chicks always get judged on their number more than guys do

Lewis: Not really

Charles: I reckon chicks are their own harshest critics

Lewis: Yeah!

Charles: There’s girls that judge girls more harshly than [...]

Lewis: No dudes actually give a shit (MF2).

In the first extract, the women initially draw on a gender-neutral sexual equality discourse where “pulling” is “equal kinda both ways,” for both the men and women on *Geordie Shore*. This gender-neutral discourse poses that “women, as much as men, have the right to express their sexuality and seek sexual pleasure” (Jackson & Cram, 2003: 123). However, the women also argue that while “pulling” may be “equal,” the men are more likely to “talk themselves up.” Alice then connects this to everyday life, commenting “isn’t that society though, girls always round [their number of sexual partners] down and boys always round up.” Alice’s comment draws on dominant discourses of gender and casual sex, where being seen as having numerous sexual partners is perceived as a marker of masculinity for men but as disreputable for women (Connell, 2005; Farvid et al. 2016). As such, a consistent theme in previous research is that women talk down their number of sexual partners to avoid negative judgement, while men talk theirs up for social approval (e.g., Brown & Sinclair, 1999; Kimmel, 2008; Jonason & Fisher, 2009). This downplaying of women’s casual sex and exaggeration of men’s helps to perpetuate the sexual double standard, presented in this extract almost as a matter of fact, where men receive praise and social status for casual sex or ‘hooking-up,’ while women who do the same are denigrated (Currier, 2013; Jackson & Cram, 2003).

As in the women’s group, the women in the second mixed-gender group also present the sexual double standard as a common experience, both on *Geordie Shore* and in their everyday lives, where women are at risk of “get[ting] labelled” and “judged on their [sexual] number more than guys do.” The men in the group question this argument. They claim that, as found in some previous research (e.g. Abrahamson, 2004; Farvid et al. 2016), women are more critical than men of women’s behaviour, that “chicks are their own harshest critics” and that “no dudes actually give a shit.” The men thus attempt to distance both themselves and men in general from perpetuating a sexual double standard. Instead, they position this as a women’s problem,

denying their own possible involvement in its persistence. This framing creates a challenge for discussing feminine sexual practices in a mixed-gender focus group. While Annie and Sharon are aware of how women's casual sex can be negatively read by others, they may not want to be seen as contributing to this 'women's problem.'

The men in the first mixed gender group also articulated a complex view of the sexual double standard, both accommodating while also rejecting dominant constructions of masculine sexuality:

Kate: Like if a guy is getting with heaps and heaps of girls he's a legend and if a girl is then she's a slag like she's slutty

[...]

Sue: Like if girls get with heaps of people then it's like bad but then like all the guys get with heaps of people and it's just crack up [...] It's kinda unfair cause girls are told to like respect yourself but then what are guys told

[...]

Ben: Be a lad

Sue: Yeah just go off being a lad

Harry: No but I would say that's probably a bit of a false perception that

Ben: I reckon it's false

Harry: In *Geordie Shore* of course it happens, but in terms of real life I think it's a false, they play it off like most people are like "oh lad" but most people on the inside are thinking like "oh he's, like, a bit of a dick"

Sue: Bit of a dick yeah

Harry: You know, like you can be like "oh good on ya that's funny" you know getting with like ten people over the last week, but then when you look back on it you're like "oh [he] kind of treated those girls as a bit of a tool<sup>23</sup>" (MF1).

The sexual double standard is again first mentioned by the female participants in this mixed gender group, where "if a guy is getting with heaps and heaps of girls he's a legend and if a girl is then she's a slag." Here, Kate directly introduces the social benefits of casual sex for men, who through frequent sexual encounters can become recognized as a "legend." Other terminology to positively position men who have had many sexual partners include "stud" or

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<sup>23</sup> The online Urban Dictionary (2009b) defines 'tool' as "a guy with a hugely over-inflated ego" and as "someone who others normally refer to as prick, dick or schmuck."

“player” (Farvid et al. 2016: 1). Conversely, women can be negatively labelled as a “slag” or “slutty” for engaging with numerous sexual partners. Farvid and colleagues pose that such terminology is used to “describe girls/women whose behaviour falls outside of what is considered morally acceptable or respectable sexual or social conduct” (2016: 1). Terms such as “slut” and “slag” are thus used to police feminine sexuality (Jackson & cram, 2003; Farvid et al. 2016).

By commenting that “girls are told to like respect yourself,” Sue draws on a traditional discourse of a respectable feminine sexuality, where women and not men are expected to maintain a modest and good sexual reputation (Griffin et al. 2012; Farvid, 2014). Sue problematizes this sexual double standard as being unjust, claiming that it’s “kinda unfair,” and questions “what are guys told.” Ben responds by positioning himself in relation to dominant constructions of masculinity, that men are told to “be a lad.” This ‘laddism,’ ‘lad culture’ or being ‘one of the lads’ is associated with typically masculine activities, such as casual sex, and an avoidance of activities or interests perceived as feminine (Francis, 1999; Jackson, 2002). However, Harry complicates this dominant discourse of masculinity, claiming that the idea of being told to “be a lad” is “a bit of a false perception.” Ben then agrees, and shifts from positioning himself alongside dominant conceptions of masculinity or ‘laddism’ to also stating, “I reckon it’s false.” Harry claims that while the men on *Geordie Shore* may be perceived as “lad[s]” or “legend[s]” for engaging in casual sex, this is not the case in “real life” and people may actually think “he’s a bit of a dick” or “[he] kind of treated those girls as a bit of a tool.” Thus, while male characters on *Geordie Shore* exhibit ‘laddish’ behaviour by “getting with heaps and heaps of girls,” in contrast to dominant discourses that value men’s casual sex, Harry positions this as unfavourable in “real life.” Although previous research claims that men are harshly judged if they *fail* to exhibit sexual success (Kreager & Staff, 2009; Bordini & Sperb,

2013), Harry suggests the limits to masculine sexuality by claiming that if men *do* exhibit sexual success they can also be judged.

### **“Fuckboy doesn’t have the same stigma as slut”: Debating men’s casual sex**

The limits to men’s casual sex were also discussed in the men’s focus group. The practice of casual sex is often thought to be a problem solely for women. This has been the focus of previous research, where casual sex has been found to be a consistently challenging terrain for women (e.g., Jackson & Cram, 2003; Farvid et al. 2016). However, while there are considerable challenges and contradictions for women in the tertiary ‘hook-up’ scene, too often research sidesteps men’s experiences and the challenges they face. The current project adds to a growing body of research suggesting that young men’s understanding of relationships and sexuality are far more complex than assumed (Dworkin & O’Sullivan, 2005; Giordano et al. 2006; Currier, 2013; Hess et al. 2015). The men’s group and their lengthy discussion of ‘the fuckboy’ highlights this complexity and some of the challenges for negotiating sexual identities and practices:

Jake: I think [...] as well, I mean you can say “it wouldn’t matter for me” but I think the fact that we still have words like ‘slut’ and ‘whore’ which are used only for females in our modern lexicon

Peter: Oh wow, but there’s a lot of words for

Mike: There’s the prefix man-slut, man-whore

Peter: Pig

Henry: Yeah but that’s less demeaning

Jake: But pig

Henry: Less demeaning

Jake: But pig is [...] also used in like a sort of praiseworthy manner though

Mike: What about fuckboy though? That’s a word that’s [...] created to deal with the same [...]

Jake: But fuckboy doesn’t have the same stigma as slut or

Peter: It definitely does

Mike: It does, you could also argue that, if someone calls you a fuckboy it’s like not good vibes at all

Peter: Yeah I feel very judged

Henry: We call Peter a fuckboy

Peter: You call me a fuckboy it's so judgey  
Jake: Well a thief doesn't like being called a thief  
Peter: No I fucking hate it  
[Laughter] (M).

There is discussion between the men as to whether terminology to signify a man who has numerous sexual partners, such as “man-slut,” “man-whore,” or “pig” can be equated with terminology such as “slut” or “whore.” Henry argues that the terms “pig” or “man-slut,” are “less demeaning” than “slut” or “whore.” Jake seems to agree and even suggests that “pig” can be used in a “sort of praiseworthy manner.” The claim that terminology to describe men’s sexual behaviours cannot be equated with terminology for women’s sexual practices has also been found in previous research (Bogle, 2008; Flood, 2013; Hess et al. 2015; Farvid et al. 2016). For example, in Kathleen Bogle’s research (2008) ‘male-slut’ or ‘man-whore’ were used jokingly rather than as derogatory labels. Similarly, Michael Flood’s research on the ‘male-slut,’ concludes that this labelling “does not have the same moral and disciplinary weight of the term ‘slut’ when applied to women” (2013: 105). Indeed, with ‘male-slut’ or ‘man-whore,’ ‘slut’ is already culturally defined as a feminized term and thus does not have the same meaning when applied to men (Farvid et al. 2016).

While ‘male-slut’ or ‘man-whore’ may not carry the same stigma as ‘slut’ when applied to women, the term ‘fuckboy,’ introduced by Mike in this extract, is made sense of ambivalently by participants. ‘Fuckboy’ is a term that, until very recently, has received little scholarly attention. Some mobile dating app and online research has made note of the term and its negative connotations (e.g., Shaw, 2016; Grieve et al. 2017; Hanson, 2017). In Kenneth Hanson’s (2017) research on smartphones and ‘hook-up culture,’ ‘fuckboy’ was an unfavourable colloquial term used by tertiary students to describe men on dating apps who seek casual hook-ups. Such men used sexually “crude” and “vulgar” pickup lines to pursue women

(Hanson, 2017: 29). In Grieve and colleagues research on emerging technology used on Twitter, the term ‘fuckboy’ is defined as “an insult for men (e.g. asshole)” (2017: 109).

In the current project, participants’ understandings of the ‘fuckboy’ were complex and ambiguous. In the above extract, Mike and Peter frame the ‘fuckboy’ unfavourably. Mike argues that being called a ‘fuckboy’ is “not good vibes at all” and Peter claims that he “feel[s] very judged” for being called this. The extract indicates some of the general dynamics of the men’s focus group, characterised by jokes, laughter, and put-downs. Throughout the focus group Peter’s understanding of masculine sexuality is particularly ambivalent. He seems to play the role, or at least *wants* to play the role, of the most ‘masculine’ group member while simultaneously dislikes being called a ‘fuckboy,’ associated with masculine sexuality. He frequently offers dominant conceptions of masculinity as ideals. For example, in an earlier discussion he claims that Gary Beadle<sup>24</sup> is his favourite *Geordie Shore* character as he’s the most “alpha,<sup>25</sup>” “he’s the leader, the main guy” and that he would “rather watch that than a beta<sup>26</sup>.” At times, Peter was aligned by other group members with this alpha, dominant conception of masculinity. For example, although jokingly, Mike earlier comments that “watching Red Pill<sup>27</sup> videos has made you [Peter] an alpha [male].” As well as being associated with an alpha, hegemonic masculinity, Peter is also regularly the brunt of jokes in this focus

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<sup>24</sup> Gary Beadle is an original *Geordie Shore* character, and is the most “sexually active” of the male characters (Wood, 2017: 50). He introduces himself on the show with the catch line “I should have a degree in pulling women” (*Geordie Shore*, 2011).

<sup>25</sup> The ‘alpha’ male refers to a traditional conception of hegemonic masculinity, “dominant in terms of conventional male attractiveness, physical power, and social status” (Alberti, 2013: 164).

<sup>26</sup> The ‘beta’ male refers to the followers of the alpha leaders, or “the secondary class men of society” (Bennett, 2017).

<sup>27</sup> Red Pill is a reference to the film *The Matrix*, where the red pill symbolises an acceptance of reality and the blue pill refers to living in ignorance (*The Matrix*, 1999). ‘Red Pill’ YouTube channels promote an ‘alpha,’ hegemonic masculinity, contrasting to the blue pill, which symbolises a ‘beta’ masculinity (*The Red Pill*, 2017).

group. While Peter claims that being called a ‘fuckboy’ is “so judgey,” Jake jokingly responds with “well a thief doesn’t like being called a thief.” The extract ends with Peter saying quite firmly, “no I fucking hate it.” As was typical of this focus group, Peter is laughed at by other members in the group. Except for Peter, the men distance themselves from dominant conceptions of masculinity, terms such as the ‘fuckboy’ are instead a source of teasing.

Teasing directed toward Peter, and debate over the meaning of the ‘fuckboy’ continued in the men’s focus group. The discussion below shifts to dispute over whether the ‘fuckboy’ can be perceived as a “compliment:”

Jake: If [...] I call Peter a fuckboy, he gets upset, but most people would probably be like

Callum: I reckon even some guys would be like, take it as a

Henry: Some sort of compliment

Callum: Yeah

Jake: Yeah still means that he pulls a lot

Callum: Yeah, so he’s a lad

Peter: Well coming from someone, have you guys been called fuckboys that often? I’ve been called fuckboy a lot it actually [...]

Callum: No I don’t have sex, I’ve never had sex

Henry: We’ve got a friend that’s ‘shamvis shmakefield<sup>28</sup>,

[Laughter]

Mike: He’s such a fuckboy!

Henry: He seeks that term out, he wants it

Jake: Yeah but he likes being told, “oh you’re such a pig,” and he’s like “ho ho ho I’m chief pig of the pig pen”

[Laughter]

Henry: People like that, people seek

Mike: Yeah I agree, I agree

Henry: No girl wants to be the lead whore

Jake: Yeah

Mike: Who? That’s ridiculous that he actually seeks that

Henry: But he does though!

Callum: But that’s more common than you think

Henry: Fuck yeah

Callum: I think we just live in a bubble of non-fuckboys

Peter: Yeah, yeah maybe you wanna be that around the guys, but being called that around girls

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<sup>28</sup> Henry did not want to say his friends’ real name for confidentiality issues as he was aware the conversation was being recorded, so he instead jokingly invented a name, ‘shmavis shmakefield’

Henry: Yeah that's the whole premise of the show though

Mike: He's saying if you call him a fuckboy in front of a girl at a bar he would not appreciate it

Jake: Yeah but that's because you're gonna stop him from pulling

Mike: Yeah ok

[Laughter]

Mike: Ok so he seeks it out amongst non-sexual partners, so he wants people who there's no chance he'll have sex with to think

Peter: Yeah like a group of guys being called a fuckboys fine (M).

This extract begins with another jab at Peter, that “he gets upset” by being called a ‘fuckboy’ but “most people” may take it as a “compliment.” Except for Peter, in this discussion the men acknowledge that for some, if not many, the ‘fuckboy’ is used approvingly, in that it can make someone a “lad” and means that they “pull a lot.” They even mention a friend of theirs who “seeks the term out,” and wants to be called a ‘fuckboy.’ Thus, for some men, ‘fuckboy’ may be more closely associated with other favourable terminology to describe men’s casual sex, such as ‘lad,’ ‘stud’ or ‘player’ (Gill, 2003b; Farvid et al. 2016). Peter, however, continues to defend his position, asking “have you guys been called fuckboys that often?” While it seems that Peter is about to discuss his issues with being called this, he is cut off by Callum who ironically responds, “No I don’t have sex, I’ve never had sex.” Characteristic of the men’s only focus group, just as a participant was potentially about to discuss male sexuality in some depth, the topic became a joking matter. This banter or jokiness has been the case in previous research with male focus groups, where according to Allen “a ‘serious’ discussion of sexuality, [is] a task at odds with usual expressions of masculinity” (2005: 42).

While the men’s group claim that *other* people “seek out” the term ‘fuckboy,’ they generally distance this from themselves, for example Mike who comments “that’s ridiculous that he actually seeks that” or Callum who states, “we just live in a bubble of non-fuckboys.” This “bubble” suggests that this men’s group frame their disassociation with dominant forms of masculine sexuality as an exception to the majority of *other* men. Throughout the men’s focus

group, other than Peter, the men distance themselves from dominant conceptions of masculine sexuality, or terms such as ‘fuckboy.’ Instead, they position themselves with different discourses of masculinity, for example, earlier in the conversation Callum comments that “we’re quite a feminine male group.” However, Callum’s terminology “feminine” highlights the difficulties in finding the language which disrupts the gender binary. His comment suggests that men may be bounded by an ‘either/or’ conception of masculinity, where they either exhibit a hegemonic masculinity or a “feminine” masculinity.

To summarise the possible challenges for masculine sexuality raised in the men’s focus group, I present a final comment from Mike and his account of the difficulty in attaining the ‘right’ amount of sex:

I think also though people will wanna know that you’re having sex just not too much or too little [...] cause if you’re a guy and you’re not getting laid you’re a loser if you’re a girl and you’re not getting laid you’re frigid [...] and if you’re at the other end of the spectrum [and] you’re a guy that’s getting laid too much then I think that also puts people off as being like a fuckboy and you don’t just wanna be another notch on their belt, well maybe some girls do (Mike, M).

Mike claims that for men and women in the tertiary scene, what counts as an ‘acceptable’ amount of ‘hook-ups’ is unclear. Mike frames feminine sexuality as at risk of being classified as “frigid” for “not getting laid.” This is a consistent theme in previous research and a common societal discourse, where women who are not sexually ‘up for it’ may be seen as uptight or prudish (Farvid et al. 2016). Mike also points towards some of the sexual pressures for men, where “if you’re a guy and you’re not getting laid you’re a loser.” This links to Kreager and Staff’s research with adolescent boys, where “sexually inexperienced boys ... received significantly less peer nominations than boys with one or more sexual partners” (2009: 155). Mike’s comment speaks to the “sexual imperative” or “sexusociety” (Przybylo, 2011: 446), where the proliferation of sexual discourses across the West invokes a “cultural necessity to have sex” (Przybylo, 2011: 448; Braun, 2005; Attwood, 2009). Because sex is seen as a

requirement, those who are not ‘doing it’ are problematized. However, despite this cultural imperative for both men and women to be having sex, Mike claims that having “too much” sex is also problematic, and that for men this can “put people off as being like a fuckboy.” Thus, casual sex is a contradictory terrain for young people and what counts as an ‘acceptable’ number of sexual encounters is fraught with tensions. While previous research has explored this as an issue for women, Mike’s comment suggests that for participants in this research understandings of men’s casual sex are also ambivalent.

## Conclusion

Casual sex is a challenging terrain for women to negotiate, as they struggle to balance postfeminist discourses of an active and ‘up for it’ sexuality and traditional discourses of feminine sexual passivity and respectability (Hollway, 1984; Farvid et al. 2016). How women engage with and make sense of such contradictory expectations has been the focus of previous New Zealand research (Jackson & Cram, 2003; Farvid et al. 2016). This chapter provides an important contribution to previous research by exploring how women *and* men engage with and make sense of representations of casual sex on *Geordie Shore*, as well as in their own everyday experiences.

The focus group context was significant in shaping the ways in which participants framed women’s casual sex. While male participants positioned themselves as uncritical of women’s sexual practices (perhaps due to the presence of other women or a female researcher), female participants were aware and critical of a sexual double standard. Men’s sexual practices were also made sense of ambivalently. While participants enjoyed watching representations of men’s ‘pulling’ on *Geordie Shore*, there was some critique of such practices in “real life.” Male

participants in this research frequently aligned themselves with more ‘sensitive’ discourses of masculinity, claiming that like women, they can also “catch feels” and framed the ‘fuckboy,’ associated with masculine sexuality, unfavourably. Male participants complicated the dominant discourse that men are praised for casual sex while women are ridiculed, claiming that men can also be problematized for having ‘too many’ sexual partners. As such, this research provides new ways of thinking about masculine sexuality. The focus of this chapter was on how participants respond to representations of casual sex and relationships on *Geordie Shore*. The following chapter shifts in focus to explore how young men and women engage with representations of drinking and style in the night-time economy as represented on *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives.

## **Chapter Five**

**“I think it depends on whether or not they can handle it”:**

### **Drinking and dress in the night-time economy**

Over the last two decades the relaxation of alcohol laws, changes in the night-time economy, and more accepting attitudes toward heavy drinking (Hutton, 2012; Hutton et al. 2013) have resulted in “young people drinking more alcohol than ever before” (Lyons et al. 2006: 223). New Zealand is no exception to such societal shifts, and alongside other Western nations such as the US, Canada, Britain and Australia, it has a prevalent binge-drinking culture (Kypri et al. 2009; Hutton et al. 2013). As Nairn et al. claim “alcohol consumption is a powerful norm among young New Zealanders” (2006: 288), particularly in student cultures (McEwan et al. 2010). The growth of this culture of intoxication, “characterised by drinkers intentionally drinking to intoxication and viewing this behaviour as socially acceptable” (McEwan et al. 2010: 15), has increased anxiety with the public, in policy arenas and academic discourse over alcohol related harm (Casswell et al. 2002; Casswell & Maxwell, 2005; McCreanor et al. 2008; Hutton, 2012).

While such public and policy discourse often constructs excessive drinking, particularly women’s drinking, as a social problem (Cullen, 2011; Bailey et al. 2015) this chapter explores how young men and women construct drinking and participation in the night-time economy as gendered, both on *Geordie Shore* and in their everyday experiences. The chapter begins with participants’ discussions of representations of women’s heavy drinking on *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives, and indicates some of the challenges for how women position themselves and are positioned by others in the culture of intoxication. I present extracts that imply the

limits to both men's and women's heavy drinking. Representations of dress and style in the night-time economy on *Geordie Shore* and in participants' everyday experiences are then discussed.

### **“If a girl gets as drunk as us it’s kind of a bit more of a big deal”: Participants framing of women’s heavy drinking**

Alcohol consumption has traditionally been associated with masculinity, as a male-dominated activity with men outnumbering women in “consumption, frequency of drinking and intoxication, alcohol abuse and dependency” (Mullen et al. 2007: 152). Drinking alcohol has thus conventionally been regarded as “male dominated, male identified, and male centred” (Lyons, 2009: 402). While getting drunk has long been a signifier of masculinity, women’s drunkenness has traditionally been seen as unfeminine (Griffin et al. 2012). In recent years however, young women are increasingly participating in the culture of intoxication, where their “alcohol consumption is rapidly catching up with that of their male peers” (Bailey et al. 2015: 747). Yet, despite women’s increased involvement in a binge-drinking culture<sup>29</sup>, drinking remains a gendered activity and is another contradictory terrain for women to negotiate (Griffin et al. 2012; Bailey et al. 2015). UK and New Zealand research has explored how, despite women’s enthusiastic engagement with the night-time economy, conservative discourses of drinking as masculine and disreputable for women remain, and thus have implications for how young women are expected to behave (Hutton et al. 2013; Lyons & Willott, 2008; Griffin et al. 2012; Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015; Hutton et al. 2016). Gendered differences in drinking were discussed in the focus groups, both on *Geordie Shore* and in participants’ own

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<sup>29</sup> A culture amongst young people of “excessive drinking over the course of a single session resulting in self-reported drunkenness” (Coleman & Cater, 2005: 126).

experiences. In the following extract, participants in mixed-gender group two discuss the women's drinking on *Geordie Shore* and how representations of this reality television show differ from their own experiences of women's drinking:

Marcus: The girls [on *Geordie Shore*] usually get more wasted than the guys  
Lewis: Yeah  
Sharon: Yeah  
Lewis: The girls are always the ones who start the confrontation  
Annie: Yup, swill their drink  
Lewis: They can't handle their piss  
Annie: They always get drunk for a reason, there's something already pre-annoying them and then they get drunk for that reason  
Lewis: Yeah like stop looking at that girl over there  
[Laughter]  
Charles: I don't think I've ever seen any of the guys like, cos regularly once an episode one of the girls will like roll around on the floor half naked, whereas you don't see any of the guys on the show do that  
Marcus: Nah, oh there was the gay guy who did it once  
Charles: Oh, Nathan  
Lewis: Oh nah he does it all the time, it's crack up  
Charles: Yeah where as in real life, yeah, it's probably the  
Marcus: Opposite  
Lewis: Yeah it's the opposite  
Moderator: So in real life it's more the guys doing [...]  
Marcus: Rolling around  
Charles: Getting absolutely shit faced  
Lewis: Yeah, we definitely get naked a lot more than the girls do  
Marcus: Yeah  
Lewis: And do weird stuff a lot more than the girls do  
Marcus: Yeah it takes nothing for the guys to get naked [in real life]  
[Laughter] (MF2).

Participants initially frame women's drinking on *Geordie Shore* unfavourably and as out of control. The women are positioned as "get[ting] more wasted than the guys," and in doing so they "start the confrontation," "swill their drink" and in general, "can't handle their piss." This coincides with traditional conceptions of female drunkenness as representing a loss of self-control and respectability (Lyons & Willott, 2008; Griffin et al. 2009). By claiming that the women "can't handle their piss," Lewis draws on a dominant gendered discourse of drinking, where women are seen as unable to keep up or handle drinking in the same way as men (Dempster, 2011). By contrast, 'real' men are seen to be able to hold a lot of alcohol (de Visser

& Smith, 2007; Peralta, 2007; Willot & Lyons, 2012). Following Lewis' comment, Annie attributes the women's binge drinking on the show to "something already pre-annoying them." By positioning women's drinking as a *response* to "something," Annie draws on a discourse of women using alcohol therapeutically (Day et al. 2004; Rolfe et al. 2009), where women are positioned as "more emotional and in need of 'something to lean on'" compared to 'strong' men (Rolfe et al. 2009: 329). Although Annie is unclear about the "reason" why the *Geordie Shore* women "get drunk," Lewis draws on discourses of women as needy and dependent (Nielsen, 2004) and puts their drunkenness down to jealousy or a potential concern over men's infidelity, commenting "yeah like stop looking at that girl over there." By framing the women as concerned over the men's faithfulness, Lewis also draws on discourses of men as sex-driven and commitment-phobic (Epstein et al. 2009) and thus seen as more likely to 'play up' or cause concern for their female partner.

In this focus group, there was consensus that while the women on the show are regularly seen in an out of control intoxicated state, "roll[ing] around on the floor half naked," the men on the show, except for Nathan, are rarely seen in this way. Nathan is regarded by participants as the only male character who drinks in the same way as the women, he is also the one "gay guy" on the show and thus by traditional conceptions of gender, considered to embody a subordinated, weaker and more feminine form of masculinity (Gough & Edwards, 1998; Peralta, 2007; de Visser & Smith, 2007). Nathan's heavy drinking on *Geordie Shore* is therefore contrasted to traditional discourses of drinking as a heterosexual and masculine activity (Peralta, 2007). However, despite participants claiming that *Geordie Shore* depicts "the gay guy" and "girls" as "get[ting] more wasted than the guys," they are sceptical of these representations and are attentive to the fact that it is a TV show. Except for Nathan, participants claim that "you don't see any of the guys on the show" acting in a highly intoxicated manner, whereas in "real life"

it's "the opposite." Similar to previous research where viewers are aware of the potentially contrived nature of reality TV (Andrejevic, 2004; Hill, 2005; Rose & Wood, 2005), by claiming that "real life" is different to *Geordie Shore*, participants question the authenticity of the way that drinking is represented on the show. However, although sceptical, it seems that they gain pleasure in watching such different depictions of gendered drinking (e.g. "it's crack up," (Lewis)). Viewers may gain some "voyeuristic pleasures" (Douglas, 2013: 155) in watching the drunken women on *Geordie Shore* depart from discourses of feminine control and respectability, as well as "the neo-liberal value of composure" (Wood, 2017: 51). Sometimes, as Douglas claims, the pleasure in reality television derives from "ironic viewing," where the "superior" and "knowing" viewer can "judge" and "mock" "the people on the screen" (2013: 149-150).

In contrast to a potentially contrived TV show, participants claim that in "real life" it is more often the men than the women "getting absolutely shit faced," "get[ting] naked" and "do[ing] weird stuff." While the extract begins with participants discussing representations of women's drinking on *Geordie Shore* critically, once they begin to discuss men's drinking in "real life" the tone seems to change. The men talk about their drinking as a shared activity amongst "the guys" and boast that they are more extreme than the women when drunk, claiming to "get naked" or "do weird stuff" "more than the girls do." This boasting and sense of pride around men's drunkenness has also been found in previous research (e.g., Workman, 2001; Peralta, 2007). Robert Peralta argues that men's drinking stories (and the pride, exaggeration and sense of accomplishment within them) is "perceived to be an expression of masculinity, power, and authority" (2007: 747). Thus, from the above extract it seems that while participants claim *Geordie Shore* represents women as "[get]ting more wasted than the guys," this is framed as unrealistic, and differs from their own experiences of women's drinking.

As participants indicated that women's drinking on *Geordie Shore* was the "opposite" to "real life," I was intrigued to hear more about how participants made sense of women's drinking in their everyday lives. I therefore asked how they felt about women's binge-drinking in their own social networks. They responded:

Marcus: As long as they can handle it [...] initially I'd be like "uuuhh" and then I'd think about it and, like I can't say anything, cause I'm shocking

Lewis: Yeah, if a girl gets as drunk as us it's kind of a bit more of a big deal, but like no one actually, well none of the lads think it's a big deal

Marcus: You can't be like, hold that against them 'cos

Lewis: Like if one of you guys [to the women in the room] gets pissed as a chook<sup>30</sup>, like, none of us lads are gonna be like "ohhh she was so fucked" like "she did all of this," you'd just be like cracking up about it, rather than, like hard out goss[ip]

Marcus: Yeah then it would be dropped

Lewis: Yeah

Charles: It would be impressive

Lewis: It would be just the same as one of the boys getting gassed

Charles: It's impressive when girls can drink heaps

Lewis: Yeah

Marcus: For about 20 minutes

[Laughter]

Charles: Like [Rosemary] does fucking drink a fuck load, she keeps up with the boys usually on Diesels<sup>31</sup>

Lewis: Yeah

Annie: Ew on Diesels as well, yeah choice of drink [sarcastic]

Charles: Yeah and [Sandy]

Lewis: Like [Susan], she goes hundy<sup>32</sup> on the Diesels

Charles: Oh does she?

Lewis: Yeah, a lot of those girls do, [Natalie]

Annie: But half the time we're pretty steamed<sup>33</sup> as well

Lewis: Half the time you guys are four pack of Park Lanes<sup>34</sup>

Annie: Are you kidding, no we're not (MF2).

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<sup>30</sup> The expression to get 'pissed as a chook' is New Zealand slang for drinking to extreme intoxication (Definithing, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Dielsels are a canned alcoholic beverage of cola and bourbon (Liquorland, 2017a).

<sup>32</sup> 'Hundy' is slang for one hundred percent (Urban Dictionary, 2017b).

<sup>33</sup> 'Steamed' is an informal term to describe getting extremely drunk (Google Dictionary, 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Park Lanes are a canned beverage of gin and sparkling soda water (Liquorland, 2017b).

Marcus firstly positions women's binge-drinking as acceptable only to a certain extent, "as long as they can handle it." Like Lewis' earlier claim that the *Geordie Shore* women "can't handle their piss," Marcus implies that women can't "handle" their alcohol in the same way as men. He may be drawing on a biological discourse of women's drinking, where their bodies are seen as processing alcohol in a different way to men (Holmila & Raitasalo, 2004; Mansson & Bogren, 2014). Such framing also coincides with previous research that suggests women's drinking is regarded as acceptable "up to a certain point" (Lyons & Willott, 2008: 705). Marcus comments that while he would have some initial judgment over women's heavy drinking and "be like 'uuuhh,'" at the same time, he also admits that such judgement is unfair and that he "can't say anything" as he too is "shocking<sup>35</sup>." By positioning his own heavy drinking as "shocking," Marcus suggests that men's drinking can also go 'too far.' Thus, despite firstly framing women's heavy drinking critically, within the same sentence, Marcus backtracks and tries to distance himself from a gendered double standard. Lewis' understanding of women's drinking is also ambivalent. He firstly draws on a discourse of the unacceptability of female drunkenness, claiming that "if a girl gets as drunk as us it's kind of a bit more of a big deal." However, he then shifts his positioning, claiming "well none of the lads thinks it's a big deal." In the context of this mixed-gender focus group, while both Marcus and Lewis are aware of a drinking double standard, they both attempt to downplay its significance.

Lewis next attempts to frame women's drinking as something more comical or entertaining rather than stigmatizing, saying to the women in the group "if one of you guys gets pissed as a chook," this wouldn't be "hard out goss[ip]," instead "you'd just be cracking up about it." Despite Lewis directly referencing the women in the room, both Sharon and Annie remain quiet in this part of the discussion. While Lewis had previously mentioned that "if a girl gets as drunk

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<sup>35</sup> I interpreted this to mean that Marcus also drinks heavily, to the point of being "shocking."

as us” it’s “more of a big deal,” he once again changes his stance, claiming that women’s drinking “would be the same as one of the boys getting gassed.” This gender equality discourse, also found in previous research on women’s drinking in New Zealand (Lyons & Willott, 2008), implies that drinking is the same or equal for men and women. However, based on both Marcus and Lewis’ previous comments, the idea that drinking is the “same” for men and women is not so straightforward.

While Marcus and Lewis seem torn between traditional constructions of the unacceptability of women’s drinking and discourses of gender equality, Charles claims that “it’s impressive when girls drink heaps.” The notion that women’s heavy alcohol consumption can impress male peers, was also found in Young et al.’s (2005) US research. Young et al. claim that through changes in gender roles, women being able to “drink like a guy” or “match them, drink for drink” (2005: 260) has become an attractive quality and can enhance women’s social position. This was also the case in Anna Kraack’s research in a Dunedin pub, ‘The Cook,’ where women were able to gain some credibility by acting and drinking “like blokes” (1999: 161). Similarly, in Lyons and Willott’s NZ research, a woman could gain approval by “drink[ing] heavily to take on an identity that more closely aligns her as ‘one of the boys’” (2008: 700). However, in the above extract Marcus challenges this framing saying that it’s only “impressive” “for about 20 minutes.” This suggests that after “20 minutes” the idea of women’s drinking as “impressive” wears off and instead becomes problematic. Again, this implies the limits to women’s drinking. As Bailey et al. claim, “although young women are called on to “drink like a guy” within the culture of intoxication, this is fraught with dilemmas and difficulties in practice” (2015: 749). It seems that in the context of this mixed-gender group, while the men attempt to position themselves as accepting of women’s binge-drinking, they are still

constrained by discourses of women's drinking as unacceptable and unfeminine (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012).

Participants then make sense of women's drinking in terms of *what* they drink. It seems that if a woman drinks "Diesels," a mixture of bourbon and cola and a typically masculine drink (McKeithan, 2012), she is valued as "keep[ing] up with the boys." Again, women's drinking is positioned only in relation to men's as the norm, and as such "the hierarchical structuring of gender remains, with behaviours aligned to hegemonic masculinity being valued" (Lyons & Willott, 2008: 700). For the first time in this extract, Annie then joins the conversation, responding sarcastically to the men's comments, "ew on Diesels as well, yeah choice of drink." Here, Annie views Rosemary's alcohol choice, "Diesels," with some judgment. Perhaps she is attempting to join in on the men's previous comments that illustrate the limits to women's drinking. While the men in the group seem to value *other* women's drinking, listing a series of women, "Rosemary," "Susan," "Sandy," and "Natalie" as "impressive" drinkers who go "hundy on the Diesels," the drinking practices of the female participants in *this* group, is not yet mentioned. While Annie tries to claim that the women in this friendship group also get drunk, saying "but half the time we're pretty steamed as well," this comment is shut down by Lewis who responds by pairing Annie and Sharon's drinking with a "four pack of Park Lanes," an alcopop typically considered as a more feminine type of drink (Cullen, 2011; Emslie et al. 2017). To Lewis' putdown, Annie stubbornly responds "are you kidding, no we're not." Although Annie wants the same status as the *other* women that the men value as "impressive" heavy drinkers who "keep up with the boys," she is not positioned by the men in this way.

As with discussions of sexuality in this group, the men's views tended to dominate the conversation, with the women participating more rarely. The women tended to wait for the

men's framings of female drinking, before responding with their own opinions, which were often framed around the comments already articulated by the men. Women's drinking was simultaneously "more of a big deal [than men's]" and also "the same as the boys getting gassed" and "impressive." Such discourses that value women's drinking, or suggest that it is equal to men's were still constrained however by comments that imply the limits to women's drinking (e.g. "as long as they can handle it"). While the *Geordie Shore* women were framed as being unable to "handle their piss," *some* women in participants' own experiences *could* "keep up with the boys." However, the men in this group did not position Annie and Sharon in this way. Framings of women's drinking as acceptable only if they can "handle it" work to exclude women who cannot manage this from participating in a culture of intoxication.

**"It's like you can ride up to the top but you've got to make sure you don't fall off the cliff": Negotiating 'handling' ones' alcohol consumption**

The women's group also presented an ambivalent understanding of women's drinking. In the following conversation, the women initially discuss women's drinking on *Geordie Shore*, and then turn to their everyday lives:

Scarlett: I feel like [on *Geordie Shore*] they make it sound like the girls embarrass themselves more when they're drunk but the guys can be just as drunk

Jess: Yeah

Sophie: Yeah I feel like for a lad if you drink lots it makes you more of a lad whereas for a girl if you drink a lot it makes you more trashy

Louise: Yeah

Georgia: Tragic

Scarlett: They're wearing a lot less clothing as well

Alice: I don't know though, when Jess drinks lots we're like, "she's a champ"

[Laughter]

Alice: Like Jess can scull so well and we're like, "what a woman"

Jess: But I'm still quite tragic

Georgia: But if she starts like crying, having a breakdown vomiting or anything then you say she really embarrassed herself

Alice: But that is tragic but that's how she reacted when she was drunk whereas if she wasn't crying she would be all good (F).

Scarlett is critical of how the women's drinking is represented on *Geordie Shore*. She understands that women's heavy drinking is challenging gendered drinking practices and argues that the *Geordie Shore* female characters' drunkenness is intentionally set up, supposedly by the producers, to "sound like" the women "embarrass themselves more when they're drunk, but the guys can be just as drunk." Scarlett implies that because of a drinking double standard, where drunken women are more likely to be "looked down upon [and] considered embarrassing" than drunken men (Lyons & Willott, 2008: 705), producers use this for entertainment purposes. Sophie directly addresses this drinking double standard, where "for a lad if you drink lots it makes you more of a lad whereas for a girl if you drink a lot it makes you more trashy" or "tragic" as Georgia adds. The terms "tragic" and "trashy" to describe drunken women were also found in Hutton and colleagues NZ research where female participants passed "harsh judgment" over "tragic" women who were positioned as "visibly drunk" and "as unfeminine" (2016: 80). However, while women are at risk of becoming "tragic" or "trashy" for "drink[ing] lots," in this extract Jess' heavy drinking and ability to "scull" alcohol is also admired when Alice comments "she's a champ" and "what a woman." While in Hutton and colleagues' research, "tragic" was a term used to describe *other* women as "the ultimate transgression" (2016: 80) it is interesting that the only time Jess comments in this extract is to self-deprecate her own drinking, jokingly commenting "but I'm still quite tragic." Thus, the sense of pride exhibited in the men's discussion of their alcohol use was absent in the women's group. Jess' self-deprecating humour may reflect her own ambivalence about contemporary demands on women's drinking.

As in the mixed gender group and previous research (e.g. Guise & Gill, 2007; Cullen, 2011; Stepney, 2015; Bailey et al. 2015), the women's discussion also highlights that drinking is only impressive up to a certain point and certain behaviour is considered problematic. As in previous

research (e.g. Bailey et al. 2015; Hutton et al. 2016) traditional discourses of control and responsibility around women's drinking seem to inform how the women make sense of, and position themselves in regard to female drunkenness. In the above extract, women's drinking is judged by a standard of masculinity that involves drinking 'like men.' To be an impressive drinker or "all good," Jess must avoid 'feminine traits' or an emotional reaction to drinking such as "crying," "having a breakdown," or a loss of physical control ("vomiting"). The women must walk a fine line between being an impressive drunk and a "champ" as they term it, and "embarrassing" themselves and becoming "tragic" and "trashy."

This "managed risk" (Hebden et al. 2015: 221), is of concern to both young men and women in the culture of intoxication, where drinking is "both intentional" yet "well managed" (Hebden et al. 2015: 223). Isabelle Szmigin and colleagues use the term "calculated hedonism" to describe alcohol consumption which allows "a type of pleasure which is constrained by time, space and social situation" (2008: 365). Similarly, Fiona Measham claims that young people engage in a "controlled loss of control," where their level of intoxication is "bounded by concerns about health, personal safety, image, identity, and so forth" (2006: 263). In the current project, participants drew on similar discourses of personal control and responsibility, drinking enough to be "cool" but to not go too far. This controlled drunkenness, informed by discourses of masculinity, is illustrated in the following conversation from the men's focus group:

Moderator: So what do you personally think about your female friends who are drinking the same amount as you?

Henry: I don't have a problem with it

Jake: I think it depends on whether or not they can handle it, because I mean I know girls who can drink much more than me and be fine, but if you have a girl, I think I'd say to anyone, the same with guys, you know where's your self-preservation, like if you're gonna be, like you don't need to go shot for shot for someone to try [and] impress them or try, keep up with everyone like I think there's something, knowing your limits

Mike: Yeah it's the level of intoxication that you have that people judge you on not the, and not even that it's how they act when they're intoxicated, some people can get real fucked up and still be just like normal like and have a good time and it doesn't matter, it's if you're like too drunk and you try and start fights or falling over or

Jake: I think for me personally it's very circumstantial

Callum: But I think it's part of a wider societal problem, where if you drink more you're perceived as having a higher social status, and so that's part of the reason why there's probably that push towards it

Mike: I agree with that completely

[...]

Jake: Yeah definitely, New Zealand's just uniquely retarded with that

Peter: Not a higher social status

Jake: Absolutely

Henry: Absolutely

Peter: No

Mike: I think cool people drink more

Jake: Look at crate day<sup>36</sup>

Peter: No, no, no, I mean provided ok there's not great social status if you have one but like there's no difference between someone who goes out and drinks 12 and 24 in terms of social status, if anything the people, ok if anything in terms of social status in New Zealand, if you're the guy whose drinking the most alcohol you probably know you're gonna be in a higher social place anyway in the first place. I think there's a limit you know

Henry: If I saw a girl at pre drinks put away way way way more than me and be fine, the feeling would be, I'm impressed

Mike: yeah, I would be like

Henry: I elevate you

Peter: Ok what about the girl who drinks more than her, sooner or later someone's gonna be black out or on the floor

Mike: I don't doubt you, but that's that's [...]

Peter: What about the person who's coma-ed<sup>37</sup> over there cause they had a fucking vodka bottle they don't have a huge amount of social status

Mike: You're now talking about like 5 different things

Henry: [Sebastian] became president of [University club] because of [...]

[...]

Mike: Have you never heard someone say like, "oh fuck he's a good cunt he sinks so much piss," I hear that all the time

Jake: Yeah

Peter: Yeah, yeah

Henry: Then that's the same for women! It's even more so I think

Mike: It's like so fuck (as in woooow) he's a good cunt

[Laughter]

Peter: Until they fuck out! It's like you can ride up to the top but you've got to make sure you don't fall off the cliff, you know, that's how it works (M).

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<sup>36</sup> Crate day is an unofficial New Zealand event, introduced by the radio station The Rock, to celebrate "the first Saturday of summer by sharing a crate with your mates" (The Rock, 2016).

<sup>37</sup> A drunken coma is according to the online Urban Dictionary, "the maximum state of inebriation that a person can survive" (2007).

As with the men in the second mixed gender group, the men's group also talk about women's drinking as impressive as long as "they can handle it." Jake draws on a gender equality discourse where women's drinking is "the same with guys," and both genders don't need to "keep up with everyone." He emphasizes personal responsibility, drawing on public health discourses of drinking (Harrison et al. 2011) such as "knowing your limits." Similar to the previous extracts, Mike claims that how people "act when they're intoxicated" is what "people judge you on." Both Jake and Mike thus frame drinking, for both men and women, in terms of "knowing your limits" and not getting "too drunk," "start[ing] fights or falling over." These are regarded as undesirable drunken traits, rather than the volume of alcohol consumed. Although women's and men's excessive drunkenness is positioned as the "same," participants still draw on typical associations of masculinity and femininity. While the women's group regard "crying," or showing emotion (typically feminine behaviours) as unacceptable drunken behaviour, the men's group reference typically masculine behaviour or "fighting" as taking intoxication too far. This was also the case in Mullen et al.'s (2007) research where participants agreed that young men became more physical, while women became more emotional when drunk. As in the second mixed gender group, a discourse of women's drinking as impressive is also raised in this extract when Henry comments "If I saw a girl at pre drinks put away way way way more than me and be fine, the feeling would be, I'm impressed." However, again there is a limit to women's drinking as it is only impressive if they can remain in control of their behaviour, before becoming, as Peter comments, "black[ed] out or on the floor."

Callum regards drinking as a "wider societal problem, where if you drink more you're perceived as having a higher social status." Mike agrees, claiming that "cool people drink more." In previous research, the link between social status and drinking has more often been attributed to men's intoxication (Benson & Archer, 2002; Benyon, 2002; Dempster, 2011;

Conroy & de Visser, 2013; de Visser & McDonnell, 2012). For example, in Conroy and de Visser's (2013) research, men who did not drink received greater negative feedback, such as risks to their perceived masculinity, than women. However, there is also some research that links peer acceptance to women's drinking (Young et al. 2005). Despite my initial question asking participants about "female" drinkers, in this focus group the discussion around "social status" or "cool people drink[ing] more" seems to be directed toward both women *and* men. Although Henry claims that the link between social status and drinking is "the same for women! It's even more so," the focus in general seems to be more around men's drinking. This is reflected when participants revert to use of male pronouns such as "you're the *guy* who's drinking the most alcohol" or "*he*'s a good cunt *he* sinks so much piss," as well as reference to male friends and social status, such as "Sebastian." The way that the men shift the discussion to men and drinking reflects the pervasiveness of dominant discourses that link masculinity and alcohol. In this extract, as has been common in the men's focus group, Peter takes an indifferent stance, and continues to raise the limits for both men's and women's drinking. Although drinking to a certain point may be associated with social status, Peter raises the risk of drinking too much and "falling off the cliff."

Of significance in this extract is the link Jake makes between drinking and social status for men and women as "unique" to "New Zealand." This notion that binge-drinking is particularly relevant to New Zealand, was also raised earlier on in the conversation, when Jake commented that the lack of sober nights out on *Geordie Shore* is "pretty indicative of New Zealand culture." The first mixed gender group also made this connection when Harry commented "there's way more in society that promotes that binge drinking culture, especially in New Zealand" (MF1). This connection that participants make in the current study between a binge-drinking culture and New Zealand has been raised in previous research, (e.g., Lyons & Willott, 2008; Willott

& Lyons, 2012). For example, Lyons and Willott's New Zealand research found that "half of the [focus] groups" described "the act of drinking alcohol ... as 'what you do' as a New Zealander" (2008: 700). The participants in the current project also framed heavy drinking as part of Kiwi identity.

**"None of the dudes in New Zealand would wear a U neck like James": Appearance in  
the night-time economy**

While the binge-drinking on *Geordie Shore* in general was seen as similar to New Zealand drinking culture, the characters' appearance, dress and style in the night-time economy was viewed as vastly different. Reference to characters' appearance and clothing was most often mentioned in the women's focus group, as they were particularly critical of how the *Geordie Shore* women dressed when they were drinking. Previous research has also found that women are critical of both themselves and other women's appearance, particularly in the night-time economy (e.g., Abrahamson, 2004; Lyons & Willcott, 2008; Griffin et al. 2012; Stepney, 2015). In Maria Abrahamson's focus-group research around courtship and alcohol, for example, she found that the women placed a "critical eye" and "self-controlling gaze" both "on themselves and on each other" (2004: 23). Similarly, in Stepney's research she found that "[female] participants were ... keen to proclaim their judgements of *other* British girls' dress and behaviour when going out and drinking alcohol" (2015: 63). Consistent with previous research (e.g., Lyons & Willott, 2008; Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015), in this project women could be deemed "tragic" or "trashy" for their heavy drinking and clothing. Female participants often positioned themselves and their own dress sense as more respectable or "rugged up" than the *Geordie Shore* women. This is illustrated in the following extract from the women's focus group on the appearance of the *Geordie Shore* women in the night-time economy:

Lucy: I feel like the girls make themselves more vulnerable as well by wearing, like not as much clothing and then when they get drunk they like start flashing their [...]  
Scarlett: Like seem more embarrassing  
Jess: That's why it seems more tragic yeah, I'm usually quite rugged up (F).

Lucy's comment that "I feel like the girls make themselves more vulnerable as well by wearing, like not as much clothing" draws on, as well as reproduces "rape myth acceptance" or "rape supportive attitudes" (Day et al. 2004: 165), where women who dress in a particular way are positioned as "vulnerable" and as responsible for, or even causing, their potential assault. Lucy also positions women as "vulnerable" through their drunken behaviour, commenting "when they get drunk [and] they start flashing their [...]." She here links feminine sexuality to alcohol consumption, drawing on arguments that drunken women are more likely to engage in 'risky' sexual behaviour (Piombo & Piles, 1996; George et al. 1988; Day et al. 2004) and are "perceived as being sexually promiscuous" (Abbey & Harnish, 1995: 299). Discourses of women's 'risky' drinking, sexuality and dress in the night-time economy work to reproduce drinking as a masculine domain while "women who attempt to enter this domain are cast as likely victims either of their own alcohol abuse or of drunken men intent on damage" (Day et al. 2004: 166). In this focus group, participants claim that "by wearing [...] not as much clothing" the *Geordie Shore* women's drinking seems more "embarrassing" and "tragic." Jess distances this from her sartorial practices which are "quite rugged up." Hutton and colleagues refer to this distancing as "positioned othering" where young women "place themselves in opposition" to "drunk, slutty and out of control others" (2016: 75).

The women's contrast of their own clothing practices with the women on *Geordie Shore* was often attributed to "a cultural difference" between New Zealand fashion compared to the UK. Both the male and female characters on *Geordie Shore* spend time and effort on their appearance, as Wood contends, "many scenes [on the show] are both sexes curling, combing,

spraying, plucking, and so on” (2017: 45). The female *Geordie Shore* characters’ “hyper-feminine” and “hyper-sexual” appearance (Wood, 2017: 45-46) reflects a general trend in the sexualisation of culture of women’s increasing “self-sexualisation.” “the adoption of an overtly sexual style of self-presentation” such as “the wearing of revealing clothing to go clubbing” (Thompson & Donaghue, 2014: 23). Women’s ‘sexualised’ clothing has frequently been framed around an either-or dichotomy of discourses of liberation and empowerment (e.g., Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002), or as objectifying (e.g., Levy, 2005). However, participants in this study, as well as other previous research (e.g., Thompson & Donaghue, 2014), presented a more complicated and ambivalent understanding of their own and other women’s ‘sexualised’ dress. As well as being critical of representations of drinking on *Geordie Shore*, participants were similarly critical of characters’ clothes and appearance in the night-time economy. In the following three extracts from the women’s group, men’s group and second mixed-gender group, participants discuss both the male and female characters’ appearance on *Geordie Shore* and how this differs to their own understandings of dress and style in New Zealand:

Extract 1:

Katie: I like judging stuff, what they’re wearing

Georgia: [The women’s clothing is] very tight

Jess: Yeah quite tight, and sometimes they shouldn’t be wearing stuff that’s quite so tight

Georgia: The guys always wear like ugly singlets

Jess: The ones that are like this

Georgia: Real low cut

Jess: James

Georgia: And Kyle his tattoos just uh

Scarlett: Yeah

Jess: Kyle just in general is gross

Georgia: Uh and his hair and the tans

Scarlett: When they all do their hair and make-up it makes me feel [...]

Georgia: The guys put so much effort in

Scarlett: Getting their hairdryer out for like that much hair

Jess: That’s one thing that’s really different, is the amount the guys get ready compared to

Scarlett: Yeah I can’t relate to that in real life

Georgia: But the girls are the same

Louise: It’s just a cultural difference

Georgia: Kiwi girls

Katie: Don't do that much getting ready (F).

Extract 2:

Henry: They have V necks down to their fucking belly button, the guys, just outrageous  
Jake: Yeah that's the thing is the guys are, they're feminized almost in that like there's a lot of, there's just as much effort put into their appearance

Henry: They show just as much cleavage

Jake: Like they straighten their hair for forty minutes, they fake tan, they shave their [...] (M).

Extract 3:

Annie: Uuuuh Chloe wears some short shit

Sharon: Yeah yeah some pretty trashy stuff

Annie: Like some cheeky dresses

Lewis: But that's like how they dress

Annie: That's how they dress over there yeah, it's very fitting

Lewis: Different styles

Marcus: T shirt and jeans isn't it here

Annie: Yeah real casual

Lewis: None of the dudes in New Zealand would wear a U neck like James and those boys in the early seasons

Annie: Yeah that's true that's hideous (MF2).

Female participants in the above extracts are particularly critical of the clothing that the *Geordie Shore* women wear, highlighting the monitoring of *other* women's dress (Stepney, 2015). They are disapproving of the women's "tight," "short," "trashy," "cheeky" and "fitting" styles (e.g., "sometimes they shouldn't be wearing stuff that's quite so tight" (Jess, F)). However, there are some tensions in this critique. While in extract one the women's group are judgmental of the *Geordie Shore* women's "tight" clothing, earlier in their discussion they provided a differing view. Alice previously mentioned that revealing clothing means a woman has "body confidence" and Jess added "yeah cause I feel like I see stuff and I'd be like I'd wear that if I knew I looked good in it." Thus, while the women's group were at times critical of women's revealing dress, they also admired women's 'sexualised' clothing if they managed to "look good in it." In Jess' claim that she would wear revealing clothing "if [she] knew [she] looked good in it" she attempts to present a 'sexy' style as a straightforward personal 'choice' in order to look "good," and as outside of broader societal constraints (Gill, 2008; Thompspon

& Donaghue, 2014). However, based on her judgements of women's "tight" clothing in extract one, it is clear that she has some ambivalence around this 'choice.' Thus, on the one hand female participants embrace postfeminist discourses of women's consumption of 'sexy' clothing as empowering and liberating, as a means of exhibiting self "confidence," while at the same time they are critical of women's dress for being "tight" and "trashy." Such contradictory understandings of the *Geordie Shore* women's dress indicate female participants' own ambivalence of postfeminist demands.

In the above extracts, appearance on *Geordie Shore* is framed by participants as a "cultural difference" between styles in the UK compared to New Zealand. Participants often drew on popular culture and media discourses of Kiwi identity as "laid back" (e.g., Onlifemag, 2011; NZ Herald, 2012), positioning themselves and New Zealanders in general as relaxed, casual and easy going. For example, in extract one, in comparison to the *Geordie Shore* women who "put so much effort in" the participants frame their "getting ready" before a night out in terms of minimal effort, where "kiwi girls" "don't do that much getting ready." They position themselves, and NZ women in general as more 'easy going' than women in the UK. This is presented by Louise as a matter of fact, as "just a cultural difference." The second mixed-gender group in extract three also attribute the *Geordie Shore* women's "trashy" and "cheeky" dress sense to cultural differences between the UK and NZ, that "that's how they dress over there." However, although attributing differences in women's style on *Geordie Shore* to their own dress as a "cultural difference" the use of disapproving words such as "trashy" suggest their understanding of women's 'sexualised' dress is more ambiguous than this. Through using terms such as "tragic" and "trashy," the female participants position themselves and their own dress as more respectable or a middle-class form of femininity than the 'improper' working-class representations of femininity on *Geordie Shore* (Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017). As Wood

comments, the *Geordie Shore* women portray “excessive masquerades of femininity that refuse the look of ‘naturalness’ normally prized in valuations of middle-class femininity” (2017: 45). However, while female participants often criticize the *Geordie Shore* women’s appearance, they also admit that they gain pleasure from this judgment (“I like judging stuff, what they’re wearing” (Kate, F)). This again links to Douglas’ (2013) research on *Jersey Shore* where viewers gain a sense of superiority over the characters on the show. It is also possible that watching *Geordie Shore* offers transgressive pleasures for female viewers where characters’ hyper-sexual and hyper-feminine appearance acts as a critique of normative femininity (Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017).

Male and female participants in the above extracts are also critical of the men’s dress and style on *Geordie Shore*. In the women’s group the *Geordie Shore* men’s “hair,” “low-cut” “singlets,” and “tans” were framed as in contrast to Kiwi men’s dress and appearance. The women are critical of the male characters’ dress, framing the style and “effort” that goes into their appearance for example, as “ugly” and “gross.” Again, participants framed behaviour on a reality television show as in contrasting to their own experiences. The time put into the male characters’ appearance is seen as “really different” and not relatable to “real life.” The men in extract two and three are also critical of the men’s appearance on *Geordie Shore*. The men’s group claim that “the men put just as much effort into their appearance” as the women, and in this sense are “feminized.” This “feminized” appearance and the men’s “V necks down to their fucking belly button” is condemned, as “outrageous.” Lewis in the second mixed gender group contrasts the men’s style on *Geordie Shore* to Kiwi styles claiming that “none of the dudes in New Zealand would wear a U neck like James.” Again, this dress choice is critiqued when Annie comments, “yeah true that’s hideous.”

Despite the “growth in the male grooming market” in New Zealand (McNeil & Douglas, 2011: 450) as well as the general rise of the ‘metrosexual,’ ‘new-man’ and alternative masculinities (Dodd et al., 2005), participants judge the effort put into the male characters’ appearance. Instead, participants position a more “casual,” “T-shirt and jeans” look as more acceptable. New Zealand is “a country with a hegemonic masculinity inextricably bound to a national identity centred on male-dominated sport and the ‘hard-man’ attitude” (McNeil & Douglas, 2011: 448), and this hegemonic masculinity is at odds with the masculine identities represented on *Geordie Shore*. Participants in this project thus position themselves and Kiwi men in general as exhibiting a more ‘manly’ appearance, distancing themselves from the ‘feminized’ appearance of men on *Geordie Shore*. McNeil and Douglas’ New Zealand research also found that “placing a great deal of emphasis on one’s appearance, is still viewed as a largely feminine activity” and that “the hegemonic view of ‘manliness’ in New Zealand is still a valid driver of consumption behaviour linked to identity construction” (2011: 453).

## Conclusion

Increasingly, young men and women are invited to take part in a culture of heavy drinking. For tertiary students in particular, participating in this culture of intoxication is associated with social status and value (de Visser & McDonnell, 2012; Young et al. 2005). However, as with casual sex, engaging in heavy drinking is a contradictory and ambivalent terrain for young men and women. Participants’ in this research were critical of how gendered drinking and dress were represented on a reality television show and positioned their own drinking and sartorial practices as dissimilar. Participants positioned Kiwi men’s appearance as more ‘manly’ and women’s dress as more ‘respectable’ or ‘middle-class’ than representations of fashion and appearance on UK’s *Geordie Shore*. They also positioned drinking in their own experiences as

different to representations of drinking on the show. Participants drew on dominant discourses of drinking and masculinity where in “real life” (compared to *Geordie Shore*) men, more so than women, engage in heavy drinking. While women could gain social value, and be seen as “impressive” for participating in a culture of intoxication, this participation was marked by certain limits set by a standard of masculinity. However, participants also discussed ambiguous ‘limits’ for men around ‘handling’ their alcohol. As such, for participants in this research how to ‘appropriately’ participate in a culture of heavy drinking is far from straightforward, where both women *and* men are required to retain ‘sufficient’ levels of control, autonomy and composure.

This chapter explored how young people made sense of representations of drinking and sartorial practices on *Geordie Shore* and in their own experiences. In the following chapter I offer a summary of this research and provide some conclusions regarding my findings.

## **Chapter Six**

### **Conclusion**

The proliferation of sexual content across all media forms, including reality television shows such as *Geordie Shore*, is part of a broader phenomenon known as the ‘sexualisation of culture’ (Attwood, 2010). The shift from media representations of femininity as ‘passive’ to ‘active’ (Gill, 2008) has been the subject of contestation in academic scholarship. While some theorists have pointed towards opportunities for women’s ‘liberation’ and sexual self-expression (e.g., Attwood, 2006; McNair, 2002), mainstream psychological research and public debates have focused on the ‘harms’ of sexualisation for women and girls (e.g., Papadopoulos, 2010), claiming that the sexualisation of culture is another form of women’s objectification guised in postfeminist discourses of empowerment (Levy, 2005). Similarly, in debates around the culture of intoxication, the increase in young people’s drinking, particularly women’s drinking, has been framed around public and policy discourses of drinking as a social problem (Casswell et al. 2002; Casswell & Maxwell, 2005) as well as postfeminist discourses of drinking as “part of women’s increasing rights and equality” (Rolfe et al. 2009: 327).

In this thesis, rather than continuing the either/or dichotomy of women’s engagement in these phenomena as harmful or empowering, I employed a feminist post-structuralist approach to move beyond this binary (Gill, 2008) by engaging young adults and tertiary students in discussions about representations and practices of women as sexually agentic and involved in binge-drinking. This enabled attention to contemporary constructions of femininity, where women are expected to drink alongside men yet not ‘like’ men (Griffin et al. 2012), and to be sexually ‘up for it’ but to not go ‘too far’ (Evans et al. 2010). MTV’s *Geordie Shore*, minimally

researched to this point (Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017), is characterized by both male and female characters engaging in heavy drinking and casual sex. Popular with a younger audience (Szalai, 2013), the show is a key site in which postfeminist contradictions for women are played out. Female characters are represented as sexually agentic and ‘up for it’ while still judged by a different set of expectations to the men, both by the public and fellow cast members. *Geordie Shore* was thus used in this research as a point of discussion to explore young adults’ readings of representations of this ‘up for it’ femininity.

While previous research in relation to drinking and sexuality has mostly explored how women negotiate postfeminist discourses of empowerment and traditional discourses of feminine respectability (e.g., Stewart, 1999; Renold & Ringrose, 2011; Griffin et al. 2012; Bailey et al. 2015; Stepney, 2015), the current project has added a significant contribution to existing research by also engaging men in these debates. As *Geordie Shore* has been heavily critiqued for its representations of men and women engaging in casual sex and binge-drinking, this research explored how both men and women made sense of such representations.

Rather than engaging in a textual analysis, as in previous research on *Geordie Shore* and similar reality shows (e.g. Douglas, 2013; Klein, 2014; Kavka, 2015; Wood, 2017), this research employed four focus groups of young adult viewers of *Geordie Shore* to explore how they talked about the representations of sex and drinking on the show. Focus group discussions emphasised participants’ viewing pleasures as they negotiated and critiqued representations of the “ungovernable” and “abject” (Wood, 2017: 41) drinking, sartorial and sexual practices of *Geordie Shore* characters. In contrast to textual analyses, participants’ discussions further highlighted the significance of their lived experiences and socio-cultural context in reading representations of casual sex and drinking. A key aim in this research was to explore the

complexity of young adults' talk about gendered sexual practices and heavy drinking. I analysed how participants in the focus group contexts drew on, challenged and negotiated the various discourses of casual sex and drinking available to them.

In contrast to textual analyses of reality television, exploring how viewers made sense of *Geordie Shore* focused on the complexity and ambivalence of their readings of casual sex and drinking. Such ambivalence was apparent in participant discussions of representations of women's casual sex. The focus group context was significant for how participants talked about women's sexual practices. In the second mixed gender group, and in the men's only group (with a female researcher present), the men were cautious about how they talked about women as active sexual subjects. They thus positioned themselves as accepting of women with many sexual partners (e.g. "the nature of girls having sex with different guys doesn't really concern me that much" (Peter, M)). As such, some male participants worked to contest the sexual double standard. Female participants were aware and critical of a sexual double standard, but depending on the focus group context were careful about how they discussed this. For example, in part due to the men's presence in the group, the women in the second mixed gender group claimed to have heard "some guys speak pretty badly" (Sharon, MF2) of a woman with numerous sexual partners, but worked to exclude the men in the group from association with 'other' men with the comment, "that's not you guys" (Annie, MF2). Therefore, the gender dynamics of the focus groups clearly impacted on the 'talk.'

There was also ambiguity around participants' understandings of men's casual sex, both on *Geordie Shore* and in their own lives. In discussions of "catch[ing] feels" (Lucy, F) after a sexual encounter, participants discussed dominant discourses of men as sex-driven and women as emotional, where "girls will get with someone casually, and then they'll get like, into them

[...] then for blokes it doesn't happen that much" (Sharon, MF2). However, alternative discourses of a more 'sensitive' masculinity were also drawn on, where "[feelings] kinda happens for dudes as well" (Lewis, MF2). At times, participants contrasted their own experiences of men's casual sex with representations of casual sex on *Geordie Shore*, as 'unrealistic.' Harry (MF1) for example suggests that 'laddism' and men's casual sex are not as valorised in "real life" as they appear on the show. He claims that the 'laddish' version of masculinity as represented on *Geordie Shore* is critiqued by "most people" who "on the inside are thinking like 'oh he's, like, a bit of a dick.'" Here, Harry challenged dominant discourses of masculine sexuality (such as the male sex-drive (Hollway, 1984)) by framing men's 'pulling' as problematic.

Critique of men's 'pulling,' as well as a 'softer' (Allen, 2005) version of masculinity were also apparent in the men's focus group who presented themselves as "quite a feminine male group" (Callum, M). Callum disassociated his friendship group from the 'fuckboy,' a term to describe masculine sexual practices in which men have a lot of sexual partners or "pull a lot" (Jake, M), claiming "we just live in a bubble of non-fuckboys." The men's critique of the 'fuckboy' complicated the dominant discourse that men are admired for casual sex while women are disparaged, suggesting that men can also be criticized for having 'too many' sexual partners. However, readings of men's casual sex were ambivalent. The 'fuckboy' was debated at length in the men's focus group, and could simultaneously be taken as a "compliment" (Henry, M) while also being "not good vibes at all" (Mike, M). Peter's understanding of the 'fuckboy' was particularly complex. Although he claimed that his favourite *Geordie Shore* character is Gary Beadle (a character known for "bedding scores of women" (Duke, 2017)), and thus potentially a 'fuckboy,' Peter dislikes being called this himself ("you call me a fuckboy it's so judgey"). Thus, even though participants enjoyed watching male *Geordie Shore* characters 'pulling,' they

distanced this from their own practices. Male participants' critique of men's pulling, and alignment with more 'sensitive' versions of masculinity, provides new ways of thinking about masculine sexuality.

As with casual sex, participants' readings of drinking as represented on *Geordie Shore* were also informed by their own lived experiences. Representations of women's drinking on the show were positioned as being edited and contrived, for example, to make it "sound like the girls embarrass themselves more when they're drunk but the guys can be just as drunk" (Scarlett, F). Participants in the second mixed gender group framed the women "get[ting] more wasted than the guys" (Marcus, MF2) as 'unrealistic.' They claimed that in comparison to a reality television show, in "real life" "it's the opposite" (Lewis, MF2) and men are more often "getting absolutely shift faced" (Charles, MF2). As such, participants in this research, from a New Zealand context, drew on dominant discourses of drinking as a masculine domain and were critical of how gendered drinking was represented on the show. However, despite this critique, participants also enjoyed watching such 'unrealistic' representations of gendered drinking (e.g. "it's crack up" (Lewis, MF2)). It seemed, therefore, that *Geordie Shore* offered participants in this research viewing pleasures in watching drunken women disrupt traditional discourses of feminine respectability as well as neo-liberal discourses of self-control (Wood, 2017).

While women's drinking on *Geordie Shore* was framed as problematic, as the women "swill their drink" (Annie, MF2), "start the confrontation" (Lewis, MF2) and "can't handle their piss" (Lewis, MF2), women's drinking in 'real life' could be acceptable or even impressive, but only within certain constraints. For participants in this research, women could participate in the culture of intoxication if they could 'handle' their drink, while those who couldn't were

excluded. What counts as being able to ‘handle’ alcohol was informed by discourses of masculinity. For example, in the second mixed gender group “impressive” female drinkers were those who could “keep up with the boys” (Charles, MF2) or drink “Diesels” (Charles, MF2), a typically masculine drink. Female participants further reinforced this standard of masculinity by framing typically ‘feminine traits’ such as “crying” or “having a breakdown” (Georgia, F) as problematic for drunken women. However, female drinkers who managed to ‘handle’ themselves, by not exhibiting such actions, were framed as a “champ” or “what a woman” (Alice, F). Thus, despite cultural value towards women who could ‘handle’ their alcohol, for female participants in this research the criteria for ‘handling’ alcohol was uncertain. As such, for women in this research participating in the culture of intoxication is a complex task.

The criteria for ‘handling’ alcohol was also unclear for men. While there was a requirement to be involved in a culture of intoxication, where “if you drink more you’re perceived as having a higher social status” (Callum, M), men and women who were ‘too drunk’ were framed as problematic. This was illustrated in the men’s focus group who drew on public health discourses such as “knowing your limits” (Jake, M), as well as their own standards of problematic drunken actions, such as “start[ing] fights [and] falling over” (Mike, M), or “becoming black[ed] out or on the floor” (Peter, M). Peter (M) summarises such ‘limits’ for young men and women, in his comment that “you can ride up to the top but you’ve got to make sure you don’t fall off the cliff.”

Viewer understandings of dress in the night-time economy as represented on *Geordie Shore* were also informed by participants’ experiences. Graefer claims that “*Geordie Shore* … draws on dominant ideologies that make its visual semiotics easy to decode for a British television

audience: we see young women in skimpy dresses with prominent cleavage and big mermaid hair” (2014: 109). Unlike Graefer’s study with British online viewers, New Zealand participants in this research were critical of fashion on *Geordie Shore*, framing this as being in contrast to their own social contexts as “a cultural difference” (Louise, F). Male characters’ “feminized” (Jake, M) appearance was positioned as “really different” (Jess, F) and not relatable to “real life” (Scarlett, F). Men and women condemned the male characters’ appearance as “gross” (Jess, F), “outrageous” (Henry M), and “hideous” (Annie, MF2).

Female viewers had particularly ambivalent readings of the *Geordie Shore* women’s dress. On the one hand, they critiqued the women’s ‘sexualised’ clothing as “tragic” (Jess, F), “tight” (Georgia, F), “short” (Annie, MF2), “fitting” (Annie, MF2) and “trashy” (Sharon, MF2). Through this critique, they positioned their own dress as more middle-class, respectable and less ‘sexualised’ than the *Geordie Shore* women’s appearance. Yet, they also admired the women’s clothing if “they managed to look good in it” (Jess, F). Furthermore, women in this research also enjoyed such critique (e.g. “I like judging what they’re wearing” (Kate, F)). Perhaps, then, as Douglas’ research on *Jersey Shore* argues, *Geordie Shore* also offers “ironic viewing” pleasures where the “superior viewer” can distance their own behaviour from the characters on the show. It may also offer viewers with some transgressive pleasures where the *Geordie Shore* characters’ hyper-feminine appearance acts as a parody of normative femininity (Graefer, 2014; Wood, 2017). Such complicated understandings of women’s dress highlight female viewers’ ambivalence around postfeminist demands.

In conclusion, participants’ socio-cultural context informed their readings of representations of drinking and casual sex on *Geordie Shore*. Such representations offered both viewing pleasures as well as opportunities for critical engagement. Despite a “cultural necessity to have sex”

(Przybylo, 2011: 448) and participate in a culture of intoxication, as represented on *Geordie Shore*, engagement with such practices were contradictory for young men and women in this research. What counts as an ‘acceptable’ amount of sexual partners was unclear for women, who may be read as “all good” and “sexually experienced” (Peter, M), while also at risk of “get[ting] labelled” (Annie, F) as a “slag” and “slutty” (Kate, MF1). Similarly, in the culture of intoxication, while women are expected to engage in drinking practices, they can only do so to a ‘limit’ judged by a standard of masculinity, such as drinking like “one of the boys” (MF2). While previous research has suggested that engaging in casual sex and drinking practices are mainly contradictory terrains for women, male participants also faced some constraints in engaging in these practices. While having casual sex is a ‘requirement’ of masculinity, and makes one a “lad” (Ben, MF1), or “legend” (Kate, MF1), numerous sexual partners could also be read as problematic, as making one a “fuckboy” (M) “tool” (Harry, MF1) or “dick” (Harry, MF1). Furthermore, while heavy drinking was associated with “social status” (Callum, M), men were also prescribed an ambiguous drinking ‘limit’ where “you’ve got to make sure you don’t fall off the cliff” (Peter, M). Thus, male participants in this research challenged dominant discourses of masculine drinking and casual sex, providing new ways of thinking about masculinity. For men and women in this research, then, how to ‘appropriately’ participate in cultures of intoxication and sexualisation was marked by unclear ‘limits’ around ‘handling’ alcohol and an ‘acceptable’ number of sexual partners.

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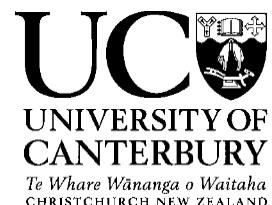
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## Appendix A: Participant information sheet

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Grace Low  
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Email: [glo34@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:glo34@uclive.ac.nz)

### **Viewer engagement with representations of gender, sexuality and intoxication in MTV's *Geordie Shore***

#### **Information sheet for participants**

I am a Master's thesis student at the University of Canterbury and am interested in how viewers of MTV reality television show *Geordie Shore* engage with the series. Despite its popularity, there is a lack of research on this show. The content on *Geordie Shore* explores themes of sexuality, hooking-up and binge drinking, issues and ideas that are relevant to young New Zealand students.

If you choose to take part in this study, your involvement in this project will be a focus group discussion with 5 to 6 other students about *Geordie Shore*. You can choose to be in a group with other students of the same gender, or a mixed gendered group. Possible topics that you might discuss are casual sex, gendered double standards, relationships, and binge drinking. I may also show you some short clips from *Geordie Shore* to watch and discuss with other participants. You will be asked not to repeat anything said within the discussion to anyone outside of the focus group. The focus group discussion will take approximately 1 to 1.5 hours. The conversation will be audio recorded for transcription of the data later.

Some of the themes in *Geordie Shore*, such as drinking and sexuality, may cause discomfort for some participants. To minimize possible distress, you do not have to discuss anything that makes you feel uncomfortable. Participation is voluntary and you have the right to leave the group discussion at any point. At the end of this information sheet a list of helplines are provided should anything unsettle you.

The results of the project may be published but you may be assured of the complete confidentiality of data gathered in this investigation: your identity will not be made public. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, all participants will be given pseudonyms and real names will be deleted from the transcripts. Consent forms will be stored in a folder in a locked cabinet in an office and transcripts will be saved onto a password protected computer. All data will be backed up on the UC server. The raw data will be destroyed 5 years after the completion of this project. A thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.

Please indicate to the researcher on the consent form if you would like to receive a copy of the summary of results of the project.

The project is being carried out as a requirement for a Master of Arts degree by Grace Low under the supervision of Dr Tiina Vares. If you would like to participate in this study, or have any further questions, please contact Grace Low at [glo34@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:glo34@uclive.ac.nz). Tiina Vares can be contacted at [tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz) or 03 369 3774. She will also be pleased to discuss any concerns you may have about participation in this project.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and participants should address any complaints to The Chair, Human Ethics Committee, University of Canterbury, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz)).

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to complete and sign a consent form at the beginning of the focus group before taking part in the discussion.

Thank you for taking the time to read this!

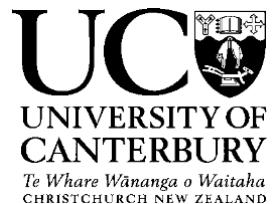
#### Helpline contact information

Alcohol and drug youth helpline: 0800 787 984

Sexuality and sexual health helpline, Outline NZ: 0800 688 546

## Appendix B: Participant consent form

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Grace Low  
Department of Sociology  
Email: [glo34@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:glo34@uclive.ac.nz)

### **Viewer engagement with representations of gender, sexuality and intoxication in MTV's *Geordie Shore***

#### **Consent form for participants**

If you are unsure about or have any questions of the following statements please ask.

Please read and complete the following:

- I have been given a full explanation of this project and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand what is required of me if I agree to take part in the research.
- I understand that participation is voluntary and I may leave the focus group at any time. However, I am aware that once I have contributed to the discussion my data will be retained and used for the purpose of this research.
- I understand that for the confidentiality of other participants, I will not repeat anything discussed within the focus group outside of the discussion.
- I understand that any information or opinions I provide will be kept confidential to the researcher and her supervisors and that any published or reported results will not identify the participants or their institution. I understand that a thesis is a public document and will be available through the UC Library.
- I understand that all data collected for the study will be kept in locked and secure facilities and/or in password protected electronic form and will be destroyed after five years.
- I understand the risks associated with taking part and how they will be managed.
- I understand that I can contact the researcher, Grace Low [glo34@uclive.ac.nz](mailto:glo34@uclive.ac.nz) or supervisor Dr Tiina Vares [tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:tiina.vares@canterbury.ac.nz) for further information. If I have any complaints, I can contact the Chair of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, Private Bag 4800, Christchurch ([human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:human-ethics@canterbury.ac.nz))
- I would like a summary of the results of the project.
- By signing below, I agree to participate in this research project.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Signed: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Email address (*for report of findings, if applicable*):  
\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Participant questionnaire**

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### **Questionnaire**

#### **Viewer engagement with representations of gender, sexuality and intoxication in MTV's *Geordie Shore***

What is your age? \_\_\_\_\_ Gender? \_\_\_\_\_

Do you identify with a particular ethnic group? Yes [ ] No [ ]

If so, how would you describe your ethnicity? \_\_\_\_\_

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Are you currently studying towards a university degree? Yes [ ] No [ ]

If so, what degree are you studying towards? \_\_\_\_\_

Is this a Bachelor's degree [ ] Master's degree [ ] Diploma [ ] Ph.D. [ ] Other?

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If you are not a student please state your current profession:

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## **Appendix D: Focus group discussion guide**

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The following questions act as a general guide only, and if individuals bring up any other topics for discussion, these will be pursued in the focus group. These questions will not be targeted at any specific individuals and they do not have to be answered if no one wants to. The questions below are only examples of what could be discussed, serving as prompts to facilitate discussion. I will only show the clips from *Geordie Shore*, and ask the questions related, if the conversation dies down after the opening questions.

### **Opening questions**

Can you tell me how often you watch *Geordie Shore*?

Do you watch it by yourself or with others?

What are some of the things you enjoy about the show?

Are there things you don't like so much about the show?

Who is your favorite character? Why?

What do you think about the drinking behavior on *Geordie Shore*?

Do you think binge drinking is different for men and women in *Geordie Shore*? How? Is this something you experience in your own lives?

What do you think about the casual sex on the show?

Do you think casual sex is different for men and women in the show? How? Is this something you experience in your own lives?

### **Clip 1: Best ever mortal moments**

What do you think of the way that *Geordie Shore* characters purposely go out to 'get mortal'?

What do you think about Charlotte's many drunken experiences throughout the show?

Can you relate to any of the drinking behavior shown in this clip?

### **Clip 2: Buck squad gone wild**

What do you think of the way that Scott and Gary 'pull' every time they go out?

What do you think about the casual sex between Gary and the girl at the party?

What do you think of Chloe and Scott's relationship?

### **Clip 3: Most naked *Geordie Shore* moments**

What do you think about the way the women in *Geordie Shore* dress when they go out clubbing?

What do you think about the way Sophie woke up in bed with a stranger?

What do you think of Holly's behavior in this clip?

What do you think of Charlotte and Gary's relationship?