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**How do we defeat the ‘dark side’? Analysing a call to tackle lad culture at a UK university**

**ABSTRACT**

Extensive feminist critique of lad culture has raised serious concerns about its role in the sexualisation and objectification of women; its association with ‘pack-like’ boisterous behaviour and pressured heavy drinking of alcohol; and its use of banter, irony and infantile humour to provide a protective shield for sexist and homophobic practices. These concerns have culminated in the National Union of Students calling for lad culture to be tackled on university campuses in the UK. This paper analyses how the call to tackle lad culture was represented in a student newspaper and made sense of by groups of male students at one university in Southern England. The findings identify three interpretative repertoires, one aligned with feminist critiques, with lad culture constructed as a series of harmful and unacceptable social practices; the other two, critical of feminist-aligned critiques, deployed rhetorical strategies to distinguish a ‘light’ side of lad culture from a ‘dark’ side, and disavow the ‘dark’ side by claiming it was performed by individual ‘bad people’. This paper recommends future campaigns address these multiple repertoires together in one, non-judgemental debate space. This will include the acknowledgement of broader definitions of lad culture, and the facilitation of ongoing student debate about the ‘light’ and ‘dark’ sides of lad culture, and the ‘grey areas’ in-between.

**KEYWORDS**

Lad Culture - Higher Education - Feminism - Interpretative Repertoires

**INTRODUCTION**

Over the last 6 to 7 years lad culture has been a hot topic in the UK press. A string of newspaper articles have reported on some of the worst examples of lad culture, including male university students performing misogynist chanting on campus, producing promotional literature with sexist and homophobic content, and participating in ‘slut dropping’ (where female students are offered a car ride home only to be left stranded a long way from home) (The Guardian, June 9, 2014; The Guardian, August 9, 2014; The Guardian, October 9, 2012). Alongside these sensational media accounts, concerning reports emerged from the National Union of Students’ *Hidden Marks* (NUS, 2010) survey, indicating 14% of female students had been a victim of serious sexual assault or serious physical violence, and 12% stalked while at university or college. And in a subsequent NUS commissioned, qualitative study of lad culture (Phipps & Young, 2013), female students described how unwanted sexual attention and groping were so frequent on campus they viewed them as taken-for-granted aspects of university life and were typically left unreported.

Researchers Alison Phipps and Isabel Young responded to these concerning findings by calling for universities and Students Unions (SU) to be proactive in tackling lad culture on university campuses; for researchers to produce empirical data that evaluate these responses and provide guidance on best practice; and for continued discussion about the conceptual usefulness, limitations and development of the concept of lad culture within specific applied contexts (Phipps, 2017; Phipps et al., 2018; Phipps & Young 2013, 2015). Whilst there is a small but valuable academic literature on students’ responses to and experiences of lad culture at university, research documenting and evaluating the actions of specific universities and SU to the recent call to tackle lad culture is still in its infancy (see: Stead, 2017). The current study responds to the dearth of critical scholarship on this topic, offering a timely, empirical, in-depth analysis of one university’s response to the call to tackle lad culture.

More specifically, the paper focuses on the performative elements of a call to tackle lad culture, in this instance, how it was represented and debated on a university campus through the SU student newspaper. Focus groups with various sets of male students from the same university were also undertaken to explore how members of this crucial demographic interpreted the call to tackle lad culture.

The findings of this study highlight three distinct lines of argument or ‘interpretative repertoires’. One aligned with feminist definitions and critiques of lad culture, where lad culture was constructed as a series of negative, harmful and unacceptable social practices. The other two repertoires were critical of feminist-aligned definitions and critiques of lad culture, employing rhetorical strategies to distinguish a ‘light’ (playful and acceptable) side of lad culture from a ‘dark’ (harmful and unacceptable) side, and to disavow the ‘dark side’ of lad culture by claiming it was only performed by individual ‘bad people’. Building on these findings, the article concludes by offering a series of recommendations for future campaigns and debates. But first, in order to contextualise the subsequent analysis, a brief genealogy of lad culture will now outline what are widely considered to be the core features of lad culture, and which form the basis of much of the feminist critique of lad culture on university campuses in the UK.

**Feminist critiques of lad culture**

Amidst cultural anxieties about a contemporary crisis of masculinity and the supposed successes of feminism, the concept of ‘lad culture’ emerged in the 1990s and was associated with stereotypical masculine interests and social activities, particularly the tabloidesque presentation of traditionally masculine media content in men’s magazines (Gauntlett, 2008). The men’s magazine *Loaded* acted as the initial spearhead for the promotion of modern British lad culture (Gill, 2014; Whelehan, 2000), and sought to defiantly and unapologetically reclaim and celebrate traditional male values (Gauntlett, 2008). This was exemplified by the editor’s promotion of Loaded as a “magazine dedicated to life, liberty and the pursuit of sex, drink, football and less serious matters” (Brown, 1994, p.3). With the subsequent emergence of weekly ‘lad mags’ such as *Nuts* and *Zoo* in the early 2000s, men’s magazines turned from a niche market to a form of mass culture, with lad culture marketed beyond its original working class base to garner wider appeal among middle-class men (Francis & Archer 2005; Stevenson, Jackson, & Brooks, 2000). Almost 25 years since the creation of Loaded, lad culture is now a mainstream form of gender discourse in the UK and has gained widespread infiltration in diverse forms of media (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016; Owen & Campbell, 2018).

Whilst there is no single agreed upon definition of lad culture, commonly agreed features include, the practice of traditionally masculine sports and heavy drinking of alcohol; the sexualisation and objectification of women; and the use of banter, irony and forms of infantile humour[[1]](#footnote-1). Briefly examining these three features, researchers note how lad culture often centres around sports and drinking activities (Dempster, 2009, 2011; Warin & Dempster, 2007). Clayton and Harris (2008), for example, note how pubs and SU bars are often prime sites for laddish behaviour. Functioning as integral spaces for male sports-team post-match drinking experiences, pubs and SU bars offer men a safe environment to engage in male bonding; to become identified as one of the lads; to engage in ‘pack-like’ boisterous behaviour; and to promote and celebrate traditional masculine ideals. With research documenting these practices at numerous UK universities, student sportsmen, particularly rugby and football players, are often perceived as the standard-bearers of lad culture (Dempster, 2009; Phipps & Young, 2013).

Lad culture is also widely linked to the increasing sexualisation of culture and the blurring of the boundaries between popular culture and porn (Attwood, 2005). This is clearly evident in lads mags renowned for their explicit sexual content. For example, in Jordan and Fleming’s (2008) analysis of UK versions of *Zoo* and *Nuts* they identified an overwhelming focus on the celebratory objectification and sexualisation of women. This is supported in Krassas, Blauwkamp, and Wesselink’s (2003) analysis of the US versions of *Maxim* and *Stuff*, that documented how the magazines were saturated with photographs portraying women primarily as “mere sexual objects, posed in ways that convey their sexual availability, and scantily clad, waiting to be ogled and possessed by the male viewer” (113). In turn, feminist commentators on lad culture argue these representations normalise traditional sexual power dynamics, with women appraised solely in terms of their appearance, sexual appeal and sexual availability, and with male readers encouraged to adopt a dominant, predatory attitude towards women, with the ultimate goal to sleep with as many women as possible (Attwood, 2005; Kimmel, 2008).

Within lad culture, the behaviours described above are frequently justified or excused as ‘just a bit of fun’ through framing them as forms of irony, playful banter or infantile humour (Phipps & Young, 2013). By employing these comedic techniques, men are able to extend the boundaries of acceptable male behaviour to include practices that can be interpreted as sexist or homophobic, whilst simultaneously using these comedic forms of self-distancing to claim the laddish practices should not be taken seriously, are only meant to be “funny, foolish and harmless” (Walsh, 2007, p.29), and thus position critics as humourless ‘knit pickers’ who miss the point of the joke (Stevenson et al., 2000; Whelehan, 2000).

Unsurprisingly, lad culture has come under considerable academic critique, with feminist writers viewing it as a form of anti-feminist backlash aligned with post-feminist sensibilities (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016). That is, through the presentation of sexist views and the repudiation of feminist ideas, feminist writers argue lad culture is “a nostalgic revival of old patriarchy; a direct challenge to feminism’s call for social transformation” (Whelehan, 2000, p.5). These writers also highlight how the anti-feminist elements combine with a distinctively post-feminist style that is comfortable ‘riffing’ with feminist critique and knowingly embraces political incorrectness (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016; Gill, 2014). In sum, feminist researchers invariably conclude that lad culture is a defensive attempt to re-assert men’s rights and reclaim male power, dominance, privilege and territory (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016; Stevenson et al., 2000).

**The call to tackle lad culture on university campuses**

Building on these academic, feminist critiques of lad culture, the call to tackle lad culture on university campuses in the UK recently gained considerable momentum with the publication of the NUS commissioned study *That’s What She Said* (Phipps & Young, 2013). Based upon a series of focus groups and interviews with 40 female university students from across the UK, the research explored their views on and experiences of lad culture within higher education. The key findings documented that female university students are at high risk of sexual harassment, and positioned lad culture as a contributory factor in supporting sexual harassment and normalising sexual assault on university campuses.

In this NUS document and in subsequent academic and mainstream media publications, Phipps and Young voiced an urgent call to recognise lad culture as a serious problem on university campuses, for universities and SU to take action, and for researchers to evaluate subsequent responses (Phipps, 2017; Phipps, et al., 2018; Phipps & Young, 2013, 2015). Heeding this call, Stead’s (2017) interview based study offered initial insights into the views of students and staff working in forward-facing roles in campaigns to challenge lad culture at two universities in Northern England. The resounding finding from this study was that participants commented on how ‘lad culture’ was ambiguous and difficult to articulate, primarily due to the wide range of social practices included under what they perceived was an ‘umbrella’ term.

The current study builds on this work by focusing on another crucial aspect involved in campaigns to tackle lad culture, namely, their performative representation. This is a crucial site of analysis because, as Carline, Gunby, and Taylor (2018) explain,

“Campaigns…send a message to the public as to how the stakeholder conceives of the underlying problem and the perceived solution. Campaigns are fundamentally politicized, as stakeholders are likely to be acutely attentive to the public relations element of an intervention (p.316).

Focusing in-depth on one university in Southern England, the current study explores how the call to tackle lad culture on campus was represented and debated in the student newspaper, and how this call to action was interpreted by groups of male students at the university. The research questions that drive this paper are thus: how did the student newspaper represent the call to tackle lad culture? To what extent were academic, feminist definitions and critiques of lad culture supported or challenged in the newspaper and focus group talk? And, how did male students’ discussions of lad culture align with or diverge from the newspaper representations?

**METHOD**

Data collection was undertaken at a campus-based university in Southern England. The university had a student population of over 17,000, with over 30% coming from outside the UK. The university recruited students with high entry grades, was located in a wealthy area, and middle class norms tended to prevail. The university also had a vibrant social scene, with regular social events in the SU bar and nightclub and with numerous dedicated student nights at pubs, bars and nightclubs in the city centre.

The university SU newspaper functioned as the performative front and main site of public debate for the call to tackle lad culture on campus. The newspaper was written and produced by students, published on a fortnightly basis, distributed around campus and available online. Using the search engine on the SU website and employing the search terms ‘lad’, ‘lad culture’ and ‘laddism’, all articles where lad culture was a substantive topic were copied and collated. The newspaper data set consisted of sixteen articles published from September 2014 to February 2015.

Focus groups were also undertaken during March 2015 as part of an undergraduate research project module. Working collaboratively, a member of staff and I co-supervised a research team of eleven students to explore how male university students talked about lad culture, drinking alcohol and masculinity. With male peer groups playing an important role in the enactment of lad culture, drinking practices and masculinity (Kimmel, 2008), focus groups consisting of existing male friendship groups were chosen as an ideal space for collaborative discussion. This group dynamic enabled participants to engage in familiar forms of interaction and dialogue and comment on actual incidents, activities and interests they shared in their daily lives (Allen, 2005). The friendship group dynamic also enabled the research team to reveal information about how the male students’ accounts were “articulated, censured, opposed and changed through social interaction and how this relates to peer communication and group norms” (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999:5, cited in Allen, 2005) [[2]](#footnote-2).

**Sample**

Existing research suggests young men’s endorsement of lad culture varies due to a number of factors, with ethnic background (Francis & Archer, 2005) and participation in sports teams (Dempster, 2009) being particularly pertinent. Reflecting this variance and providing a context in which multiple perspectives could emerge, the sample included four groups of university sports team members, four groups of non-sports team members, two groups of international[[3]](#footnote-3) students and one group of non and infrequent drinkers (41 participants). Each student-researcher recruited one group of male students (typically through friendship networks), then exchanged groups with another team member so that each student-researcher conducted their focus group with students they were not previously acquainted with. This provided a degree of detachment and encouraged the focus group facilitators to employ more probing questions to elicit understanding about incidents, people and perspectives they were unfamiliar with. And following recommendations from the research methods literature (Bryman, 2012), each focus group consisted of three or four participants as this was seen as more manageable for the student-researchers who were novices using this method.

**Research training and focus group design**

Following an apprenticeship-inspired approach (Thomas & Quinlan, 2014), my colleague and I provided the student-researchers with research training, employing a series of experiential learning exercises that enabled them to gain first-hand experience designing and conducting focus groups. First, we asked the student-researchers to brainstorm a series of potential focus group questions that were then critically discussed in class. Questions included, ‘can you tell me about a typical night out you’ve had recently?’, and ‘how does the drinking experience differ when drinking purely with guys, compared to a mixed group?’ We also included a collective activity to provide an alternative means to elicit participants’ perspectives. This involved showing the participants the front cover of the most recently published university student newspaper, and asking them to comment on the leading story and front page headline that read: “THE DARK SIDE OF LAD CULTURE”, depicted a male student in a hoodie, keeled over and assumedly drunk, and included statistics from the on-campus student survey about lad culture.

To pilot the focus group schedule, the team undertook an in-class mock focus group with one supervisor taking the role of facilitator, four students acting as focus group participants, and the other supervisor and students taking the role of active observers. Through critical, group reflection on the focus group, the student-researchers identified principles of good practice such as demonstrating sensitivity to emerging group relations; not being over-commanding or judgemental; drawing out reticent participants; and tactfully interrupting to clarify ambiguous responses (Allen, 2005; Thomas & Quinlan, 2014).

The research was conducted in line with BPS ethical guidelines and ethical approval was granted by the module convenor. Participants were given information sheets that summarised the goals of the study and provided information about confidentiality, and debrief sheets that provided contact details of relevant university support services. All participants signed a consent form and chose a pseudonym. Each student-researcher conducted their focus group in a quiet room on the university campus and with the participants’ permission used an audio-device to record the conversation. The focus groups lasted between 20-40 minutes and the audio recordings were transcribed in the style of everyday conversation.

**Analytic approach**

I read, re-read and coded the sixteen newspaper articles and eleven focus group transcripts, and sought to identify the common interpretative repertoires used to make sense of the call to tackle lad culture. An interpretative repertoire can be defined as a “recognisable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations distinguished by familiar clichés, common places, tropes and characterizations of actors and situations” (Edley & Wetherell, 2001, p.443). I considered the local functions and effects of employing various interpretative repertoires, as well as the wider social implications. This included attending to what ‘subject positions’ were made available for the reader and writer of the articles and the speakers in the focus groups, and what could legitimately be said, done and felt from these positions (Edley, 2001).

**ANALYSIS**

Three distinct interpretative repertoires were identified in both the newspaper articles and male student talk, yet were evident to differing extents in the respective data sets. One repertoire aligned with academic, feminist definitions and critiques of lad culture. Here, lad culture was constructed as a series of negative, harmful and unacceptable social practices. This repertoire was evident in the majority of newspaper articles, yet considerably less so in the focus group talk. In stark contrast, the other two repertoires were rarely seen or heard in the newspaper articles yet predominated in the majority of focus groups. Here, feminist-aligned definitions and critiques of lad culture were themselves critiqued, with male students employing two novel rhetorical strategies. One sought to distinguish the ‘light’ (playful and acceptable) side of lad culture from the ‘dark’ (harmful and unacceptable) side. The other sought to disavow the ‘dark side’ of lad culture by claiming it was only performed by individual ‘bad people’.

**Feminist-aligned definitions and critiques of lad culture**

Whilst the label of ‘feminism’ was rarely glimpsed within the data set, almost every newspaper article that critiqued lad culture nevertheless directly aligned with the academic, feminist definitions and critiques of lad culture outlined previously. Taking a lead role here was the SU president. Through authoring the first three articles that discussed lad culture, the SU president set the initial agenda by presenting concerns about lad culture as an important topic and professing his desire to open a conversation about lad culture on campus. In these articles, the SU president demonstrated his active engagement with this issue, repeatedly reporting back on his attendance at Lad Culture Strategy Team meetings[[4]](#footnote-4) with the NUS. As a direct response to discussions at one of these meetings, the SU president introduced the first definition of lad culture; a definition that directly referenced Phipps andYoung’s (2013) NUS study:

*‘Steve’ - SU President*

 “The report outlines how sport and heavy alcohol consumption, group or ‘pack mentality’, ‘banter’, sexism and misogyny, homophobia, sexualisation and objectification of women, and rape supportive attitudes and sexual harassment are all common features of ‘Lad Culture’… Essentially, ‘Lad Culture’ is a behaviour that makes an individual feel uncomfortable, and that is never okay”.

Drawing on the academically respected NUS study to inform and support his definition, the SU president provides a list of common features said to be included within lad culture; features that clearly align with the academic, feminist literature (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016 Phipps, 2017; Phipps & Young, 2013, 2015). Later in the article he also offers his own interpretation and summary, positioning lad culture as a behaviour that negatively impacts the feelings of others, and which he views as completely unacceptable (“that is never okay”). This initial definition and critique was expanded upon in a series of newspaper articles written by the Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer who, whilst never explicitly mentioning the word feminism or claiming a feminist identity, constructed the ‘problem’ of lad culture in a manner that directly maps onto the academic, feminist definitions outlined earlier:

*‘Jasmine’ - Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer*

But ‘lad culture’, and the heavy alcohol consumption and ‘pack mentality’ that go with it, means that students on a night out either have to surrender to the chants of “DOWN IT! DOWN IT!” when faced with a ‘dirty pint’, or face exclusion and taunting from their peers… Bullying, pack-mentality and exclusion are all intertwined with the heavy drinking that happens on ‘laddish’ nights out.

*‘Jasmine’ - Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer*

Dismissing such actions as ‘harmless banter’ normalises sexual harassment and objectification, and contributes to the rhetoric that women’s bodies are public property, open to comment, criticism or physical contact regardless of the woman’s wishes. Girls should be able to go on a night out in their own SU without being groped or having their bums pinched by complete strangers who then disappear into the crowd. When someone disregards your personal boundaries like that, it can kind of kill the mood of a good night out and leave you feeling pretty shitty, disrespected and violated. University should be a place where students can have a fun night out and feel safe and relaxed.

In both excerpts above, ‘nights out’ are located as a prime site for lad culture. In the first extract, nights out provide the context where the close relationship between lad culture and drinking alcohol is considered. As was evident across the entire data set, and evidenced in this extract, the drinking of alcohol is not questioned or problematised. Rather, it is the specific interactional dynamics of drinking, in the form of chanting, bullying, pack-mentality, exclusion and pressurised, heavy drinking that are viewed as the problem and associated with “‘laddish’ nights out”.

In the first extract, students on a night out are positioned as ‘complicit victims’ who are required to begrudgingly take part in lad culture or face bullying and ridicule. The gender of the students is not stated, and thus implicitly enables both male and female students to take up this position. However, as was more common in the data set, in the second extract,girls and women are explicitly located as the victims of lad culture. Here, “‘harmless banter’” (put in scare quotes to signal the need to question whether banter can in fact be harmless) is represented as the poor excuse or get out clause that has the effect of normalising sexual harassment against women and positioning women’s bodies as objects of public scrutiny and physical harassment. In turn, in the position of victims of lad culture, female students who are groped on nights out are said to be emotionally harmed by the experience, “feeling pretty shitty, disrespected and violated”. The Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer responds to this concern by advocating for a right of care and right of protection over women’s bodies, and the requirement for physical safety within the SU building.

Taken together, the definitions and accounts offered by the SU president and Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer clearly and consistently represent lad culture as a problematic and harmful set of social practices, and mirror much of the established academic, feminist research on this issue. Building on this repertoire, subsequent newspaper articles reported the actions being taken by the SU to support individuals, clubs and societies to evaluate, monitor and tackle lad culture on campus and to support victims of lad culture.

**Distinguishing the light from the dark side of lad culture**

With the exception of the two international students groups, participants in all other focus groups frequently challenged the feminist-aligned repertoire that located lad culture, in its entirety, as harmful and unacceptable. Participants argued that these constructions were crude and unfair generalisations. To support their arguments, they typically distinguished a ‘light’ (playful and acceptable) side of lad culture, from a ‘dark’ (harmful and unacceptable) side. At this point it is important to reiterate that the newspaper front cover shown in the focus groups included the headline “THE DARK SIDE OF LAD CULTURE”. This specific language and imagery[[5]](#footnote-5) may have impacted the respondents’ arguments and linguistic repertoires, by suggesting that a ‘dark’ and ‘light’ side of lad culture existed, and, implicitly, that the light side was less problematic. Yet crucially, the majority of newspaper articles were devoid of rhetoric or examples to support the existence of a light side of lad culture, with only one article briefly voicing this perspective and exploring the challenges of distinguishing between the two sides:

*‘Sarah’*

Whilst being a “lad” is far from synonymous with being sexist, aspects of lad culture certainly seem to push the line. For example, two of my friends at Freshers’ Week were praised for going around asking girls to kiss them on the cheek, only to turn their head and kiss them on the lips before they could move away. This is obviously a far more light-hearted way of toying with the idea of consent than some of the horror stories you hear, and I choose it because it’s more of a grey area than some of the obvious stuff you can shake your head and tut at with regards to sexual objectification, and is subsequently more common. Should even a kiss require consent? Is it really just fun? Or perhaps just “banter”; the umbrella term that can be used to cover anything from joking to light bullying to racism and homophobia.

This is an interesting and important excerpt because it offers a rarely heard argument that not all people who identify as ‘lads’ are sexist (“being a “lad” is far from synonymous with being sexist”). Despite this, the subsequent argument still raises concerns about lad culture, claiming that some activities “seem to push the line”. The image of pushing the line supposes that there are two sides of lad culture, assumedly the acceptable and unacceptable, and that the line between them can be distinguished and crossed. The author illustrates this argument by recalling a specific event they experienced on campus, where male students were praised for tricking girls into kissing them on the lips. The author stresses the importance and relevance of this seemingly “light-hearted” example, because it offers a space where the line between acceptable and unacceptable elements of lad culture becomes “more of a grey area”. This is contrasted to what the author sees as the common “horror stories” relating to sexual objectification which she assumes are clearly unacceptable and widely denounced.

The importance of this student newspaper article, argument and repertoire cannot be underplayed, as it introduces ambiguity and ambivalence into the sense making around behaviours associated with lad culture. Indeed, the author is not sure how to interpret the act of ‘tricked kissing’. She therefore poses a series of questions (that she refrains from answering) that ask readers to reflect on their own assumptions about consent, and to consider the appropriateness of the concept of ‘banter’ as an explanation for this behaviour, a concept she implicitly problematises by referring to it as an “umbrella term”, covering a diverse range of activities.

Whilst this article offered one of the very few public struggles over where to draw the line between acceptable and unacceptable elements of lad culture, by contrast, in the focus groups, participants engaged in extensive debate and rhetorical work to develop this line of argument. Yet what frequently emerged from these discussions were not clear and consistent lines separating one from the other, but rather a series of grey areas and blurred lines, consisting of contested levels of acceptability and shifting transitions from light to dark, acceptable to unacceptable. Many of these examples focused specifically on the concept of ‘banter’. As such, in the feminist-aligned interpretative repertoire, banter was typically constructed as an excuse for sexism and a means to police masculinities. Yet within the focus groups, male students constructed banter in alternative and complex ways. Below is one such example:

*Group 6 – Sports Team*

INT: So what do you think is particularly laddish?

BRUCE: Erm, I dunno, a lot of the stuff that comes under the umbrella like banter, teasing and stuff. It’s fine if you know the person and you know that they’re gonna take it well…

DAVID: Yeah I mean okay this is probably one of my worst aspects, but recently by a Facebook conversation where we have as a kinda of club, I referred to someone as a hoe. Errm which I know they actually did take in good jest as I’ve spoken to them afterwards but I realised that to other people definitely doesn’t come across well and it literally does depend upon the person and how you know them and if you know how they would take it. I mean it can be difficult to judge.

Responding to an invitation to identify things considered laddish, Bruce highlights banter and teasing. Perhaps aware that feminist-aligned repertoires are highly critical of banter, he straight-away seeks to legitimate this activity, proposing that it becomes acceptable within the context of ongoing relationships where the speaker knows the recipient will interpret it as a form of harmless humour (“It’s fine if you know the person and you know that they’re gonna take it well”). This contextual and relational argument is then supported and illustrated by David who recounts an example of banter and teasing where he called a person a ‘hoe’ on Facebook. David initially constructs this incident as potentially highly problematic (“probably one of my, worst aspects…I realised that to other people definitely doesn’t come across well”). This is no doubt due to the word ‘hoe’ being derogatory slang for prostitute, and thus can be viewed as a means of degrading the other person by implying they slept with many people. But crucially, David undertakes rhetorical work to re-position this instance of banter as acceptable when understood within the specific context and ongoing relations between speaker and recipient. Here, he claims knowledge that the recipient was aware of the conventions of banter and thus interpreted it as a form of harmless humour (“I know they actually did take in good jest”).

This example was indicative of a range of focus group discussions about banter, heavy drinking and drinking games, wherein distinguishing the light side from the dark side of lad culture was said to require knowledge of how talk and behaviour were located and understood within specific contexts, conventions and relationships that enabled forms of lad culture to be deemed acceptable and playful, or not (“it literally does depend upon the person and how you know them and if you know how they would take it”). However, as the two excerpts above show, the rhetoric required to distinguish the light from the dark side was rarely straightforward or unproblematic, often due to the multiple audiences and different positions from which they could make sense of these acts (“I mean it can be difficult to judge”).

**Disavowing the dark side by claiming it is only performed by individual ‘bad people’**

The third interpretative repertoire challenged the feminist-aligned repertoire by disavowing the dark side by claiming it was only performed by individual ‘bad people’. This repertoire was almost exclusively associated with discussions about sexual assault, groping and the sexual objectification of women. Whilst this repertoire was prominent in the majority of focus groups, it was only evident in a single newspaper article written by an anonymous male student author:

*Anonymous*

If I were to take things too far and make jokes about an unwanted sexual experience, or about a very self-conscious friend’s appearance, that would not be okay, but it wouldn’t be ‘Lad Culture’. It would be me being a dick…. I hope they proceed in a firm manner to find the perpetrators.

Interestingly, this argument begins by harnessing the previous interpretative repertoire, suggesting that there is a line between acceptable and unacceptable forms of lad culture and banter, and that this line can be crossed (“If I were to take things too far”). The author then offers an additional argument that if a person knowingly crosses the line, the resulting problem or blame should not be associated with lad culture, but rather attributable to the individual bad person who performed the act, in this hypothetical situation, himself (“it wouldn’t be ‘Lad Culture’. It would be me being a dick”). This rhetorical approach breaks any link or association between lad culture and an individual engaging in unwanted sexual behaviour or bullying, leaving the individual fully and solely accountable for their actions. Positioning these individuals in a negative light as ‘perpetrators’, the author is also able to offer support for punishing their actions by dealing with them “in a firm manner”.

It is also important to consider the possible rhetorical intentions and effects of the author choosing to represent himself as ‘anonymous’. In the article he was reported to have chosen this approach due to “worry that the content would result in an unwanted online discussion, public or otherwise. The author is however willing to respond to any criticism through [the newspaper]”. This rhetorical strategy can be interpreted as a form of protection, wherein, because his arguments challenge the feminist-aligned repertoire, the author assumes they will be viewed as problematic, and thus result in criticism. Mirroring the strategies identified in previous research on British male undergraduates’ talk about gender and feminism (Gough, 2001; Gough & Peace, 2000; Peace, 2003), this approach also works to position the author as a victim and worthy of sympathy, someone who does not feel safe enough to freely voice his perspective in public. Crucially, the arguments deployed by this anonymous author were reiterated and developed in numerous focus groups. In the example below, the interviewer initiates the conversation by showing the participants the front cover of SU newspaper that included a headline, image and survey statistics relating to lad culture:

*Group 5 – Sports Team*

INT Have you ever seen this before?

THEO Ah. Yeah. We, we ah, talk quite a lot about this.

CHRIS Yes

INT Ok, why’s that?....

CHRIS The problem, the problem that I’ve had with it is that the large spectrum of incidents which still come under the lad culture heading…. it’s just not, there’s no, there’s no way that you can link you and your friends having friendly banter to pushing a man towards sexual assault.

THEO Yeah, yeah totally agree, that’s right.

CHRIS Yeah, and the large amounts of people who have been doing the assaults have been on their own. That, is that a lad culture? Surely not. It’s a society problem in terms of the sexualisation of women, but that isn’t because other peers, who are also male, have kind of, egged him on.

In this excerpt, Chris raises concerns about putting a “large spectrum of behaviours under the heading of lad culture”, and argues there is no link between “you and your friends having friendly banter”, which is implicitly constructed as an acceptable group activity associated with lad culture, “to pushing a man towards sexual assault”, which is implicitly constructed as an unacceptable activity performed by a lone man. After gaining agreement and support from Theo, Chris continues by claiming knowledge that most instances of reported assaults are performed by people “on their own”. He then poses and answers a rhetorical question (“is that a lad culture? Surely not”) in order to argue the problem of sexual assault should not be associated with a *culture* of laddism. By individualising the problem of sexual assault, this repertoire works to deny any responsibility (or support) for sexual assault, placing instances of sexual assault as unacceptable, but outside the politics, influence and gender relations of lad culture.

 Yet intriguingly, Chris’s argument becomes more complex, and somewhat contradictory, when he then conceptualises sexual assault as “a society problem in terms of the sexualisation of women”. As such, by perceiving a connection between individual action and the wider culture of gender relations, Chris is deploying a common feminist repertoire that situates sexual assault and rape within “a wide-ranging constellation of behaviours, attitudes, beliefs, and talk that work to produce and reproduce gendered dominance in everyday interaction” (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016, p.69). Yet, amidst this wider cultural argument, lad culture, is assumedly not conceptualised as part of, or connected to, the wider culture of gender relations. This unusual rhetorical twist is held together by Chris conceptualising lad culture in a narrow sense, solely in terms of peer pressure and group dynamics in local contexts (“that isn’t because other peer, who are also male, have kind of, egged him on”).

**DISCUSSION**

Responding to extensive feminist critiques and the recent call to tackle lad culture on university campuses, this study offered an in-depth analysis of how the call to tackle lad culture was represented and debated on a university campus through a SU student newspaper, and how this call was subsequently interpreted by groups of male students. Three key interpretative repertoires were identified, and each repertoire offers important insights for future interventions, debates and theoretical work regarding lad culture.

 Building on published feminist research (Phipps & Young, 2013), and championed by the SU president and Gender and Sexuality Equality Officer, the feminist-aligned definition and critique of lad culture was by far the most prominent interpretative repertoire deployed in the SU newspaper articles. In many ways the prominence of this repertoire can be lauded, as forms of sexism, prejudice and bullying associated with lad culture were publicly derided; student societies and clubs that wished to promote inclusion and equality were invited to be trained and supported; and calls for the SU and university to provide a duty of care and a safe space for all students were strongly advocated.

 At the same time, this study highlighted two problemswith the deployment of this repertoire. Firstly,of the 16 newspaper articles that discussed lad culture,onlytwo offered alternative repertoires. So, despite the SU president calling for debate about lad culture, the feminist-aligned repertoire predominated to the possible detriment of enabling alternative, counter arguments to emerge. For example, on the lone occasion the disavowing the dark side repertoire was deployed in a newspaper article, the author made his identity anonymous. The rhetorical effect of this move was to position the author as a potential victim, under fear of attack from being labelled prejudiced for challenging the prevailing feminist-aligned repertoire. Whether the author had a genuine concern, or whether this was a tactic to critique ‘feminism gone too far’ (Garcia-Favaro & Gill, 2016), the author choosing to anonymise himself is nevertheless a serious concern. As such, a number of political commentators have argued that an underlying problem with contemporary, left-wing, progressive politics is the tendency to close down dissenting voices (such asTrump supporters, Brexiteers and supporters of right wing politics) by claiming they are sexist, racist or prejudiced; with a subsequent danger of alienating these speakers from crucial public debates (DeBard & Eberly, 2014; Pie, 2016). In response, a popular recommendation is to create public forums where diverse speakers can be heard, engage in debate, and persuade one another of their arguments, whilst receiving no blame or shame. This was evidently not the case with this university debate about lad culture, as the repertoires deployed by male students in the focus groups were rarely represented or debated in the pages of the SU newspaper.

The second problem with the feminist-aligned repertoire was that it defined lad culture in monolithic terms, as negative, harmful and unacceptable, and thus left no space to consider positive conceptualisations of lads or lad culture. The second repertoire actively critiqued the outright condemnation of lad culture, and seeking to distinguish the light from the dark side of lad culture, enabled some practices associated with lad culture to be deemed acceptable. This repertoire echoes recent research findings that document ‘friendly’, ‘genial’ and ‘reflexive’ forms of laddism in university and sports contexts (Jeffries, 2019; Nichols, 2018, 2020; Stentiford, 2019). Moreover, in a number of academic publications it has been argued that lad culture should be conceptualised as a continuum of social practices (Phipps, 2017; Warin & Dempster, 2007). Yet problems remain when the continuum is conceptualised in narrow terms, as moving between “‘everyday’ forms of sexism and more violent sexual assault” (Phipps, 2017, p.816); the problem being that the whole of lad culture (even the ‘light’ side) is still viewed as harmful and unacceptable. This paper therefore recommends that future research, campaigns and interventions work with an *extended* continuum of lad culture that includes socially acceptable practices, which might include singing, chanting, making jokes and getting drunk, activities often associated with lad culture, yet are not inherently or inevitably harmful to others.

A second crucial issue to consider is that this repertoire does not impose *a priori* assumptions. In other words, the meaning, intent and effect of instances of lad culture (such as banter) need to be analysed within specific contexts, ongoing relationships between speakers and receivers, and complex gender power dynamics. This argument contributes to emerging understandings of how self-identified lads can implement banter to both support and critique sexist ideas (Nichols, 2018, 2020), and can demonstrate nuanced and reflexive understandings of the contextual (in)appropriateness of banter (Jeffries, 2019).

In line with the previous two repertoires, the disavowing the dark side repertoire positioned a number of activities (particularly sexual harassment) as harmful and unacceptable. This finding therefore offers a crucial point of agreement across the entire data set that could be used as a springboard for future interventions and debates. However, the argument that individuals performing these actions are in no way connected to lad culture is potentially problematic. As such, research by Carline et al., (2018) and Pascoe and Hollander (2016) documents men deploying similar repertoires that individualise and pathologise rape as “something a bad man does, not something that informs all gendered relationships between men and women” (Pascoe & Hollander, 2016, p.74).Echoing these findings, the disavowing the dark side repertoire obscures the social structures and gender power relations that permeate university life, lad culture and wider UK society, which arguably scaffold and support problematic behaviours such as sexual assault (Gavey, 2013).

Ultimately, the findings of this research demonstrate that spaces for non-judgemental and non-threatening peer group discussions should be integral in future interventions related to lad culture. As such, non-defensive, peer group discussion is vital for enabling male and female university students to voice competing arguments and repertoires, to find ways to think through complex ‘grey areas’ related to lad culture, and become agents of positive change within their communities.

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1. Research has also identified lad culture manifesting in male students’ disruptive activities in school and university classrooms (e.g. Jackson, 2003). However, this concern did not emerge in the data in the current study. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The student-researchers consisted of two males and nine females, aged between 19-22. Acknowledging the focus group context as a site of joint identity work (Allen, 2005), it is important to consider to what extent the focus group facilitators’ gender impacted on the types of arguments and repertoires the male participants produced. For example, a common assumption is that male participants are more likely to present politically correct arguments and softer masculinities in the presence of female facilitators. Yet following Allen (2005), I argue this is too simplistic, as research suggests that male researchers have also elicited these repertoires from boys and young men (e.g Frosh, Pheonix & Pattman, 2002). Moreover, in this study, other aspects of the facilitators’ and participants’ identities (such as being students and young people) were also in play during the focus groups, and offered positions for shared identification. It is also important to note that the style of questioning can play a more important role in shaping participants accounts’ than the gender of the person asking the questions (Allen, 2005). In this study, all facilitators used a shared focus group schedule and took a facilitative, non-judgemental and non-confrontational approach to questioning. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Our initial goal was to a sample mixed international group, but due to the research-students’ ease of access to groups of Chinese students, these groups were ultimately chosen. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. These meetings involved an appointed committee of individuals from across the UK, including SU officers, university staff, NUS staff and officers and external organisations, with a goal to lead the direction of the NUS's work around tackling lad culture within higher education. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This mobilises the concept of the dark and light sides of the force from the Star Wars movie franchise. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)