

Northumbria Research Link

Citation: Jeffries, Mike (2020) 'Is it okay to go out on the pull without it being nasty?': lads' performance of lad culture. *Gender and Education*, 32 (7). pp. 908-925. ISSN 0954-0253

Published by: Taylor & Francis

URL: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594706>
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2019.1594706>>

This version was downloaded from Northumbria Research Link:
<http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/id/eprint/38460/>

Northumbria University has developed Northumbria Research Link (NRL) to enable users to access the University's research output. Copyright © and moral rights for items on NRL are retained by the individual author(s) and/or other copyright owners. Single copies of full items can be reproduced, displayed or performed, and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational, or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided the authors, title and full bibliographic details are given, as well as a hyperlink and/or URL to the original metadata page. The content must not be changed in any way. Full items must not be sold commercially in any format or medium without formal permission of the copyright holder. The full policy is available online: <http://nrl.northumbria.ac.uk/policies.html>

This document may differ from the final, published version of the research and has been made available online in accordance with publisher policies. To read and/or cite from the published version of the research, please visit the publisher's website (a subscription may be required.)

'Is it okay to go out on the pull without it being nasty?': lads' performance of lad culture.

Michael Jeffries,
Department of Geography & Environmental Sciences,
Ellison Building,
Northumbria University,
Newcastle upon Tyne,
NE1 8ST

Corresponding author: michael.jeffries@northumbria.ac.uk

Abstract. Lad culture is pervasive in UK higher education, fuelling misogyny and violence towards women. Lad culture is commonly described as mix of boorish socialising, drinking, sport and pack behaviour. This study reports on the attitudes and experiences of laddish students from a UK university. Laddish behaviours were ubiquitous in their university lives. They were well aware of the harm lad culture causes but struggled to manage their behaviour. Being a lad is an important part of their identity. With their lad friends they relaxed their performance of assertive masculinity. Interviewees identified banter within their friendship group as an essential social currency but were explicit that banter aimed at other people was bullying. Academic success was important and was gained in part by making a distinct break from anti-academic lads. Their self-awareness and willingness to engage with the issue offers opportunities for more effective interventions to combat misogyny.

Key words. Lad culture, masculinities, UK higher education

Word count. 8976 words

Introduction.

Sexual harassment and violence against women is endemic in UK in higher education. The misogyny, objectification and violence are commonly linked to 'lad culture', or 'laddishness', a combination of attitudes and performance by some male students. This behaviour combines heavy drinking, aggressive sexual objectification of women, reckless behaviours and an antipathy to study, associated with a pack mentality and some sports, "drinking, football and fucking" (Phipps and Young 2015a, p461). The particular damage done by lad culture is part of wider discrimination faced by some university students and staff based on their gender and ethnicity, including harassment of staff (Universities UK 2016) and gender inequality in careers, for example Aldercotte et al.'s (2016) study of gender equality in STEM subjects. Misogyny towards women in higher education is a global phenomenon (Henry and Powell 2014; Phipps 2016). Lad culture is sometimes associated with spatially and temporally contingent sites; for example the use of bars by sports teams on some nights (Clayton and Harris 2008). However, Jackson and Sundaram (2018) point out that the tendency to attribute lad culture to specific places, activities or times hides the pervasive threat and damage done throughout universities, and they suggest that the ubiquity of laddishness even increases its invisibility, at least to staff.

In the UK the growing concern at the impacts on women students has prompted national surveys of the incidence, nature and effects of lad culture (NUS 2010, 2013, 2015) evidencing the endemic challenge. Widespread media coverage (NUS 2013) added an element of moral panic, reinforced by the perceived decline in academic performance of male students compared to their women peers (Kahn, Brett, and Holmes 2011; Jackson, Dempster and Pollard 2015). Responses from institutions have often been hesitant, not least from the fear of reputational damage (Jackson and Sundaram 2018). Grass roots activism led by student unions and campus activists has resulted in specific campaigns to raise awareness and combat misogyny, both nationally including the NUS' *'It Stops Here'* and British Universities and Colleges Sport's *'Take a Stand'*, as well as local initiatives. In turn such responses have provoked antagonistic reactions, positioning male students as the victims of an overbearing, killjoy, political-correctness gone mad, a common response to campaigns addressing misogyny (Garcia-Favaro and Gill 2016). Deriding and challenging campaigns are themselves a performance of laddishness: showing off, anti-authority. Lads are unlikely to be involved in campaigns intended to reduce the harm done by lad culture.

Lads and lad culture: retheorising the monolithic other.

Missing from most analyses of the challenges of lad culture are detailed interrogations of the attitudes and experiences of male students who define themselves as lads. Existing studies of laddish students do not focus on their attitudes and performance of laddishness as a fundamental characteristic of their lives, but instead explore their behaviour within defined contexts such as sport (Dempster 2009), alcohol use (Clayton and Harris 2008) or responses to sexual violence prevention schemes (Carline, Gunby, and Taylor 2017).

Recent retheorising has emphasised the need to explore the more complex nature of laddish behaviour (Nichols 2016; Phipps 2016; Phipps et al. 2017). In this study I add to our understanding of lad culture by characterising the experiences and attitudes of a group of laddish undergraduates to lad culture in UK higher education, their understanding and awareness of the phenomenon and their own attitudes and behaviour. Secondly the study aimed to identify the significance of being a lad,

including the positives, throughout the participants' experiences of university. Laddish behaviour amongst male undergraduates is a complex mix of the now well documented negatives, but also important elements of friendship amongst the lads themselves. Ultimately the objective of this study is to identify opportunities for engaging laddish undergraduates to reduce the negative effects of lad culture, whilst avoiding the glib "lads = bad" discourse that can hinder campaigns by alienating male students.

Phipps (2016) introduced this nuanced characterisation of laddishness, in particular that it is not a single phenomenon of a male response to (re)establish a hegemonic masculinity in the face of the increasing agency of women in higher education. Hegemonic masculinity, the idea of a normative, dominant performance of masculinity, has been revisited by Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) who argue for the importance of the context on the precise manifestation of this masculinity. UK higher education is one such context, creating its own versions of laddishness. Phipps (2016) spotlighted an intersectionality with long-held class power structures, starting with a laddishness associated with highly privileged students at elite universities reinforcing long held entitlements and behaviours. Phipps' second category is a laddishness amongst middle class students who are both in anxious competition with women academically, but also find university a release from over-protective home life. Thirdly there is a working class laddishness traditionally associated with an antipathy to education, at very least 'not fitting in' (Reay et al. 2001), although Archer, Pratt and Phillips' (2001) careful analysis of working class men's outlook showed that structural inequalities may be just as important as anti-academic identity. All three versions of laddishness nurture their own variations of misogyny, but are also more complex, for example, perhaps reinventing traditional forms of dominance (Ingram and Waller 2014). Phipps and Young (2015b) specifically link the rise of lad culture to the neoliberalisation of higher education, turning students into self-interested, competitive consumers and making institutions wary of any publicity that may dent market share.

Studies of specific elements of lad culture reveal telling detail: male students can recognise the problematic behaviours and performance, but remain, even if unwillingly, complicit, for example in the context of sport (Dempster 2009) or alcohol use (Dempster 2011). Studies have also revealed the threat of lad culture to the academic success of some male students, primarily by a performance of disinterest towards study which is seen as a feminine activity. Their disinterest is made manifest by messing about in class, conspicuous disengagement and the need to appear not to try characterised by Jackson and Dempster (2009) as 'effortless achievement', whilst the success of many women students is denigrated as 'morbidly diligent' (Jackson and Dempster 2009). For some men being in higher education sits uneasily with their personal construction of masculinity (Leaper and Van 2008), undermining their motivation which is a key determinant of academic success, especially in non-traditional fields of study (Leaper and Van 2008; Isacco and Morse 2015). One possibility is that lad culture results from the pack mentality that ruthlessly polices the maintenance of a normative masculinity to cope with the perceived feminizing effect of education. Making friends, in effect making a new home, is an important concern for students in the transition to university (Boute et al. 2007) so fitting in by following the pack rules and a limited repertoire of acceptable lad behaviours may be an irresistible pressure.

However, being one of the lads could also have important, positive benefits. Some studies of the problematic impacts of lad culture hint at these positives, in particular the role of classic lad interests such as sport and alcohol for forming friendships among men (Dempster 2009, 2011). Jackson and

Sundaram's (2015) audit of lad culture in UK higher education specifically points out that there is a spectrum of laddish behaviours. Phipps (2016) and Phipps et al. (2017) highlight the need to explore the fine grain of male students' attitudes, recognising that they are not a homogenous block and that lumping all lads together may hinder strategies to combat the damage done by lad culture. For example, Nichol's (2017) study of laddishness in a rugby club reframed the behaviour of the men as a more reflexive, 'mischievous masculinity', more diverse in content than the monolithic other of lad culture, to some extent resisting the damaging behaviours associated with laddishness. Strikingly, at the same time as detailed analyses of lad culture have appeared, other studies of heterosexual male students in higher education have identified an emerging inclusive masculinity. These studies often focused on male students from team sports associated with lad culture (Anderson, Adams, and Rivers 2012; Robinson, Anderson, and White 2017; Scoats 2017). Inclusive masculinity is characterised by markedly reduced, indeed active opposition to, misogyny and homophobia along with affectionate friendship between men. This offers a competing discourse, disrupting the disparaging constructions of lad culture.

The study presented here sets out specifically to address Phipp's (2016) exhortation to explore the detail of lads' experiences and attitudes. In focusing on a group of students who self-identified as lads therefore, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- i) In what ways do these students understand "lad culture"?
- ii) What attitudes, experiences and contradictions manifest in their enactment of "laddishness"?
- iii) How has this informed their social and academic experiences at university?

Method

Context.

The interviews reported here took place as part of a larger project investigating male students' experiences of and attitudes to lad culture in one academic department of a large, post-1992 city based university in the north of England. The project was prompted by a "Lad Culture Summit" the previous academic year, which was well attended by staff and student gender activists but from which lads were conspicuously missing. The inability of campaigns to engage laddish students was a compelling subplot throughout. The host city has a reputation as a party venue that is a significant attraction for undergraduates, with a nightlife economy conducive to laddishness, typical of many UK cities (for example organised, mass pub crawls, Hubbard, 2013). The specific department supports approximately 350 undergraduates, 50:50 male:female, and the majority from northern England including substantial numbers who are the first of their family to attend university.

The wider project was introduced to all undergraduates in the focal department using the opportunity of timetabled whole year lectures with high attendance at the start of the academic year. A particular emphasis was placed on the harm done by lad culture to both male and female students, for example using evidence around male mental health such as the *Campaign Against Living Miserably*. Real, but anonymised non-contemporary examples of support work by the researcher with male students addressing depression, self-harm, violence and substance abuse were

used to illustrate the vulnerability of male students. The project was explained, in part, as an experiment to involve male students in engaging with the challenge of lad culture. The context of the wider project within the department was an important framework within which the approach to potential interview subjects could be made. This study reports the interview based element of the project.

Interview participants

The interviews focused on students who self-identified as laddish. However students might be unwilling to engage with the project or, worse still, they might feel they were being singled out as misogynistic troublemakers.

Coincidentally with the department wide briefings I started teaching a third year class that included a substantial number of students who fitted many publically performed signifiers of laddishness, for example group banter (both the subject matter and language used), dress and behaviour. I asked two students who I knew through teaching them over the previous two years, and who had already volunteered anecdotes about their behaviour in day to day conversation, if they would be willing to take part and if they would ask some of their friends too, without me knowing who they had asked. They were given outlines of the interview content to share, so they could all see in advance of agreeing. In addition they were told that whilst concerns about lad culture focus on aggressive and misogynistic sexual behaviour the interviewees would not be asked about their personal behaviour in any of these areas. They were also informed of the hoped for outcomes to develop support for male students to avoid the traps of lad culture and to provide a novel insight into the problem of laddishness, away from the cliché of “lad = bad”, ultimately helping all students and staff.

They agreed, and five of the six friends they asked also volunteered. Having anticipated that potential recruits would be reluctant the participants were very engaged and remained so. All seven participants were British, white, heterosexual men, aged 20-21 at the time of the interviews. For all seven participants the stereotypical lad activities of going out socialising, drinking and on the pull (implicitly straight) were an important part of their experiences of being a student. Banter, both verbal and actions such as forfeit games (an activity or dare in which failure would result in a forfeit, for example running naked in the street), between them were routine. Six of the seven were very interested in sport and used the university gym, primarily to look good rather than training for a sport.

One problem arising from this method of finding interviewees is that all seven come from a broad friendship group which risks pseudoreplication; they are a small, not fully independent sample from a broader population of lads. The pseudoreplication arose from the method of recruiting participants and is likely to result in a convergence of participants' responses given their shared experiences. In particular, they were all characterised by eventual high academic outcomes although this was not obvious when the project started, their end of second year marks being in the typical mid-range of high 2:2 to low 2:1. All seven had relatively middle class backgrounds, again not known at the start, although several interviewees, as first generation undergraduates, suggested ties to friends at home who they characterised as working class. They are therefore from the young, straight, white, middle-class population who dominate many UK universities and are associated with lad culture (Jackson and Sundaram, 2018). I cannot claim the results can be generalized, although

key outcomes reinforce the limited studies of other, also often small and particular, study groups, for example within one football team (Clayton and Harris 2008).

Interview format and content.

The interviews were semi-structured, one to one with the author. All seven interviews lasted 60-70 minutes the participants talking willingly and ranging widely. They were also encouraged to use whatever language and words came naturally, although experience suggested there was some self-censorship.

Because the participants knew the interviewer there were potential challenges of collusion, positionality, plus the conspicuous ethical dilemma of interviewing students who I taught about a highly sensitive subject. The methodology was granted ethical approval by the university and the funding body additionally commented favourably on the method. The participants were offered the opportunity to be interviewed by a trained researcher who they did not know nor had any responsibility for teaching them, but they all unhesitatingly stuck with the author as interviewer. Overall the importance of this rapport is a powerful benefit in such studies (Hutchinson, Marsiglio, and Chan 2002; Robinson, Anderson, and White 2017) and avoids problems recruiting participants to studies of challenging issues (Carline, Gunby, and Taylor 2017). Hutchinson, Marsiglio, and Chan (2002) emphasise the value of treating this kind of subject matter and method as a collaborative process, where interviewees can appreciate how their involvement is sustained beyond the immediate interview and likely to inform actions benefitting their peers. However, there remains the possibility of collusion. It is likely that participants would wish to create a positive narrative of their lives, a process familiar from studies of male violence (Edin and Nilsson 2014) or interventions to reduce sexual violence (Carline, Gunby, and Taylor 2017)

Before the interviews, the participants were briefed on the focal themes and what would not be included. The over-arching themes were specified as:

1. What is good about being a lad?
2. Participants' own attitudes, and of their friends, to study and academia, peer pressure and laddish behaviour.
3. Experience and awareness of laddish behaviour, such as pressure to join in, own experiences, examples, again their own and those of their friends.
4. Informal support networks, friendship, how to cope in times of trouble.
5. Evidence of impacts on academic work and attitudes to study.

All the interviews were transcribed in full, participants given their transcript and reminded that they could opt out of taking part and their transcripts destroyed. All have remained supportive and interested in the work after graduation. Interviews were coded by the author to identify recurrent elements within the five main interview themes. For example theme 1, what is good about being a lad, included anticipated sub-codes such as friendship and support, but also elements that emerged from an initial coding such as transition to university. Theme 3, focusing on their experiences and

awareness of laddish behaviour, included sub-codes such as banter, alcohol and sports whilst the initial coding also revealed unexpected, recurrent elements such as references to home, class or academic success. Quotes are attributed to pseudonyms for purposes of confidentiality.

Results

The results are presented as the four dominant topics that emerged from the interviews: the participants' characterisation of laddishness, friendship, banter and attitudes to study.

'He's a lad': calibrating laddishness at university.

All seven interviewees readily defined and characterised the negative stereotype of lads using a recurrent combination of behaviours and attitudes, a performance they associated with misogynistic bullying and academic failure. Such behaviours were a familiar part of their undergraduate world:

Big groups of lads going out, chucking drinks all over each other, falling over, not caring.
[Chris]

Being a lad was characterised by going out, risky behaviour, loud, boisterous showing off, heavy drinking, a strong interest in sport, in particular football or rugby, and casual sex ("pulling"). All the participants were content to define themselves as lads, one slightly reluctantly. They calibrated their own behaviour as different from the lad-culture stereotype in higher education by disrupting the dominant monolithic construction of laddishness. Instead they identified other men likely to behave in this way, labelling them as "lad lads", "rugby lads" and "gym lads" although some of these other lads were friends, even flat mates. Typical "lad lad" attributes were:

Trying to do more and more daft stuff so you become the most recognised, you've got the most accolades. [Ben]

Thrives off other people goading them, pushing them to do stuff, often a bit aggressive. How naked you can get and most of them get very naked very quickly. [Kyle]

However it is not just the "lad lads";

Every lad these days has been naked when they're drunk. [Tom]

Characteristics associated with the negative aspects of lad's behaviour were readily identified in the behaviour of others: abuse and disrespect aimed at women, homophobic language, aggression and fighting aimed at men, showing off by hurting other people, and vanity, both in clothes and body image. Much of this performative behaviour was seen as directed at other men, showing off to be top dog. The interviewees' saw these behaviours as a very public, aggressive performance of laddishness. Interviewees also suggested associations likely to cause problems for lads who behave this way, notably disinterest in academic study, lack of support networks and of real friends:

...another type of lad that is very, very masculine, very afraid to express emotion. [Tom]

A subtler element found in all interviews was 'joining in', primarily the socialising or easily getting roped into taking part. Drug use barely featured, except as a very niche element with some lads or venues.

The interviewees' representation of their own behaviours focused upon the interplay within their friendship group. However, the private practice amongst friends could easily turn into intimidating and excluding public behaviours. Whilst the interviewees all distanced themselves from these nastier behaviours they also struggled with the pressures:

It rubs off on you a bit and you kind of get sucked into it. [Kyle]

Being lairy and being a nuisance... I think it is quite easy to cross that line.... If there's is a big group of lads behind you pushing you to do that, you would maybe try it on with a girl. [Tom]

These performances snowball under their own momentum:

There's no ring leader at the end of the day, you're just trying to impress each other. [Rob]

But the interviewees could also be the source of peer pressure to join in:

I guess I was kind of a bit press-, like, from me, putting pressure on him [to drink], it didn't really affect me at the time, but people were calling him boring. [Ben]

Pressure also came from organised nightlife events such as mass pub crawls:

Normal rules don't seem to apply, they [the promoters] encourage you to drink more than you should' [Rob]

Class was made explicit, although fleetingly, in a majority of interviews and seen as an important driver of laddishness, primarily by references to home background and friendship groups. Several participants referred to friends at home who did not go to university, or to other universities perceived as having a very laddish atmosphere:

the lads that stayed at home are the wider group like plumbers, electrician... [Jake].

Whilst the interviewees saw their university city as:

A big football city, so it's a big sports city, it's a big university city and there's a prevalence of lads...where-as down south there is a different attitude..... don't have the same kind of upbringing I had. [Rob]

Another characterised a different city as likely to be a more laddish venue:

Because my friends are in [name of city] I'd say they are actually the lads that I think we should be if we're lads. [Jake]

In all these cases laddish behaviour was associated with a northern, working-class background not specifically a university or campus context. Friends not at university were just as laddish, indeed more misogynistic.

The interviewees were wholly familiar with laddish behaviour which was pervasive throughout their university experience. They sought to distance themselves from the perpetrators of the worst behaviour but found it hard to resist the pressure to join in and getting caught up in events.

‘Time with the lads is the best time you have’: the external performance versus intimate practice of laddism

At the heart of the interviewees’ experiences as lads lay significant friendships that underpinned their university life. Friendship dominated the interviews forged initially via a common ground of drink, sport and sexual objectification of women, summed up by one interviewee as “lad norms”, with pranks and banter an everyday currency underpinning specific events.

Particularly valued were the kudos from being quick witted, especially at a friend’s expense, and the converse willingness to take an insult, as part of a back and forth rapport. The lad norms may represent a limited repertoire to start making friends but by their final year the interviewees had developed much deeper friendships, even if these activities were still core to much of what they did:

That’s the main positive, we do have a lot of laughs, we do fun things together, me and my friends. [Rob]

If you’re part of a friendship group who consist of lads you do a lot more things, play a lot more sport, go out on the town more. [Rob]

Although this might create insular friendship groups:

Maybe it’s not as easy to express yourself if all your mates aren’t the same. [Chris]

An unexpected element in the interviews was that several participants highlighted the group as a space in which they were comfortable, where they could be themselves and did not have to worry what people think. Being with the lads relaxed the need for heightened, public performance of laddishness, certainly by the final year. They were very well aware of each other’s behaviour, misadventures and character. This was taken into account by calibrating banter and forfeits.

The first year of university, especially Fresher’s week, represented the ideal opportunity for misogynistic partying, drink and casual sex:

Halls, it’s like a breeding ground for lad behaviour, everyone’s first taste of freedom, everyone’s going pretty wild. [Tom]

Partying, drink and sex were still important in the final year, the lad norms still applied, but their resulting friendships had deepened:

It almost forces you to get to know each other...you end up having drunk nights and when you're drunk you have your little heart to hearts and that's when you actually make good friends with people. [Chris]

Not worrying what other people think could mean that the lads felt able to talk or behave in misogynistic or bullying ways that would cause them difficulty outside of their friendship group, but there was no evidence of this, quite the reverse. Within their group they seemed less pressured to maintain a heightened lad performance. The bragging, thoughtless stereotype might not be wholly convincing 'we know each other too well' [Tom]. This had its advantages, one interviewee who reckoned he might be seen as a bit more boring commenting 'within the group I don't mind because I'm... yeah' [Jake].

Whilst being one of the lads still required a willingness to join in and take part there was also a recognition that not everyone could always do so all the time. Interviewees claimed that non-participants would not be criticised for not doing so and that actions such as forfeits and drinking games were calibrated especially around ability to drink, injuries, (for example from sport that may restrict mobility), or success with women. However an implicit pressure to join in lingered in descriptions of examples.

Three interviewees extended the value of their group to physical protection and looking out for each other, especially on nights out. This included standing up for one another if threatened, looking after friends who were too drunk and searching for anyone who got lost or separated:

If you go out and something was to happen to you, like you'd get lost or anything like that, they've got your back, they'll come and find you. [Chris]

Of course this could have the perverse effect of allowing more drinking, especially pre-drinks or drinking games, because they knew the other lads would look out for them.

For all of them the lads were an essential, supportive, positive core of the university experience. The simplistic lad norms of their first year had been replaced by deeper friendships:

I've said it multiple times to my friends 'I love you too man', because it is important that your best friends know that. [Ben]

'In a bubble': the social glue of banter.

Central to time spent with the lads is banter. Banter is also core to much of the contest over lad culture; to take the polar opposites it is either used as a glib first line of defence for nasty behaviour ('it's only banter') or a catch-all term to criticise the interactions of many male students.

The interviewees emphasised that banter included talk but also actions, the latter including the likes of forfeit games, dares and pranks:

Just jokes, pranks, messing around with each other, taking the piss out of each other. [Tom]

Banter provided an essential social glue and could be insulting or harsh but only within the friendship group of lads, usually including insults (“rinsing”) or retelling of misfortunes and embarrassing stories at the expense a friend. Being able to banter with style and a telling eye for funny misfortune was much valued. However, all the participants made clear that banter only works with good friends, who will happily return the banter in kind. The to and fro of the exchanges was the fun, a game that only worked if the players could give as good as they got:

A lot of funny stuff comes from the on the spot thinking and if you see a situation it’s that quick thought, that little pop, that little joke that gets everyone laughing. [Ben]

You can literally get away with saying anything to your mates. I wouldn’t be offended, it’s just a bit of banter, a bit of a joke. [Ben]

These explanations could be used to excuse hurtful behaviour but the interviewees were adamant that this was not the intent whilst also recognising the misuse that banter could be put to, such as laughing off bullying behaviour:

So, it’s not, it’s not meant to hurt, but it is funny. [Rob]

Banter aimed at strangers was seen as simply intended to hurt, demean or threaten. Amongst their friends banter worked because of an equality of opportunity based on knowing far too much about everyone’s drunken misadventures, things ‘we have all done at times’ [Tom]. Everybody could be the butt of banter and everybody could join in. Banter aimed at people outside the group was pointless because you would not see or understand their reaction. When friends were known to be in trouble banter would be nuanced. One interviewee explained, having suffered an injury that stopped him playing sport for a while, then he recovered:

It’s when they know I’m okay, that’s when it comes. [Rob]

However banter can resume rapidly, sometimes spotlighting the very misfortune that elicited sympathy:

If somebody breaks up with their bird then there’s a week delay where you have to be nice to them, then after that week you can start making jokes about it. [Ben]

Sexist and homophobic language was common place as part of the chatter, although racist or xenophobic language did not seem to feature. Whilst they claimed to adjust talk and action within the group, several interviewees suggested problems navigating banter. Examples were given of subject matter related to a murder that was brought into banter as a joke, the interviewee not feeling comfortable with this but ‘you just kind of joke and laugh’ [Ben]. Also an example of bumping into a relative who is an out lesbian during a night in town, homophobic slang ‘slipping out’ and the friends involved then being very apologetic whilst the women seemed unconcerned: ‘and she’s just like ‘oh, give over’ [Ben].

You just kind of joke and laugh, when really you think “oh god, it’s not actually that funny” but people say stuff like that, like being in a little bubble with your mates, you don’t think about the implications. [Ben]

There were very occasional suggestions of a divide between language used, most notably:

...there's a boundary between, like, jokes about people being gay and, like, racial jokes. [Ben]

The primary contradictions lay between an avowed desire to avoid misogynistic or homophobic language but at the same time getting caught up in it or putting up with it from other people:

You know you're doomed if you go out with certain people. [Ben]

Banter also included use of social media platforms that have become associated with lad culture. However, all seven no longer paid much attention to such media, associating them with first year at the university and that the content was seen as repetitious and boring. Instead they had their own, private social media chat groups set up primarily for banter but also academic support.

Banter was a key aspect of the interviewees' friendships. They were absolutely clear that banter only works between friends and that banter aimed at other people was insulting and bullying.

'It's not a stigma': top lads, top marks and academic success.

All the interviewees were determined to do well, showing both a strong interest in their study and making no attempt to downplay their effort:

We want to get a good grade, we're gonna work hard. [Lee]

This commitment was attributed to self-motivation but also a recognition that the friendship group all wanted to do well and were willing to prioritise academic work in their final year. They had all cut back on going out considerably and were good at resisting distractions that would have unfailingly side-tracked them in the first year. The academically committed friendship group made sure they had nights out but then helped each other to make sure the work still got done. This was sometimes made explicit:

I think being in a group of lads does mean you get [academic] support. [Lee]

The advantage of the lad culture is the fact that there is that support in terms of academic, it's not a stigma. [Tom]

The desire to do well extended to implicit competition.

You want to get good marks, I've beaten friends, but then you hand yours in and you get 65 and they get 70% and you're thinking how have they got that, because I want that.
[Lee]

Whilst good marks gave bragging rights, poor marks were seen as a sensitive subject and not used in banter. Instead they tried to be encouraging of friends:

Even if you didn't do too well, then, everybody would be there for you. [Ben]

Whilst sensitive to difficulties their friends faced, they were unexpectedly damning of other male students whose poor marks they associated with being stuck in anti-academic laddish behaviours. This included suggestions that these students had largely given up, wasting their

days sitting around playing video games and lacking motivation. There was a sense of increasing schism from these other lads, even if they had all been part of the general lad group at the start of university. How brutally the interviewees dissociated themselves from these others was a surprise:

They bought into that sort of culture, don't do much work. You've given up, that's not good, that's not funny anymore. [Lee]

They are in a small group of people, they don't really turn up to lectures, their grades are suffering. [Jake]

Doing no work may have been funny as a fresher but not by the final year.

Academic success was important to the interviewees, resulting in both competition but also mutual support. They clearly separated themselves from laddish students who they saw as mired in anti-academic laddishness.

Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to the debate around lad culture in UK higher education by characterising the attitudes and awareness of a group of lads to the phenomenon of lad culture and their personal experiences of being a lad as a fundamental part of their lives as students. Lads' attitudes and experiences are absent from most studies of lad culture: it is not surprising that lads are largely absent from most actions to address the harm their behaviour can cause.

The results show that this group were very aware of laddish behaviours and the damage these can do. Lad culture was ubiquitous in their experience of university. Jackson and Sundaram (2018) point out that media coverage of lad culture focuses on extreme examples, often explained away as the activities of a few bad apples, which risks making invisible the pervasive, everyday impacts of misogynistic behaviour. The interviewees' narratives and examples were from everywhere and anytime in their university lives; lectures, libraries, laboratories.

The interviewees' sustained characterisation of laddishness differentiated the same continuum of laddish behaviour identified by Warin and Dempster (2007), if only to distinguish themselves from what they identified as the worst of the lads. The participants' calibration of laddishness exactly matches the terms such as "laddy" and "rugby" lads used by women students in Stentiford (2019) to differentiate extremes of laddishness, suggesting a ubiquity of laddish performance in the UK. The interviewees' evidence supports Jackson and Sundarams' (2018) spotlighting of the everyday pervasiveness of laddish behaviour, what Lewis, Marine and Kenney (2018, 67) neatly characterise as the 'wallpaper of sexism'. Lad culture is disguised by its normality: it is not just a few bad apples, headline grabbing events or confined to a handful of disreputable bars.

Phipps and Young (2015a) note that students may dip in and out of multiple masculinities, with laddishness to the fore when socialising, although for the participants in this study laddish behaviour was a more constant underpinning of their daily lives. Their narratives revealed novel insights; notably the relaxation from clichéd laddish performance within their friendship group and secondly

the schism between lads who eventually focused on academic success versus those left behind. Growing awareness of the variations within laddishness, such as Stentiford's "likeable" lads (2019) or Nichols "mischievous" masculinities (2016), may help tactics to combat lad culture, partly by separating out the viscous misogyny of some male students that hides behind the general laddishness of the others. Instead the positives of the lads' friendships can be emphasised, particularly the obvious affection with which they talked about one another, echoing Ripley's (2018) examples of everyday emotive, inclusive behaviour amongst some contemporary male undergraduates.

More positively the interviewees were willing to engage. Part of the purpose of the project was to experiment with involving laddish students with this topic. Their willingness to get involved can be useful to help challenge lad culture, in particular to outflank claims that the challenge is just political correctness gone mad or similar evasions. Lads will engage if the topic is made relevant to them. The participants revealed a complex awareness, sometimes astute and thoughtful, at others naïve and compromised, very much the detail suggested by Phipps (2016) and Phipps et al. (2017). They simultaneously recognised the harm done by laddishness, indulged in the classic laddish behaviours, struggled to mediate and reconcile their own behaviour and placed their friendship with other lads at the heart of their university experience. This tension runs through discussions of lad culture, not least as the very term can imply a mischievous but essentially good natured masculinity (Jackson and Sundaram 2018) whilst many of the interviewees' own examples showed the unstable threshold between creating fun or fear. The interviews all contained moments of what Carline, Gunby, and Taylor (2017) recognised as 'disruption and contestation' in their study of young men's attitudes to rape prevention campaigns. These opportunities allowed critical, even positive responses, just as Nichols (2016) notes in her study of the performance of laddishness in a rugby club. Carline, Gunby, and Taylor's (2017) subjects also showed the same contradictory, clumsy narratives evident in the current study as young men struggle with stereotypical derogatory language whilst well aware of the challenges this creates.

The participants' distancing of themselves from the nastiest performances of laddishness would be understandable simply as an artefact of the interviews but may also represent the expression of more complex identity work (see recent review Winkler, 2016). Identity work may be particularly apparent in situations where self-identity is foregrounded and simultaneously stressed. The interviews created just such a context as the participants struggled to reconcile their identity as lads and the positive feelings this engenders ('identity play' *sensu* Ibarra and Petriglieri, 2010), with the negative discourse of laddishness. This tension existed in their everyday university lives, not just in the interviews, and recognising the tensions from sustaining a lad identity and how this will vary with context may help position strategies to combat lad culture. Identity as a lad was important to the interviewees, but the identity work required to sustain this self-image was demanding and not wholly successful. The occasional but distinct references to home background also suggested a role for class, that laddishness was thoroughly established whilst at school and that friends who had not moved on to university were likely to be mired in the limited repertoire of laddish behaviours. Whilst university was steeped in laddish behaviour it also represents an opening to address the challenge, creating an opportunity to help lads avoid destructive behaviours if they can be given the means and confidence to do so.

The interviewees' understanding of banter wholly undermines the glib "it's only banter" cop out used to explain away bullying and insulting remarks. Their appreciation of banter made very plain that they recognise the difference between banter within a friendship group versus the demeaning nature of banter aimed at others. Nonetheless their banter routinely included phrases that reinforce sexist and homophobic discourses. One possibility is that as a group of young, straight, white men the sexualised banter was much more relevant to their lives than issues of race. Their claims that sexist, homophobic banter did not mean anything ignores the continued effects of its presence in everyday discourse, echoing Jackson and Sundarams' (2018) analysis that aspects of lad culture are so routine we easily overlook them. More optimistically, Anderson and McCormack's (2018) exploration of the use of homophobic speech amongst young people who were supportive of gay people emphasised the youngsters' differentiation of intent and context, in particular that potentially homophobic phrases lacked this meaning where the friendship group understood none was intended. McCormack (2011) differentiated a graduation of intent in the use of homophobic language and the interviewees' usage fits his 'fag discourse' category, which recognises negative effects may still result even if the participants and context are broadly gay friendly. One fleeting comment in my interviews suggested that racist language was not seen as acceptable but that homophobic language was, with the implication that homophobic phrases were understood as not intended to insult. It may be that the students' publicly performed attitudes ("front stage") and private beliefs ("back stage") are at odds (Ripley, 2018); encouragingly Ripley's study within a friendship group of laddish British undergraduates suggested that their publically inclusive attitudes were genuine. As in my study Clayton and Harris (2011) noted the importance of banter and the benefits of being quick witted, but in the case of the football team they studied the banter remained resolutely homophobic and misogynistic within the group, and the physical space (a student bar) only served to reinforce the unchallenged opportunity for this performance. Banter remains a challenging topic, simultaneously a vital social medium for the lads, but likely to be offensive to others outside the bubble, a tension they are evidently aware of but poorly equipped or unwilling to challenge.

The interviewees were damning of those lads they saw as not bothering with study, depicting them as time wasters carrying on in much the same way as in the first and second year. Stentiford's (2019) study of laddish behaviours amongst engineering students at a UK university hinted at a similar gulf developing between what women students characterised as a "genial" laddishness, versus a small number of misogynistic, anti-academic men who became socially excluded and sometimes dropped out. The friendship group of my interviewees included many women, the interviewees perhaps being examples of Stentiford's "likeable" middle-class lads. The brief references to friends who had not gone to university also suggested a growing separation, moving away from working class laddishness and anti-academic attitudes. For the interviewees academic success mattered greatly. Within the group they were supportive of each other, often helping one another with academic work, as well as very competitive. Revealingly poor marks were not used as ammunition for banter. Whilst academic failure has been associated with lad culture Jackson and Dempster (2009) point out that men still want to do well even if they want to give the impression of not trying. The self-reliant achiever is a classic male performance (Jackson, Dempster, and Pollard, 2015). A top lad can also be top of the class.

Conclusion: tactics to help lads tackle lad culture.

In this section, I use the findings from the interviews to illuminate the ways in which the prevalent lad culture within the UK can be leveraged to nurture positive social and academic progress. The interviewees offer a competing narrative to the construction of laddishness as a wholly negative phenomenon.

Institutional and activist campaigns to reduce the harm from lad culture have seldom directly involved lads, who are likely to be, at best, indifferent to policy or, worse, may react antagonistically to perceived criticism. The interviewees' identity as lads is important to them and therefore glib condemnation will not work. However, their identity work, required to maintain their sense of being good lads in the face of their familiarity with the harm done by lad culture, offers an opening to engage.

Firstly, male students need lad-friendly campaigns which are relevant to their lives. Emphasise the positives of being one of the lads, whilst campaigning remorselessly against behaviours such as sexual harassment and violence. The lads were well aware of the nature and challenge of lad culture. The impact of misogyny and violence on women was not a surprise to them, they did not need more evidence of the problem. They were willing to engage with the subject when this was presented as an inclusive issue. For example they responded positively to the wider project's concern for the mental health of men which has been widely linked to destructive performances of masculinity.

Secondly, lads know the difference between aggressive, misogynistic bullying versus the boisterous fun amongst friends; campaigns should be careful to do so too. Lad culture strategies should reinforce the students' existing awareness of this difference and build their confidence to call out misogyny and harassment, to help isolate and erode pervasive, everyday misogyny. The characterisation of lad culture by a recurrent suite of behaviours (Phipps and Youngs' "drinking, football and fucking") creates a problem if action to tackle the damage done appears to be a blanket condemnation of these activities, which are an important part of the lives of many men, and women, at university.

Finally, help individual students develop the skills and confidence to mediate their own behaviour. The interviewees' attitudes and experiences suggested particular difficulties navigating their behaviour in groups, especially the risk of getting caught up in events or of challenging banter, and also the possibility that sexist and homophobic discourse is still embedded in their activities even though they claim otherwise. Their awareness of the issues creates an opportunity for actions such as bystander training to help individuals practice how to respond effectively, and safely, to situations they will inevitably be caught up in.

We need tactics to address lad culture that allow lads to join in. As one interviewee asked 'is it okay to go out with my mates drinking and on the pull without it being nasty?' [Rob]. The question was not facetious or combative, but a blunt framing of an important question to keep in mind as we devise policy and practice to resist the damage done by lad culture.

Acknowledgements.

The interviews were conducted as part of a project was supported by a Teaching Quality Enhancement Fund award from Northumbria University. The interviewees' willingness to take part and continued support were vital and greatly appreciated. I am grateful to Ruth Lewis, Alison Phipps and Jon Swords for astute critiques and support of this work. Two referees provided very thoughtful and helpful critiques of the initial submission.

Declaration of interest.

The author has no conflicts of interest arising from this work

References

- Aldercotte, Amanda, Kevin Guyan, Jamie Lawson, Stephanie Neave, and Szilvia Altorjai. 2016. *Experiences of gender equality in STEMM academia and the intersectionality with ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and age*. Equality Challenge Unit. London, Equality Challenge Unit.
- Anderson, Eric, Adi Adams, and Ian Rivers. 2012. "I kiss them because I love them": the emergence of heterosexual men kissing in British institutes of education. *Archives of Sexual Behaviour*, 41 (2): 421-430.
- Anderson, Eric, and Mark McCormack. 2018. Inclusive masculinity theory: overview, reflection and refinement. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 (5): 547-561
- Archer, Louise, Simon Pratt, and David Phillips. 2001. Working-class men's construction of masculinity and negotiations of (non)participation in higher education. *Gender in Education*, 13 (4): 413-449.
- Boute, Vanessa, Mark Pancer, Michael Pratt, Gerald Adams, Shelly Birnie-Lefcovitch, Janet Polivy, and Maxine Wintre. 2007. The importance of friends. Friendship and adjustment among 1st year university students. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 22 (6): 665-689.
- Carline, Anna, Clare Gunby, and Stuart Taylor. 2017. Too drunk to consent? Exploring the contestations and disruptions in male-focused sexual violence prevention interventions. *Social & Legal Studies*, 27 (3): 299-322.
- Clayton, Ben, and John Harris. 2008. Our friend Jack: alcohol, friendship and masculinity in university football. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 11 (3-4): 311-330.
- Connell, Raewyn, and James Messerschmidt. 2005. Hegemonic masculinity: Rethinking the concept. *Gender & Society*, 19 (6): 829-859.
- Dempster, Steve. 2009. Having the balls, having it all? Sport and constructions of undergraduate laddishness. *Gender and Education*, 21 (5):481-500.

Dempster, Steve. 2011. I drink therefore I'm a man: gender discourses, alcohol and the construction of British undergraduate masculinities. *Gender and Education*, 23 (5): 635-653.

Edin, Kirstin, and Bo Nilsson. 2014. Men's violence. Narratives of men attending anti-violence programmes in Sweden. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 46: 96-106.

Garcia-Favaro, Laura, and Rosalind Gill. 2016. "Emasculation nation has arrived": sexism rearticulated in online responses to 'Lose the Lads' Mags campaign. *Feminist Media Studies*, 16 (3): 379-397.

Henry, Nicola, and Anastasia Powell. 2014. *Preventing sexual violence: interdisciplinary approaches to overcoming a rape culture*. London, Palgrave MacMillan.

Hubbard, Phil. 2013. Carnage! Coming to a town near you? Nightlife, uncivilised behaviour and the carnivalesque body. *Leisure Studies*, 32 (3): 265-282.

Hutchinson, Sally, William Marsiglio, and Mark Chan. 2002 Interviewing young men about sex and procreation: methodological issues. *Qualitative Health Research*, 12 (1): 42-60.

Ibarra, Herminia, and Jennifer Petriglieri. 2010. Identity work and play. *Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 23 (1): 10-25.

Ingram, Nicola, and Richard Waller. 2014. Degrees of Masculinity: Working and Middle-Class Undergraduate Students' Constructions of Masculine Identities. In Roberts S. *Debating Modern Masculinities. Change Continuity and Crisis?* London, Palgrave MacMillan.

Isacco, Anthony, and Jennifer Morse. 2015. Male graduate students at a "women's college": examining the role of academic motivation, support, connection and masculinity ideology. *Sex Roles*, 72 (7-8): 321-334.

Jackson, Carolyn, and Steven Dempster. 2009. 'I sit back at my computer ... with a bottle of whisky next to me': constructing 'cool' masculinity through 'effortless' achievement in secondary and higher education. *Journal of Gender studies*, 18 (4): 341-356.

Jackson, Carolyn, Steven Dempster, and Lucie Pollard. 2015. "They don't seem to really care, they just think it's cool to sit there and talk": laddism in university teaching-learning contexts. *Educational Review*, 67 (3): 300-314.

Jackson, Carolyn, and Vanita Sundaram. 2015. *Is 'lad culture' a problem in higher education? Exploring the perspectives of staff working in UK universities*. Society for Research into Higher Education.

Jackson, Carolyn, and Vanita Sundaram. 2018. 'I have a sense that it is probably quite bad... but because I don't see it, I don't know': staff perspectives on 'lad culture' in higher education. *Gender and Education*, DOI 10/1080/09540253.2018.1501006.

Kahn, Jack, Benjamin Brett, and Jessica Holmes. 2011. Concerns with men's academic motivation in higher education: an exploratory investigation of the role of masculinity. *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 19 (1): 65-82.

Leaper, Campbell, and Stephanie Van. 2008. Masculinity ideology, covert sexism, and perceived gender typicality in relation to young men's academic motivation and choices in college. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 9 (3): 139-153.

Lewis, Ruth, Susan Marine, and Kathryn Kenney. 2018. 'I get together with my friends and try to change it'. Young feminist students resists 'laddism', 'rape culture' and 'everyday sexism'. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 (1): 56-72.

McCormack, Mark. 2011 Mapping the terrain of homosexually-themed language. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 58 (5): 664-679

Nichols, Kitty. 2016. Moving beyond ideas of laddism: conceptualising 'mischievous masculinities' as a new way of understanding everyday sexism and gender relations. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 (1): 73-85.

NUS. 2010. Hidden Marks. *A study of women students' experiences of harassment, stalking, violence and sexual assault*. London, NUS.

https://www.nus.org.uk/global/nus_hidden_marks_report_2nd_edition_web.pdf

NUS. 2013. *That's what she said. Women Students' experiences of 'lad culture' in higher education*. London, National Union of Students. <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/thats-what-she-said-full-report>.

NUS. 2015. *Lad Culture Audit Report. A look into the findings from our audit of higher education institutions and students' unions work on lad culture*. London, NUS.

<http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/lad-culture-audit-report>

Phipps, Alison. 2016. (Re)theorising laddish masculinities in higher education. *Gender and Education*, 29 (7): 815-830.

Phipps, Alison, and Isabel Young. 2015a. 'Lad culture' in higher education: agency in the sexualisation debates. *Sexualities*, 18 (4), 459-479.

Phipps, Alison, and Isabel Young. 2015b. Neoliberalisation and 'lad culture' in higher education. *Sociology*, 49 (2): 305-322.

Phipps, Alison, Jessica Ringrose, Emma Renold, and Carolyn Jackson. 2017. Rape culture, lad culture and everyday sexism. Researching, conceptualizing and politicizing new mediations of gender and sexual violence. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 (1): 1-8.

Reay, Diane, Jaqueline Davies, Miriam David, and Stephen Ball. 2001. Choices of degree or degree of choice? Class, 'race' and the higher education choice process. *Sociology*, 35 (4): 855-874

Ripley, Matthew. 2018 The integration of British undergraduate men's public and private masculinities. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 27 (3): 288-300.

Robinson, Stefan, Eric Anderson, and Adam White. 2017. The bromance: undergraduate male friendships and the expansion of contemporary homosocial boundaries. *Sex Roles*, 78 (1-2): 94-106.

Scoats, Ryan. 2017. Inclusive masculinity and Facebook photographs among early emerging adults at a British university. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 32 (3): 323-345.

Stentiford, Luaren. 2019. 'You can tell which ones are the laddy; lads': young women's accounts of the engineering classroom at a high-performing English University. *Journal of Gender Studies* 28 (2): 218-230.

Universities UK. 2016. *Changing the Culture. Report of the Universities UK Taskforce examining violence against women and hate crime affecting university students*. London, Universities UK, <http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/changing-the-culture-final-report.aspx>.

Warin, Jo, and Steve Dempster. 2007. The salience of gender during the transition to higher education: male students' accounts of performed and authentic identities. *British Educational Research Journal* 33 (6): 887-903.

Winkler, Ingo. 2016. Identity work and emotions: a review. *International Journal of Management reviews*, 00, 1-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12119>.