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Who Promoted the Nightlife of Flirts? Freedom or Capitalist Business?

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Abstract

There is scientific and rich literature about sexual-affective relationships in the nightlife. Some of the contributions analyze the freedom or the harassments in those relationships. Less has been researched about to what extent the origin and evolution of the promotion and extension of the participation of young people in the nightlife was motivated by their demand for freedom or by the nightlife business. This article presents results of the research about this matter within the framework of the Horizon 2020 Allinteract project. In addition to desk research and a literature review, the research includes interviews to participants in the young nightlife from 1960 until 2022. Besides the diversity of ages and genders of interviewees, the results show three coincidences among all of them: a) they and their friends paid more for less on drinks than in any other consumption they made; b) the motivation for this payment was the will to feel attractive for others; c) disdainful hookups were normalized among those who do not feel attractive enough.

Keywords: nightlife, capitalist business, attractiveness, flirt, coercive discourse, disdainful hookups.

¿Quién Promovió la Marcha Nocturna de Ligues? ¿La Libertad o el Negocio Capitalista?

Resumen

Existe una rica literatura científica sobre las relaciones afectivo-sexuales en la marcha nocturna. Algunas de las aportaciones analizan la libertad o los acosos en esas relaciones. Menos se ha investigado sobre hasta qué punto el origen y la evolución de la promoción y extensión de la participación de los y las jóvenes en la marcha nocturna estuvo motivada por su demanda de libertad o por el negocio de la marcha nocturna. Este artículo presenta los resultados de la investigación sobre esta cuestión en el marco del proyecto Horizonte 2020 Allinteract. Además de la investigación documental y la revisión de la literatura, la investigación incluye entrevistas a participantes en la marcha nocturna desde 1960 hasta 2022. Además de la diversidad de edades y géneros de los y las entrevistadas, los resultados muestran tres coincidencias: a) ellos y ellas y sus amistades pagaban más por menos en las copas que en cualquier otro consumo que hicieran; b) la motivación de este pago era las ganas de sentirse atractivos y atractivas para los demás; c) los rollos despreciativos estaban normalizados entre quienes no se sienten suficientemente atractivos.

Palabras clave: marcha nocturna, negocio capitalista, atracción, ligue, discurso coercitivo, rollos despreciativos.

Many individuals are not aware of the capitalist origin or motivation of the things they do, of the decisions they make, which in many cases have devastating consequences for their health and their relationships. In his book “The dialogic society. The sociology scientists and citizens like and use” (in press), Ramon Flecha explains this with the example of smoking. Until the end of the 1920s, women did not smoke, and most health consequences of smoking were suffered by men and those in their environment (passive smokers). Edward Bernays, one of Sigmund Freud’s nephews, came up with a strategy to help the American Tobacco Corporation sell tobacco to women. He managed to be paid by the company through a pseudo-psychoanalytic idea that stated that women were jealous of men because, as they did not have a penis, could not use a cylindrical object as was the cigarette. This idea was used in a publicity campaign at the New York Easter Parade, in which well-dressed women appeared smoking cigarettes and thus portrayed the image that smoking was a symbol of women’s freedom and the search for equality with men. It was a coercive discourse to make people think it was freedom what it actually was the submission to the publicity made by those who earned a lot of money at the expense of our health.

There are several initiatives which exemplify the birth of nightlife in Western countries. For instance, Zurich’s Cabaret Voltaire was a very famous club during World War I, framed on performances of different typologies of artists that questioned traditional artistic expressions (Goldberg, 2001; Houser, 2018). Later, with the rise of Nazism in Germany, a significant number of clandestine basements were created with live music that were called discotheques (Duque, 2006). In non-Western cities, like Beirut, it is worth mentioning the relevant evolution of nightlife that started with society balls and soirees during the post-independence years and the golden 60s. However, from the 70s onward, due to the influence of European nightlife initiatives in cities like Berlin and Ibiza, Beirut’s nightlife experienced a change with more transgressive and Western-inspired parties (Buchakjian, 2015).

On the other hand, nightlife established in New York is one the most relevant ones. In the 70s there was a community of young people, most of them living in suburban places, who started to frequent nightclubs such as Club 57 and Mudd Club, which became very famous venues for famous singers such as Madonna or Cindy Lauper. Both clubs are based on the

promotion of postmodern and eclectic performances with subversive objectives. In the 80s, thanks to the economic momentum lived in the city due to the Dow Jones Industrial Average's increase, more fashioned style emerged that was significantly visible in Studio 54, an emblematic and worldwide-known club for many years (Houser, 2018). In that club the idea of having a DJ in a cabin was fostered, and the relevance of this figure has survived to the present day (Duque, 2006).

With reference to the capitalist strategies and the economic impact of nightlife, a body of literature has identified a set of instrumental techniques which increase the expenditure on this area (Hobbs et al., 2000; Malbon, 1998). Tutenges and Bøhling (2019) have analyzed how many of these spaces promote alcohol consumption advertising offers such as "Happy Hours". Evidence shows how effective this technique is in making people spend more money in alcoholic drinks. Similarly, bartenders employ different strategies aimed at fostering more alcohol consumption, which some scholars argue is the focal point of the nightlife business (Sheard, 2011). Most of the time this objective is achieved combining flirting and drinking strategies such as shot glasses, beer bongs and large pitchers. In the same vein, other papers have already discussed nightlife venues that have as a core function the selling of alcoholic drinks for which purpose entertainment of different sorts is provided (Moss, 2009). Other works pay attention to the connections between tourism and nightlife (Rêgo & Almeida, 2022). They shed light on how big urban cities are mixing both elements in certain historical neighborhoods. Drawing on the idea that tourism is an important market niche, town governmental bodies are locating clubs in places tourists usually visit.

Research has also explored sexual-affective relationships within the nightlife (Pedersen et al., 2017), with a particular focus on the freedom or harassment in them (Duque et al., 2020; Flecha et al., 2020). In this regard, research has found the existence of the coercive dominant discourse (CDD) that imposes the link between attraction and violence (Gómez, 2015; Puigvert et al., 2019). Different media, movies, TV shows, publicity, peer interactions, and so on launch and reinforce the CDD by portraying violent and disdainful relationships as cooler, more exciting and desirable than egalitarian ones (Rodrigues-Mello et al., 2021). Many adolescents and youth are pressured to engage in disdainful hookups in different settings, and the nightlife is one of them (Racionero-Plaza et al., 2020a).

Much research has been conducted on how this coercive discourse is spread and reinforced (Gómez, 2015; Villarejo et al., 2020), on its consequences for sexual-affective relationships (A. López de Aguilera et al., 2021; Torras-Gómez et al., 2020) or for health (Padrós-Cuxart et al., 2021), or about the transformative potential of dialogue and friendship to break free from such discourse (G. López de Aguilera et al., 2021; Racionero-Plaza et al., 2020b; Salceda et al., 2020). However, less has been researched about the origin of many youth's participation in the nightlife. This study follows the hypothesis first set out by Flecha (*in press*), whose thesis is that the nightlife business sells the product of making oneself feel attractive. Following this hypothesis, this study explores to what extent interviewed people feel that their participation in the nightlife was motivated by their demand for freedom or by the nightlife business.

Methodology

This article was conducted following the communicative methodology (CM) framework (Gómez-González, 2021; Redondo-Sama et al., 2020; Soler-Gallart & Flecha, 2022). The CM has two main characteristics, co-creation and social impact, which are today two requirements for any research project funded by the European Commission (Gómez et al., 2019; Soler & Gómez, 2020). The CM is based upon the universality of language, that is, that all human beings are able to communicate. In this regard, all research participants are involved in a continuous egalitarian dialogue with researchers, in which participants contribute knowledge from their lifeworld and experience, and researchers provide knowledge from scientific evidence. In this way, new knowledge is co-created stemming from the different reflections, perspectives and arguments shared between participants and researchers. This egalitarian dialogue or co-creation is necessary for research to have social impact, that is, to contribute improvements to society and citizens on those issues that society has democratically agreed upon are necessary to improve. The goal of the CM is therefore not to simply describe reality, but to contribute to improving it through the dialogue arisen with the communities and individuals (Ruiz-Eugenio et al., 2020; Valls et al., 2020).

The reality being studied in this research has never been explored from this perspective, which makes this dialogue between the existing scientific

evidence on the nightlife business and disdainful hookups and diverse people's experiences in the nightlife necessary. To that end, 9 communicative interviews have been conducted with people who started going out in different decades from the 1960s to the 2010s. Table 1 below contains more details about participants, including the age and the decade in which they started going out.

Table 1

Participant profiles.

Pseudonym	Gender	Age at which they started going out	Decade in which they started going out
Jaime	Male	15	1960s
Clara	Female	17	1970s
Noelia	Female	17	1980s
Julia	Female	15	1990s
Mireia	Female	14	1990s
Lorena	Female	14	1990s
Abel	Male	15	1990s
Claudia	Female	14	1990s
Angela	Female	14	2010s

In the interviews, participants and researchers engaged in dialogues around their experiences in the nightlife, sharing reflections from participants' perspectives on why they or other people participate in such nightlife, the extent to which the difference between what they pay or paid in the nightlife and what it actually costs is higher or lower than in other

products or services they consume, etc. Interviews were conducted either via videoconferencing platforms or in person, and all of them were audio-recorded. The duration of the interviews varied from 15 to 40 minutes.

The interviews were then transcribed and read several times in order to analyze the data. The analysis was conducted by several researchers in dialogue in order to establish the main categories. After such dialogues and categorization, three main categories were established: the proportion between the cost and the pay for drinks in nightclubs; the motivation for paying such a difference; and the normalization of disdainful hookups in the nightlife.

This research has received approval from the Bioethical Committee of the University of Barcelona, the institution coordinating the project. Following the guidelines of the EU Charter of Fundamental Rights and the UNESCO Universal Declaration of Human Rights, all participants received information about the study objectives, the procedures, and an informed written consent form. The consent form stated that participation in the study was voluntary, that no personal information would be displayed, and that they could withdraw from it at any time. All participants signed the informed written consent form, providing consent to participate and be audio-recorded.

Results

The biggest difference between cost and price: nightlife

All interviewees, regardless of the decade in which they started going out, shared the reflection that the difference between how much they paid for the drinks in those spaces and how much they actually cost is the greatest compared to other products or services they consume. As an example, Jaime, who started going out at 15 years old in the 1960s, explains that:

The difference in cost and price [in the nightlife] was and is the largest of all the products I consume (Jaime).

Another participant, Abel, also explains that he thought the price of the drinks he consumed when he went out to discos around the 90s was really

high, and that he obtained the money to pay for them from either his grandfather or father:

a drink [cost] 500 bucks. In that moment [it was] really expensive, I remember when we went out, we went to the Maremagnum a lot, the drink cost 1000 bucks, I thought “wow, this is super expensive”. (...) [I would obtain the money] from grandpa or from dad, whatever they gave me (Abel).

There is a clear acknowledgement of how high the cost for a drink was in the different nightlife spaces which the study participants went to. One of the participants, whose mother owned a discotheque, explained this reflection as an “insider” of the nightlife business:

I have talked to my mother about the difference between setting up a “tapas” bar and setting up a [discotheque]. The price [of drinks in the discotheque] was set by the market, not by how much the product cost. I mean, I have relatives who have other businesses and what they do is they double the price of what they buy. On the other hand, in this one [the nightlife business], maybe [the difference] was ten times. In businesses that are not nightlife, normally the profit margin you have is double, you sell it for twice as much, but in nightlife it didn't matter if you bought [the products] at Macro, Dia [different Spanish supermarkets] or... the price was set by the market (Claudia).

Knowing the nightlife business from the inside, Claudia clearly explains that in terms of the difference between cost and price, this one is unlike any other business, affirming that it is the very nightlife market that establishes such a huge difference between what people pay for and what it actually costs. Some participants even reflected on what this strategy from the nightlife business meant for the economy in their households:

It was a coincidence that, while I was still a child and helped at work in one of my family's grocery stores in Pérez Galdós, they opened what I believe was the first discotheque in Bilbao (Dantzari) right in front of the store. I used to hear many conversations from the customers about that discotheque, about the

girls and boys that went in there, etc. One of the conversations was that those who go there no longer give their paycheck at home, they spend it there (Jaime).

Claudia shared similar conversations that she had at home, even though it was the late 90s when she started going out. She and her working-class family used to talk about the consequences of the process which (in her words) middle- and high-class youth went through when they started going out to nightclubs:

The debate we had [at home] was that the rich do not give the salary at home anymore and are spoiling their children, [that they spend it] on parties, at the disco... we talked a lot about this process of not giving money at home and spending it on parties, and how this process was destroying families (Claudia).

Neither the drinks nor music: the motivation was to feel attractive

Towards the end of the interviews, all participants were clear in their hypothesis that the main reason for going out and even paying such a high price for the drinks was to feel attractive. In the beginning of the conversation, Abel gave many reasons why people do so:

It was a discotheque where people went a lot, people talked a lot about it, [we went] to see what the atmosphere was like, to meet girls, to dance, to listen to the music played on the radio (Abel).

While at first he talked about meeting people as being one of the many reasons why people go out in the nightlife, he later on recognized that people (and himself) went out to those places and consumed such expensive drinks to flirt, not to dance. He even acknowledged that he and his friends did not like many of the places they went to but that they did for that particular reason:

People buy drinks and go to the disco to flirt or to pretend (...) except for some environments, the other places I went to was to try to flirt, to drink, many places I didn't like, and neither did my friends, but people went there for something else. The party was

associated only with that. If you want to dance you go to salsa classes (Abel).

As Abel explained, partying and consuming in the nightlife is associated with feeling attractive. In this sense, Claudia expressed that every detail in her mother's disco was directed towards people flirting and hooking up. She shared different examples of how this was done:

We did a lot of margin calculations on, for example, whether or not to have a dart machine. The dart machine was there not only because of the amount of money we were getting out of the dart machine, but because it attracted customers who wanted to hook up through the dart machine. The place was geared towards hooking up with people inside. For example in the discos there are always sofas, we had some cushions on the floor, or the darker area, that is aimed exclusively at having people hook up with someone (Claudia).

As Claudia affirms, this not only happened in her mother's disco, but rather in all discos and nightclubs in general, aimed at having people feel attractive. From her personal experience as someone who has gone out a lot to places alike, there is a dominant idea that the attractive people are the ones that can be found in these nightlife spaces, hooking up with anyone or moving around:

we have been taught that feeling attractive is when someone flirts with you, and that [nightlife] is one of the places in which if you haven't hooked up or flirted all night, it's bad, you're ugly (Claudia).

The normalization of disdainful hookups among those who do not feel attractive

In this sense, many interviewees reflected on the idea that consuming in those spaces in order to feel attractive does not always make some people feel that way, and that is precisely why many accept and normalize disdainful hookups. This does not mean that all hookups in the nightlife are

disdainful, but Clara, who started going out to the nightlife in the 70s at 17 years old, clearly states that:

[girls who felt unattractive] sought to feel attractive with people who despised them (Clara).

This lack of feeling attractive in a space organized for this goal through consuming forced them to subdue to the worst guys in the nightlife even knowing that after hooking up with them they would despise them:

they [the girls who did not feel attractive] subdued to unbelievable levels knowing that not only [the boys they hooked up with] insulted them and would not greet them, but that at the same moment they were hooking up with them, the boys were feeling disgusted by them (Jaime).

In a similar vein, Mireia, who started going out to evening discotheques in the 90s, shared a friend's experience in those clubs, in which she would hook up with boys who despised her in order to feel she was attractive:

One of my best friends was subdued for many years to a boy who made her suffer. She and I had gone out together to nightclubs in the evenings. I do remember that she associated feeling attractive with flirting in the discotheque with a profile of guys who then despised the girls. She was looking to attract these guys (Mireia).

Another participant explains that recognizing that the boys she hooked up with were disgusted by her was so hard that she would self-deceit herself in order to believe she had those hookups because she was attractive, not because she was the opposite:

I started going out in the nightlife at around 14 years old, it was the 2010s, and I always felt very ugly and non-attractive, so I went out to try to feel attractive. And in the days I hooked up with boys in nightclubs, before the hookups I felt uglier than ever. And because of that, in those nights I would put myself "out there" for the worst guys to use me as a whore, because I knew I couldn't make boys fall in love with me. And of course, the boys I hooked up with were the ones who could not "access" attractive and beautiful girls and

had no other choice but to hook up with girls like me, so their disdain and humiliation towards me was huge, and I would normalize and even accept such violence. But it was so hard for me to accept that I subdue to such disdain because I was not (and did not feel) attractive that I had to tell myself that they had chosen me over other girls at the disco because I was the most attractive and sexy girl. I knew deep down it was all a lie, but I didn't want to recognize the truth (Angela).

Julia shared an example of how much the “market” value of girls like Angela, who had disdainful hookups, lowered after those relationships, becoming still less attractive and more disgusting to the very boys they hook up with:

a friend of mine (...) told me that the morning after [hooking up with girls in the nightlife], when he woke up, he felt very disgusted by the girls and once, seeing one of them lying there on the bed, he thought she was nothing more than a broom (Julia).

Many interviewees were not aware at first that this eagerness to participate in the nightlife to feel attractive is a strategy by the capitalist market of the nightlife business. Some of them stated that they first were made believe that they went to nightclubs and had those kinds of disdainful hookups because they were free. But they then reflected on the lack of freedom they had, realizing that their motivation to do that came from the nightlife business:

I thought that “being pretty” meant flirting in general and at the discotheque of course. As I had many insecurities and thought I was not (pretty), and I started going to discos at 14, in the 90's, and I loved them, I thought I found the place where I could be attractive. At the beginning it was not easy to hook up, now I know it is very easy because it is all a strategy that even appears on internet manuals. So I thought “I am getting to be attractive, and also freer to do what I want”. Now I see that I didn't become attractive. It is curious that I experienced it as “I am liberating myself” and in reality I was subduing myself, following what is socially imposed on me from a capitalist society that turns me into an object to be used and thrown away (Lorena).

Along this line, Jaime explains that, since the moment in which what he thinks was the first disco from Bilbao opened, the people who went to his family's store talked a lot about the reason why girls at that time would enter for free in those nightlife spaces:

Another conversation [I heard] is that girls were given free admission in exchange for letting boys touch them inside. (...) those who did not succeed in attracting [others] in the nightlife were considered to be useless (Jaime).

In this sense, another interviewee who started going out in the nightlife in the 80s stated that making girls enter for free in nightclubs was a strategy from the capitalist nightlife business to make girls who do not feel attractive pay the price of feeling “triumphant” by having disdainful hookups:

I never paid to enter discotheques, I always entered for free, I only paid the ticket if I wanted to drink something, because back then with the entrance they gave you one or two drinks, I drank a Coca Cola or so... but normally I didn't pay, it was free for girls. Officially they didn't force one to do anything in exchange for the free entrance, but there was a coercive discourse that in practice forced us to have disdainful hookups and most girls had them at least once. Usually it was those who felt less attractive that day and so they tried to compensate with a “triumph” that sometimes was at four in the morning, when the corresponding boy had not achieved anything else and was looking for leftovers. I was told so many things because I did not have any disdainful hookup, a friend even told me that if I continued like that I would get rusty, she said it without bad intentions but without realizing that she was enslaved by that coercive discourse and thus tried to enslave me too (Noelia).

Discussion and conclusion

A body of literature has pointed at the capitalist origin and motivation of nightlife, showing different strategies which the nightlife business uses in order to gain the maximum profit (Hobbs et al., 2000; Malbon, 1998;

Pedersen et al., 2017; Sheard, 2011; Tutenges & Bøhling, 2019). There is also extensive scientific literature about the coercive discourse that pushes many youth to have disdainful hookups in different spaces, including nightlife (Puigvert et al., 2019; Racionero-Plaza et al., 2020a). However, the extent and ways in which the nightlife business is behind young people's motivation to participate in the nightlife had not been explored in depth yet.

The interviewees from all different periods are aware that the difference between the cost of the products and the price in which they buy them in the nightlife is much superior to that of any other product or service they consume. They are also aware that such a disproportionate difference happens even when the cost of the building, the personnel that work there, etc. is included. Very few of them have fallen into the fact that this means a capitalist business, although they quickly see very clearly that it is when this question is posed to them. Only a few participants have pointed out the fact that when the nightlife business arose, many youth who had until then contributed economically to their homes stopped doing it and spending money in the nightlife instead. Until that moment, household economy had for decades been framed on the idea that children contributed to daily expenses with their working effort when they got a job (Elder et al., 2020). This was a practice that contributed to covering basic needs related to food and invoices, but soon changed with the nightlife business which managed for those youth to give their money to them instead of to their families.

Among interviewees, there is also a generalized awareness that people do not pay the drinks or the work of the personnel mainly. When they are asked to reflect on it and hypothesize why that is, the first ideas that usually come up are that of fun, the music, the dancing; but then the awareness that what they most desire and look for is to feel they are attractive to others, and that they are even attractive specifically as sexy people, as desirable for sex, increases. Indeed, that is the hypothesis that they make most to explain the reason for that disproportionate pay.

They are also clear about the fact that those girls who have disdainful hookups in the nightlife lower their value in the market of sexy relationships and, therefore, their attractiveness (Racionero-Plaza et al., 2021). They clearly see that girls who have those disdainful hookups do it because at least in that moment, that day, they do not feel attractive, and they are afraid of not being useful even for those hookups, and that is why the market

created the strategy to subdue them. On the contrary, attractive girls do not need to do so and they do not do so, and the boys who look for disdainful hookups do not come to them because they know they have no chance with them.

Hence, the main conclusion from this study confirms the hypothesis Flecha (in press) set out, which is that what many people pay for in the nightlife is feeling attractive. As participants themselves have stated, they pay drinks 10 times higher than what they actually cost in exchange of feeling attractive. Those who already feel attractive by just going into the nightlife have obtained what they have unconsciously paid for. Nonetheless, some boys and girls who do not feel attractive when they go out have not obtained what they paid for, so they think the only way to feel attractive is to hook up, as the CDD dictates. This makes their need to feel attractive very high and, therefore, some have disdainful hookups if they cannot have hookups with the partners they really like.

This research points out a conclusion that only works for the people interviewed, but that future studies with different interviewees and different contexts and countries will contribute to clarifying.

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