

## Article

# Liberalism, Lack and Living the Dream

Re-considering Youth, Consumer Sovereignty and the Attractions of Night-time Leisure in Magaluf

Anthony Ellis  
*University of Salford, UK*

Daniel Briggs  
*Universidad Europea, Spain*

Simon Winlow  
*Northumbria University, UK*

Antonio Silva Esquinas  
*Universidad Europea, Spain*

Rebeca Cordero Verdugo  
*Universidad Europea, Spain*

Jorge Ramiro Pérez Suárez  
*Universidad Europea, Spain*

**Abstract** Much of the academic literature on alcohol-based leisure focuses on the pleasures of hedonism and youthful cultural exploration in environments free from the prescriptions, pressures and routines of everyday life. In this article – in which we present data from our ongoing ethnographic research exploring the experiences and attitudes of young British tourists in the Spanish resort of Magaluf on the island of Majorca – we argue that the standard liberal social-scientific image of youth leisure is naive and misrepresents its variegated reality. Our research indicates that many young British tourists gain little contentment from their holiday in the sun. Rather than embarking on a leisure experience composed of boundless freedom, choice, indulgence, excess and that is indicative of personal consumer sovereignty, many of our interviewees could identify the regimented and commodified nature of alcohol-based tourism. Rather than satisfaction, they felt an imprecise dissatisfaction. Drawing upon elements of psychoanalytic theory, we argue that underneath our interviewees' accounts of drunkenness and promiscuity lies an obdurate but imprecise sense of lack. Yet, it is precisely this absence which only recharges their motivation to do more of the same the year after in similar destinations, thus confirming the presence, power and domination of consumer sovereignty.

**Keywords** youth, alcohol, night time economy, consumer culture, neoliberalism, consumer sovereignty



With its large night-time economy, good beaches and warm weather the Spanish resort of Magaluf, Majorca, attracts large numbers of young European tourists during the summer months. However, this influx of tourists also creates a number of significant social problems (Hughes et al. 2008). This article uses qualitative data gathered from a sample of young British tourists and seasonal workers in the resort to reconsider the notion of consuming individuals as sovereign and in doing so offers a challenge to some established liberal social scientific accounts of young consumers and their involvement in alcohol-based night-time leisure. We argue here that underneath our interviewees' testimonies of drunkenness, promiscuity, pleasure-seeking and presumed freedom, lies an obdurate sense of lack. For them, something is missing, and they are compelled to follow the reconstructed super-ego's injunction to enjoy in the hope of finding something of genuine value that can be used to assuage this. However, as Lacan claimed, desire always signifies an absence and there are no 'answers' to be found in capitalism's sign-value system.

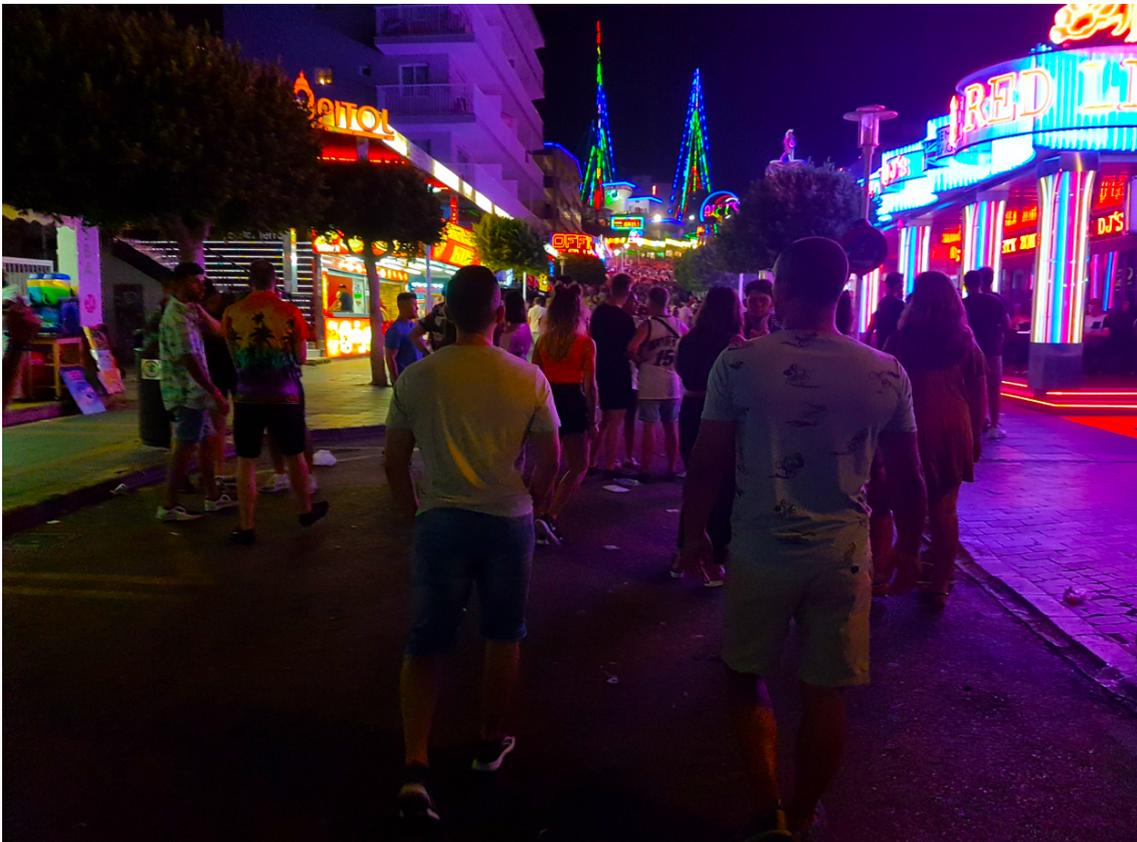


Fig. 1. Researchers in Magaluf's drinking strip. Image: authors.

The data presented here was gathered during four separate week-long visits to the resort during the summers of 2016 and 2017. We used in-depth interviews and participant observation in an attempt to identify their expectations of and feelings about their experience in the resort. As well as conducting interviews with young British tourists and British workers, interviews were conducted with local government officials, police officers, local business-owners and residents, hospital staff, and representatives from

British tour operators to gather a broad perspective on the resort and its functioning. To maintain the anonymity of the young people who spoke to us, we use pseudonyms throughout the article.

This article has four sections. The first section outlines the socio-economic context of our study and offers a basic guide to the concepts we draw upon; this is because any discussion about these young peoples' personal outlooks, their consumer commitments and the functionality of consumer sovereignty must be set against capitalist ideology which 'manufactures desires' while, at the same time, renders its subjects as 'desirers' (Briggs 2017). The second section focuses on alcohol-based leisure and Lacan's concept of 'subjective lack' that acts as the foundation for our analysis. In the third section we offer a sample of our data, and in the fourth and final section we offer a discussion which joints all the elements of the article.

### **Capitalism and Consumer Sovereignty at the 'End of History'**

Wolfgang Streeck recently claimed that 'capitalism is vanishing on its own, collapsing from internal contradictions and not least as a result of having vanquished its enemies' (Streeck 2016, 13). For Streeck, capitalism is moving towards its endpoint not because we lack awareness of its negative outcomes, but because we lack a vision of a credible alternative. In a similar vein, Jean-Pierre Dupuy has lamented the absence of a positive vision of the future. For Dupuy, contemporary politics is but a shadow of its former self and largely obedient to the needs of the 'markets' (Dupuy 2014). Before the 2008 global financial crisis, leftist academics often suggested that an epic shock to the global finance system may force the state to resume its traditional role of containing the profit motive. On the contrary, in the last decade the state has, by and large, rushed to aid markets. Urgent remedies were sought in the immediate aftermath of the crisis to patch up failing banks and corporations and to assuage the declining confidence of markets; while policies designed to address the endemic socioeconomic insecurity experienced by growing segments of Western populations were not, and have not been since, particularly forthcoming. Yet, for the moment, a dead but dominant zombified neoliberalism continues to stumble forward (Peck 2010), although its continued dominance is far from completely assured.

Notwithstanding, there is a great deal of popular anger now at the injustices that have become increasingly salient in the post-crash period. Falling consumer lifestyles, rising economic insecurity and the horrors of austerity merge with common dissatisfaction at the ostentatious wealth and growing power of the global business class to push many once depoliticised people back onto the field of politics (Winlow et al. 2015). Many do hope for genuine change, however, in the absence of an appealing alternative, many people hang on to electoral democracy as the only means of envisioning change and, for the most part, those who control political parties capable of securing an electoral mandate remain largely wedded to neoliberal orthodoxy.

Reflecting upon this context and the neoliberal mantra that 'there is no alternative' to what currently exists, Mark Fisher argued that we occupy an era of 'capitalist realism', where, despite the tumult of repetitive cycles of economic decline in the post-war period, it is now almost impossible to imagine the end of the liberal capitalist system



Fig. 2. The morning after the night before: empty bottles left on the beach in Magaluf. Image: authors.

(Fisher 2009). Fisher claimed that the result of 'capitalist realism' is the endless recreation of present culture and the fomentation of widespread cynicism, depression and anxiety. His account seems to reference an incipient nihilism that effects young people in particular, large numbers of whom, Fisher claimed, are politically disengaged and live in a state of depressive hedonia that is 'constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as... an inability to do anything else *except* (author's emphasis) pursue pleasure' (Fisher 2009, 22). Attached to social media and hooked into consumer culture's ubiquitous sign value system, the conduct and character of many socially-included young people seem indicative of the postmodern super-ego's 'injunction to enjoy' (Žižek 2000, 2009a, 2009b) that uses the feeling of guilt to drive the subject towards enjoyment. For the majority of those living in Western liberal democracies today, the absence of pleasure weighs heavy upon the psyche and mainstream consumer culture is considered by many to be vivid, diverse and a perennial source of value.

This is why in the contemporary era we have been granted supposedly greater individual freedoms to explore behaviours and experiences that were previously subject to stricter prohibitions. Regular indulgence in the consumption of commodities and pleasurable experiences seems though to only offer a partial and fleeting respite from the psychological pressure to enjoy. For Žižek, the suspension of modernity's customs and rules does not lead to an increase in freedom per se, only we become free to enjoy ourselves in ways that are largely restricted to the commodified enjoyments manufactured for us by contemporary commercial culture. We see messages associated with this process everyday: 'enjoy now'; 'buy now'; 'accumulate experiences'; 'shop'; 'have sex'; 'travel'; 'indulge'; 'you deserve it' and the pressure to ensure that individuals do not postpone commodified gratification is particularly intense.

Consumerism and advertising operate on the aforementioned principles of personal freedom, autonomy, the supposed dissolution of restrictive social structures and prohibitions, and situate ‘the authentic sovereign being at the heart of politics and culture’ (Hall 2012, 187). The vast majority of members of Western market societies, with their basic needs fulfilled, are so often positioned as supposedly sovereign over their own lives and identities: unshackled from restrictive tyrannical rules and constraints, enamoured with the power and freedom necessary to make their own choices in the marketplace, and free to indulge their personal desires.

Consumer sovereignty – the situation in an economy where the desires and needs of consumers control the output of producers – is predicated upon the presumed power of individuals, their preferences, tastes, aspirations and desires, which markets are posited as simply responsive to. Yet, such a presumption conveniently by-passes what we argue here is the crucial role played by consumer markets and culture in actually soliciting and manipulating the subject’s desire. For Bataille, the issue of sovereignty was not related to questions of international relations necessarily, but rather pertained to personal relations; specifically, the inner relations individuals share with those objects that they desire. Sovereignty, as a subjectivity, Bataille argued, seeks to live purely for the moment, to consume beyond the basic requirements of ‘utility’, and avoids activity that ensnares one in concerns for the future in order to maintain a self-interested and indulgent concern purely with the immediate present (Nioche 2016). Bataille’s take on sovereignty resembles the individualistic and consumerist injunctions of contemporary culture in late capitalism that we have begun to outline. In particular, Bataille’s conceptualisation appears characteristic of the ubiquitous visibility of opulent and excessive consumer lifestyles in late capitalism, specifically, those experienced by the system’s various ‘winners’ – the contemporary super-rich and celebrities – who seek to wrestle themselves free from social conventions and obligations to practice an un-restricted personal sovereignty and ‘special liberty’ from which one can, with relative impunity, freely express and realise personal desires (Hall 2012).

Utilising Bataille’s basic suppositions on the concept of sovereignty, but with specific relation to the cultural conditions of late capitalism, we suggest that this context appears to have quite profoundly shaped the evolution of contemporary subjectivity. Prolonged political and cultural advocacy of possessive individualism, consumer sovereignty and the associated ideological dismissal of socio-cultural obligations increasingly now shape the ways in which subjects understand themselves and their experience of reality (Winlow and Hall 2013, Hall and Winlow 2015). Amidst neoliberalism’s latest crisis of legitimacy and unopposed capitalism’s potentially terminal internal contradictions, many individuals in Western liberal democracies remain rooted in the relative comfort of capitalism’s consumer universe. Increasingly set apart from those others who appear to constitute their community, many individuals live out their lives as presumed monadic statelets of micro-sovereignty plugged into social media, dreaming of personal growth and hedonistic excess, absorbed in advertisements for holidays, cars and other commodities, while gazing at the sublime splendour of those that have ascended into opulent, exclusive dream worlds of consumption and excess.

### **The Liberal Celebration of Youth Culture at the ‘End of History’**

There is a considerable tendency within sections of the social-science literature on youth practices, identities, cultures and lifestyles to resist a critical analytical engagement with the socio-economic context described above and its potentially debilitating impact upon many young people’s lives. There also remains a proclivity amongst some analysts to posit the cultures that young people create as inherently political, in opposition to capitalism, patriarchy and authoritarianism, and their engagement in consumerism as nimble, adroit and capable of avoiding a ponderous and homogenising consumer ideology (Hall and Jefferson 2006, Martin 2009).

Young people may buy consumer items produced in developing economies by corporations paying near starvation wages from tax-avoiding, union-busting retail giants, but they retain the ability to invert the dominant symbolism associated with these products. When young people daub graffiti on walls, it is suggested that they are expressing their ethical distaste for capitalism and the banality of its cultures (Ferrell 2001). When they loot shops in times of riot and disorder, they are expressing their dissatisfaction with high retail prices and vulgar practices of politicians and banking elites (Clement 2017). When they throw bricks at the police, they are demanding an end to austerity and better employment and educational opportunities (Millington 2016). We may believe that the standardised youth practice of getting drunk, taking drugs and seeking casual sex in the routinised, corporatized and homogenised urban night-time economies of the West is conventional and very much part of the cultural mainstream, but such an interpretation apparently ignores the constantly changing attitudes, values and aspirations of those involved in such cultures (Jayne et al. 2010).

For some liberal social scientists, ‘young people’ appear to act as a blank screen onto which they can project their most heartfelt political and cultural desires. Such liberal commentators place themselves in the privileged position of being able to ‘talk for’ young people. Those who refuse to endorse the celebration of youth are dismissed as conservative contrarians who know nothing of the reality of youth experience today. When social researchers suggest alternative ways of reading the behaviours and attitudes of young people, they are told they have overlooked the fundamental goodness and agency of young people and failed to understand the boundless complexity of the cultural field (Millington 2016, Jayne et al. 2010). As a result, the diversity of ‘young people’ is denied. The diverse political attitudes held by young people are ignored, and the most banal activities are reconfigured and presented as tiny facets of young people’s unquenchable desire for freedom and progressive change.

The liberal humanism that we suggest structures this discourse is far more regressive than we might think. Those who seek to reproduce this are in fact mobilising a reductive naturalism that denies reality. It is perfectly clear that the cultural and political attitudes of ‘young people’ are quite diverse. What sense does it make to claim that ‘young people’ are creative and insubordinate, and that in their cultural practices they seek to topple existing hierarchies and construct a new value order, when ‘young people’ also rush to join the Young Conservatives (Binder and Wood 2013), dream of becoming entrepreneurs or reality TV stars (Winlow and Hall 2006, 2009), and even campaign

politically to return to a traditional social order in which housing was cheap and plentiful and jobs paid enough to raise a family?

Some of those engaged in qualitative social research present data that seems to suggest that youth culture always contains the drive to revolutionise the social world. Some young people may understand their practices as countercultural, but it seems absurd to suggest that these young people are in the majority and that progressive politics is a timeless feature of youth cultures, identities and lifestyles. Are the young people who spend the night queuing outside of the Apple store in the hope of being among the first to buy the latest iPhone (Prynn, 2014) really imbued with countercultural sensitivities? Are the young people who march with Pegida or the English Defence League attempting to fight their way free from the tyranny of traditional culture (Winlow et al. 2015)? Are the legions of young people who sit alone playing computer games (Atkinson and Rodgers 2016) really expressing dissatisfaction with capitalist hegemony? Are the young people shopping for bargains on the high street really attempting to subvert corporate culture and challenge out of date gender stereotypes (Martin 2009, Leblanc 1999)? Why should we assume that every riot is an inarticulate demand for a just social order (Akram 2014, Millington 2016, Clement 2017)?

Given this context, we will now discuss hyper-consumerised, alcohol-based leisure in Magaluf in the hope of challenging this reductive liberal naturalism and forcing it to look again at the reality of youth practice and the depressive hedonia that seems to shape the attitudes of many young people to contemporary consumer culture (Fisher 2009).

### **Alcohol-based Leisure, Youth Tourism and Subjective Lack**

The alcohol-based leisure industry in Britain grew rapidly as the industrial economy faded into history and a new service economy began to emerge. The first neoliberal government in Britain, led by Margaret Thatcher, set out to cut back on public spending and expose British industry to the vigorous cut and thrust of the global market. As part of this transformative agenda, the emphasis of local government shifted from municipal socialism to municipal capitalism (Winlow and Hall 2006). Where once local government was principally tasked with the provision of services to the local community, it was now forced to adopt a business approach in which locales would compete against one another to attract government funds and investment capital (Hobbs et al. 2003). This led to the liberalisation of licensing systems and zoning regulations. Bars could now open later, play loud music after dark and move into areas once free from night-time business activity. Local government bodies began to advertise their towns and cities as centres of alcohol-based tourism. The goal was to allow the profit motive to extend beyond the restrictions of the traditional nine-to-five working day. Consumers needed to be tempted back into the city centre to spend money. This process transformed British city centres, and its affects were most keenly felt in the old industrial areas. Many of these places were 'rebranded' by marketers and public relations companies, keen to cast off images of industrialism and toil and focus on the pleasures of consumption and leisure (Winlow and Hall 2006, 2009).

This trend, which over time altered the overall shape and content of British youth culture (Smith 2014), influenced the expectations of young British tourists heading to the continent for their now-traditional one or two weeks in the sun. A range of companies sprang up to sell alcohol-focused holidays – often drawing upon suggestions of imminent promiscuity – to young people increasingly orientated towards the pursuit of hedonism (Smith 2014). These holidays represented, and continue to represent, a ‘time out of time’ (Winlow and Hall 2006, 2009) in which normative comportment and behavioural expectations are temporarily suspended (Briggs, 2013). The allure of casting aside convention, transgressing cultural boundaries and ‘living for the moment’ carried with it overtones of pure sovereign individual freedom over life and personal destiny (Kuldova 2017). In a world in which transcendental ideals are increasingly greeted with cynicism, a world in which there appears to be nothing pure for us to believe in or work towards, it seems the only thing that can be counted on are the ‘stupid pleasures’ (Žižek 2009b) of consumer culture. Week after week young, working-class British people work away quietly in jobs they hate (Lloyd 2016), and the prospect of two weeks of Bacchanalian excess becomes something to focus on, something that makes the nine-to-five easier to take. It is also something to reflect upon when the holiday is at an end and the deadening work experience returns (Briggs 2013). The best of youth, so many young people think, lies in getting drunk with friends in an atmosphere of (commercialised) debauchery and licentiousness (Briggs and Ellis 2017, Smith and Raymen 2018, Smith 2014, Winlow and Hall 2009), and living life in the absence of consumerised excess encourages the subject to feel they are ‘missing out’ (Briggs 2013, Lloyd 2016) and therefore in a perpetual state of desire.

However, as Lacan claimed, desire always signifies a lack (Lacan 2002). We desire only objects which we do not possess. Should we come to possess the desired object, our desire for it will be extinguished. The ideology of consumer capitalism draws upon this aspect of our psychic lives to renew and reinvigorate market society. The early advertising industry, influenced by Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, did this in a very direct manner. Commodities were pitched to address a sense of subjective lack. Buying particular consumer items, advertisers told us, would assuage our anxieties about our social status. We could stick out from the crowd or display our membership of a particular cultural group by buying a specific branded item. In effect, consumer objects were imbued with transcendent qualities that promised to ‘make us whole again’ (McGowan 2016). Of course, as soon as we had purchased these items, our desires were reconfigured, and the process began all over again. In the pages that follow, we will see that many of our respondents seemed locked in this perpetual cycle of desiring consumption.

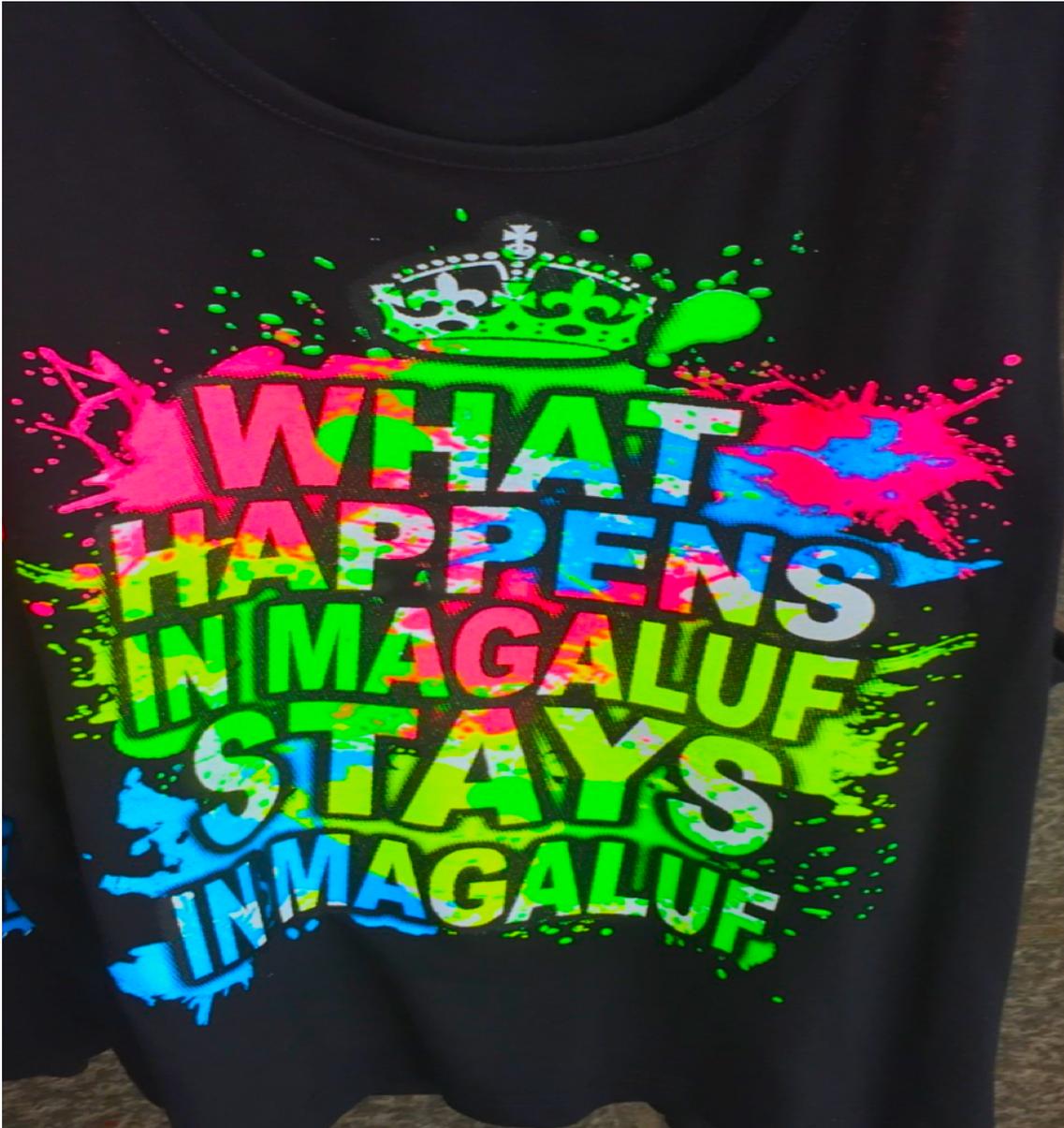
For Žižek an empty space lies at the core of the human subject (Žižek 2000). The subject is compelled to solicit coherent symbolism in order that it might begin to move away from the terror of the Real (Lacan 2002). In essence, the subject’s experience of the Real is so traumatic that it is forced to construct a symbolic substitute. The symbolic order then equips the subject with systematised forms of meaning that allow it to understand itself and the world it inhabits. The absence at the core of subjectivity has been ‘filled up’ with the meanings, associations and ‘identities’ constructed within the symbolic order – or what we suggest is within the realms of consumer sovereignty. The terror of the Real – for example the impending environmental, financial and political

catastrophes in our future – is held at bay by these systems of meaning, and we must act as if we believe in the conventions, traditions, rules and customs of the symbolic order if we are to avoid an encounter with the Real. As symbolic orders decline, as we lose faith in our culture's traditions, conventions, law and unwritten rules, we draw closer to the horrors of the Lacanian Real. The fundamental lack at the core of subjectivity can no longer be 'filled up' with the symbolic order's meanings and identities, as we can no longer bring ourselves to act as if we have belief in them. This model, truncated and simplified here, underpins Žižek's conception of desire and the desirous subject.

Žižek's work on the super-ego's 'injunction to enjoy' is also of great relevance here (Žižek 2000, 2009b). The modern super-ego, Žižek maintains, bombarded the subject with an array of often contradictory messages that related to the prohibitions of the symbolic order and the rules of the subject's community. The fundamental force of these messages was guilt. If the subject transgressed the laws or hidden rules of its community, the super-ego, tasked with reeling in the asocial drives of the ego, would pepper the subject with intrusive guilt. The subject was compelled to reflect upon its social conduct, and its thoughts and feelings, and feel guilty for transgressing the boundaries established by the symbolic order. This is not to say that the modern super-ego is a fundamentally 'ethical' agency that attempts to push the subject towards positive social behaviours. Žižek is at pains to point out that the rules of the subject's community can often be harmful and negativistic. However, Žižek's main concern is to map the inversion of the modern super-ego in the present.

The postmodern super-ego, which arose at a time characterised by the triumph of consumer semiology and the gradual disintegration and disappearance of traditional community life, uses its guilt function to push the subject towards the realm of subjective pleasure. The asceticism of traditional societies, and the sense of guilt one may have felt for engaging in ostentatious and pleasure-driven behaviours, are at an end. One 'follows the rules of one's community' by committing to what might appear, initially, to be selfish and egoistic behaviours. We 'follow the rules' by buying beyond our means, by taking opportunities to experience commercialised thrills, by giving primacy to immediate gratification over delayed gratification, by living as if we were sovereign. The postmodern super-ego instructs us to enjoy and we feel guilty if we ignore its instructions. However, Žižek is not describing a world of unrestrained pleasure and the freedom to pursue individual pleasure-giving projects. It is impossible to really enjoy what one is instructed to enjoy. Dedicated to amassing hedonistic experiences, we do not experience the thrill of genuine transgression, as, when we 'transgress', we are in fact abiding by the symbolic law. The barriers we believe ourselves to be overstepping when we engage in pleasure-seeking behaviours does therefore not really exist, so in fact there is nothing inherently rebellious in drinking to excess, especially when there are many others close by doing exactly the same.

With its promises of pleasurable excess and hedonism, the majority of young tourists holidaying in Magaluf are drawn to Punta Ballena (colloquially referred to by British tourists as 'the strip'): a long street filled with pubs, bars, nightclubs, tattoo parlours, lap-dancing clubs, brothels and fast-food outlets that runs parallel to the resort's main beach. Punta Ballena, and the area that surrounds it, is saturated in flyers and posters for events and club nights that promise unbridled enjoyment, hedonism and that instruct



individuals to ‘live for the moment’; t-shirts and vests in local shops are adorned with slogans that fit the resort’s self-image of decadence and excess: *‘What happens in Magaluf stays in Magaluf’* and *‘Made in the UK destroyed in Magaluf’*.

Fig. 3. Vests available to purchase in one of the numerous tourist shops around Punta Ballena that fits the resort’s image of deviance, debauchery and excess. Image: authors.

Both male and female bodies are ‘objectified’ and commercialised. Advertisements promise a world of exoticism, sex and excess, but the reality of Punta Ballena is rather different. During day-light hours, the shallowness of the resort’s commercial messages is there for all to see. Despite the best yet laboured efforts of local street cleaners, urine and vomit can still be seen on the pavement. Uncollected refuse, plastic cups and broken



bottles lie in piles next to doorways. Graffiti adorns walls and the shutters that will soon open to reveal the fast food outlets and drinking venues of the night-time economy. As night descends, this grubby reality is replaced by the 'orderly disorder' (Horsley et al. 2015) of the commercial drinking strip.

Fig. 4. Lap dancing clubs on Punta Ballena. Image: authors.

Throng of young men and women, keen to get drunk and have fun, will soon fill the street. Some will be drawn into lap-dancing venues and brothels. Women will be repeatedly accosted and grabbed. Some will lose consciousness and end up in a heap on the floor or sitting slumped against a wall. There will be a fight, and someone will be badly hurt. And then the throngs will head back to their hotels to sleep it off before the process starts all over again as the following indicative fieldnotes attest:

Midnight approaches as we make our way to the bottom of Punta Ballena. The rhythmic beat of heavy bass grows louder and the first signs that we are getting closer to the resort's nightlife become more visible. On the pavements, beneath a large banner draped high up across the side of a building proclaiming that 'Good Times Start Here', lie piles of plastic wrappers and polystyrene boxes containing half eaten fast food; patches of urine cover walls; and fresh pools of vomit lie adjacent to dustbins. The first of several of tonight's casualties confronts us: a young man, wearing only shorts and trainers, sits slumped on the pavement. His head hangs forward, his eyes are closed, and a long string of

saliva stretches between his parted lips and the grey concrete. Vomit lies in pools around him and a patch of urine spreads across his shorts. Several young people gather next to him and ask if he knows where his hotel is. He stirs briefly, his eyes remaining closed, while he mutters a barely intelligible reply before drifting into unconsciousness again. Punta Ballena is jammed with a large mass of bodies that

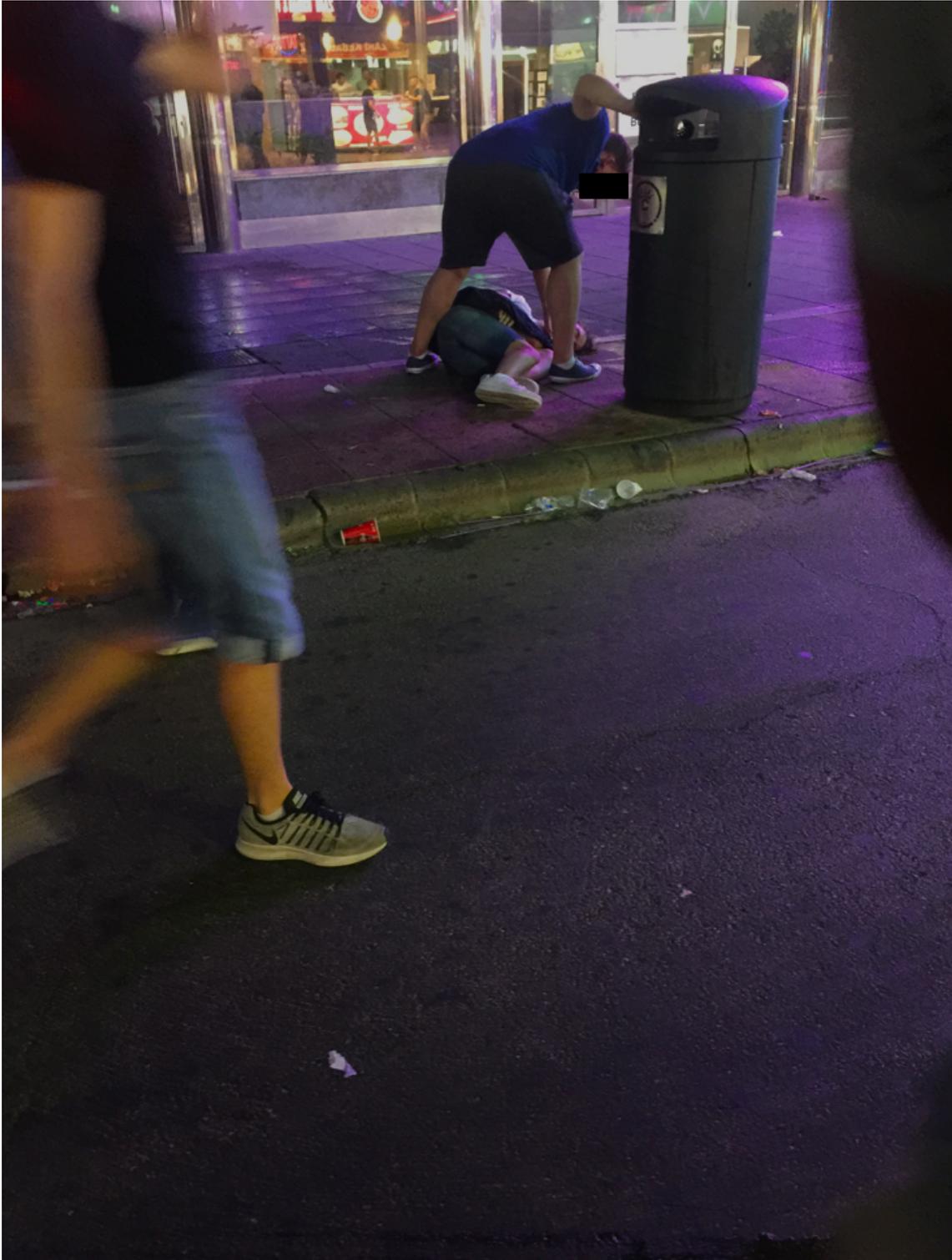


Fig. 5. Typical consequences of the night's excesses off one of the small streets of the 'strip.' Image: authors.

move chaotically in various directions as it ascends into a kaleidoscope of neon lights. As we weave our way through the pulsating crowd, PR workers with various regional British accents approach us frequently: *'Fucking mental in here mate, wall to wall with gash (women), and I can do you a pint and a shot for 5 Euros. How good is that?'* Touching and groping are frequent in the mostly male crowd. Women stick together rather than risk a dangerous journey along the drinking strip alone. Intoxicated young men embrace each other and sing football songs; PR workers grab drunken revellers and attempt to drag them into their bars. We reach the brow of the hill and a young woman approaches us: *'You want sex tonight? Blow job? Lovely girls in here (gestures with her hand to a 'Gentleman's club')*'. We politely decline and continue walking. We pass a busy bar and notice a heated discussion taking place between two young men with a third young man positioned between them trying to prevent what appears to be a confrontation becoming physical. He fails. One of the young men punches the other. The blow's impact knocks his opponent swiftly backwards and sprawling onto the floor. A few onlookers laugh as

business continues as normal.

Punta Ballena displays the raw democracy of capitalist universalism but there are hidden 'divisions in the dark' (Hollands 2002). As Briggs has noted, high-status consumer venues enable those with significant cultural, financial and experiential capital to position themselves above 'the herd' on the street that stumble blindly from venue to venue (Briggs 2013). For example, on the Island of Ibiza, exclusive hotel, beach and



nightclub complexes – like Ushuaia – claim to offer ‘services and facilities for those who want everything’ amongst ‘beautiful people and international celebrities’ (see <https://www.theushuaiaexperience.com/en/club/>). A similar process of market segmentation is underway in Magaluf. The recent arrival of several exclusive hotels and beach clubs, patrolled by muscular private security personnel, is indicative of the tendency of

markets to diversify in an attempt to cultivate more luxurious and exclusive holiday experiences.

Fig. 6. Unconscious on the 'strip.' Image: authors.

### **Stories From the 'Strip'**

While we heard many stories of promiscuity and youthful hijinks, we also encountered many young men and women for whom the holiday had not gone to plan. We also spoke to many men and women bored with the prevailing climate of regimented drunkenness. 'Robbie' and 'Dez' were both 20 years old when we spoke to them. Both lived in the South of England. Robbie was employed full-time and Dez was at university. We encountered them during their second visit. The pair recalled their first visit fondly: care-free nights spent drinking, spending money and meeting young women. This second visit, however, had so far not quite lived up to their expectations. They were this time aware of the grubby materiality of the drinking strip and its environs, and they believed the resort had become contaminated by Sub-Saharan African men and women working in the resort's drug and street sex markets:

*Robbie:* 'You never used to get pimps and prostitutes. They'll [African sex workers] just walk up to you now and grab your cock. They stand outside our hotel and take your wallet out of your pocket, nick your money. It happened to me last night... they took my wallet out, took my money and then tapped me on the shoulder and said, "you've dropped your wallet". There were two other guys on the other side of the road and when I was walking off they came back and told me what happened.'

The palpable sense of orderly disorder that descended upon Punta Ballena during the night seemed to simultaneously intimidate and attract our participants. Many of the men knew that they may encounter violence. All of the women knew that it was likely they would at least be groped at some stage. Some of our contacts spoke of the monotony of pleasure-seeking and the mundanity of the nightly trek to the drinking strip. Others constructed a 'hierarchy of remembrance' (Winlow and Hall 2006) that allowed them to focus on the fun nights that occurred only rarely and ignore the dull nights in between. The unadulterated fun of the 'good nights' seemed to cancel out the drabness and mediocrity that seemed to be the norm. And yet, many were also of the view that pleasure could indeed be found here. Some connected their holiday experiences to their lives at home. They had worked hard, and this was their chosen compensation. They felt that they needed this kind of commercialised excess to cope with the pressures they experienced in their day-to-day lives:

*Dez:* 'I think so many people our age go to Uni and they've got so much pressure on them: You've got to get a degree, get a good job, because otherwise you are screwed and all that shit. People want to come here and let their hair down, get away from all the stress.'

Robbie and Dez told us they had enjoyed their holiday, but nonetheless it had failed to measure up to expectations. They complained that the resort was not as busy as before.



They complained that the resort was dominated by competitive groups of young men, and there were not enough women available for them to talk to. They also complained about the prices and the aggressiveness of the PR workers and suggested that the bar owners watered down the drinks. They had hoped to recreate the excitement of their last holiday in Magaluf, but, so far, they had been unable to do so. In retrospect, they wished they had chosen more wisely and booked a holiday at a competing resort, where, they were sure, young people really were ‘living the dream’.

Fig. 7. The promise of good times on Punta Ballena. Image: authors.

This seemed to also be the case for ‘Liz’, a British woman aged in her early 20s, who worked as a ‘shot girl’ in a bar. In contrast to Robbie and Dez – who were present for only a brief, but intense, bout of hedonism before returning to the pressures of work and study – Liz had been in the resort since the beginning of the summer and would remain until the weather cooled and the crowds dissipated. Liz’s working nights were spent dressed in heavy make-up and revealing clothing. She carries large trays of vodka jelly of varying colours around the bar while exchanging brief and flirtatious pleasantries as she tries to entice customers to buy drinks from her. Like so many PR workers in the resort, Liz was not legally registered to work and, as a result, found herself in a particularly vulnerable position. She did not receive a regular wage from her employer but was paid commission, receiving a Euro for every drink she sold. Much of what Liz had to say about her work and life in the resort did not mirror the glamour and exoticism that are often used to promote summer work abroad to British young people.

As she sat sullenly across the table from us one evening, sipping a vodka and coke and smoking a cigarette, Liz described a nocturnal existence of perpetual fatigue and insecurity. Low-level sexual harassment and constant groping from groups of intoxicated men were routine. Relationships with men were fleeting, ephemeral, and devoid of commitment and trust. She had fallen in love with a young man, but she had later discovered he had been unfaithful. A small mercy was that Liz received complimentary drinks throughout the night, and the numbing quality of intoxication seemed to offer her some respite from the boredom, drudgery, depression and insecurity that typified her work life. Liz grew up in a rural market town in Southern England, and she tells us she was always desperate to escape. For a time, the bright lights of Punta Ballena appeared to offer Liz an escape from the tedium of home. The strip seemed exciting and imbued with possibilities. It seemed a world away from the dour and exploitative service economy in which most of her friends worked. Her view of the resort is now quite different. Every year when she returns to England she tells herself she will not return to Magaluf, but every year she does precisely that. The banality of everyday life in her home town seems to her too stifling, and the longer she spends there the more she is willing to disavow her knowledge of Magaluf's dark side. A friend will say on Facebook they plan to head to Magaluf again for the summer, and Liz will look out the window and conclude that a better life is being lived elsewhere.

Tales of dissatisfaction, boredom, entrapment and grinding precarity (Standing 2011) were relayed to us by other British workers in the resort. Most were seduced by the lure of working and partying the summer away. 'Michelle', another young twenty-something British woman who also worked as a 'shotgirl', had similar experiences to share. Like Liz, Michelle's evenings were spent selling shots; her salary dependent on sales. 'Bad nights' – by which Michelle meant low sales – were a frequent occurrence and Michelle had found herself drinking alcohol most nights:

*Michelle:* 'You end up drinking all night, every night. You have to be on a level with people. On days off you don't sleep at night, you can't, you just lie awake and only sleep in the day. Your body just adapts, it just gets used to it.'

Michelle had grown bored of her employment, weary of her nocturnal, alcohol-soaked existence, and disillusioned by her precarious circumstances. Michelle explained to us that she had recently been the victim of an elaborate scam by someone she believed was her landlord. Michelle and her friend, who also worked in the resort, had been paying this person to stay with several other PR workers in an apartment located close to Punta Ballena. One afternoon a representative from the local council visited the apartment to inform Michelle, her friend, and the others staying in the apartment that they were actually squatting. Michelle had not seen or heard from the person she had been paying rent to since the council's visit. As Michelle got up from her seat to return to work she told us how she was now 'counting the days' until her flight back home.

## **Discussion**

Using periods of ethnographic immersion in the resort of Magaluf, we have presented an alternative argument to those that suggest the youthful consumerist excess and hedonism that takes place there reflects a boundless cultural field with the potential for

resistance. As we established relationships with these young people and started to interrogate the ‘fun’ they had said they had, and the images of excess they had posted on their Facebook and Instagram accounts, we discovered that they merely reflected the superficial ‘desires’ marketed to engage them as desirers (Žižek 2009a, Briggs 2017) and this is what forms the centre of the consumer sovereignty paradigm: there is no choice but to choose, no alternative other than to conform in what the symbolic order provides (Žižek 2000). It is this provision which stimulates the seemingly never-ending excess and appeal of returning to Magaluf, or a similar resort, to participate in the same activity again. We suggest that this reveals the personal stymie of no real opportunity to change mixed with a nagging sense of having participated in a ‘pointlessness which was pointless’ (Briggs 2013) and this is the lack to which Žižek refers.

This, we argue, confirms their obligations as subjects involved in the negation of the Real (Lacan 2002): individuals largely concerned with self-gratification (Žižek 2009a) that seems to fit the blueprint laid out in Bataille’s sovereign subjectivity when consumption ‘beyond the basic requirement’ merges with a lack of concern for the future. The strong sense of guilt in these young peoples’ minds is of ‘missing out’, rather than any pressing concerns about their position in time, space and history, nor inherent feelings of indignation at the various crises emerging from the neoliberal capitalist system. All there is are the markers and symbols of unlimited fun they can have in a plastic location conceived for feeling this false sense of personal liberty.

These narratives and images also confirm the instructive nature of how ‘desire’ is commercially constructed in Magaluf and the fact that it is aggressively marketed to these young people, as Žižek points out, meaning it becomes impossible to enjoy and rather than contentment or satisfaction, there endures a sense of absence and lack. In this sense, our research suggests it is difficult to sustain claims that youth culture is inherently creative, empowering and resonant of countercultural sensibilities in this context. As a result, it becomes important to challenge consumer sovereignty and the presumptions this entails regarding personal choice, freedom and the function of markets. Many of the young British tourists who visit Magaluf hope to experience the thrill of transgression. They are bored with their home lives, often anxious and stressed about work, family and relationships, and they hope to throw themselves into an absorbing consumer experience full of unexpected joys and immediate gratification that confirms their assumed status as sovereign consumers.

However, the drinking environments in which they spend the majority of their time are routinised, risky and aggressively commercial. The disorder of the drinking strip is not spontaneous, and nor is it particularly shocking. It is routinised and predictable, and the profit motive underpins almost every facet of the holiday experience. Many of these tourists leave the resort feeling disappointed, exploited and with a nagging sense that something that cannot be identified is missing. What they were searching for was simply not to be found in the drinking dens of Punta Ballena. The reality of Magaluf does not stand in stark contrast to the reality of everyday life in Britain, the stupefying banality of which many of our contacts sort to flee. The mundanity of work is not balanced out by the supposed raw freedom and personal sovereignty presumed inherent to this consumer experience, because this experience is first and foremost a commercialised one. It is manufactured, advertised and sold.

The cold market logic that underpins low-grade service work in Britain underpins the routinised and alcohol-sodden consumer experience available in Magaluf. The dreams of unrestrained freedom, pleasure and consumerist excess beyond basic utility, that so many British tourists carry with them as they head off on their holiday in the sun will soon fade. Many will leave the resort financially worse off. They will have a few interesting stories to tell, but our data clearly shows that growing numbers find the annual binge in the sun ultimately unfulfilling and potentially harmful. However, their recognition of the holiday's unfulfilling nature will not mean they will drop out and never return; on the contrary, these uncomfortable truths seem to be quite effectively disavowed and suppressed, and the promises imbued in this consumer experience become once again appealing and appear to be genuine. The search then resumes, hope rekindled, that the desirable experiences offered by alcohol-based night time leisure will attenuate subjective feelings of emptiness and fulfil expectations.

- Akram, Sadiya.** 2014. 'Recognizing the 2011 United Kingdom riots as political protest: A theoretical framework based on agency, habitus and the preconscious', *British Journal of Criminology*, 54, 3: 375-392.
- Atkinson, Rowland.** and Rodgers, Thomas. 2016. 'Pleasure Zones and Murder Boxes: Online Pornography and Violent Video Games as Cultural Zones of Exception', *British Journal of Criminology*, 56, 6: 1291-1307.
- Binder, Amy and Wood, Kate.** 2013. *Becoming Right*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Briggs, Daniel.** 2013. *Deviance and Risk on Holiday: An Ethnography of British Tourists in Ibiza*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Briggs, Daniel.** 2017. 'Lectura ligera de una de las historias oscuras del mundo de consumo: La obsolescencia programada en su contexto capitalista avanzado' in J. Soto Piñeda (Ed), *Obsolescencia Programada en un contexto nuevo*, pp 433-458, Bogota: Universidad Externado de Colombia.
- Briggs, Daniel and Ellis, Anthony.** 2017. 'The Last Night of Freedom: Consumerism, Deviance and the 'Stag Party'', *Deviant Behaviour*, 38, 7: 756-767.
- Clement, Matt.** 2017. *The Sound of the Crowd*. London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Dupuy, Jean Pierre.** 2014. *Economy and the Future*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.
- Ferrell, Jeff.** 2001. *Tearing Down the Streets*. Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Fisher, Mark.** 2009. *Capitalist Realism*. Winchester. O Books.
- Hall, Steve.** 2012. *Theorizing Crime and Deviance: A New Perspective*. London: Sage.
- Hall, Steve and Winlow, Simon.** 2015. *Revitalizing Criminological Theory: Towards a New Ultra-Realism*, London: Routledge.
- Hall, Stuart and Jefferson, Tony.** (ed) 2006. *Resistance through Rituals*, London: Routledge.
- Hobbs, Dick Hadfield, Phil Lister, Stuart and Winlow, Simon.** 2003. *Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night Time Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Hollands, Robert.** 2002. Divisions in the Dark: Youth Cultures, Transitions and Segmented Consumption Spaces in the Night-Time Economy. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 5, 2, 153-171.

- Horsley, Mark, Kotze, Justin and Hall, Steve.** 2015. 'The Maintenance of Orderly Disorder: Law, markets and the pseudo-pacification process' *Journal on European History of Law*, 6, 1: 18-29.
- Hughes, Karen, Bellis, Mark, Calafat, Amador, Juan, Montse, Schnitzer, Susanne and Anderson, Zara.** 2008. 'Predictors of violence in young tourists: a comparative study of British, German and Spanish holidaymakers', *European Journal of Public Health*, 18, 6: 569-574.
- Jayne, Mark, Valentine, Gill and Holloway, Sarah.** 2010. 'Emotional, embodied and affective geographies of alcohol, drinking and drunkenness' *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 35, 4: 540-554.
- Kuldova, Tereza.** 2017. The Sublime Splendour of Intimidation: Outlaw Biker Aesthetics of Power. *Visual Anthropology*, 30, 5: 379-402.
- Lacan, Jacques.** 2002. *Ecrits*, London: Norton.
- LeBlanc, Lauraine.** 1999. *Pretty in Punk*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press.
- Lloyd, Anthony.** 2016. Labour markets and identity on the post-industrial assembly line. London: Routledge
- Martin, Greg.** 2009. 'Subculture, style, chavs and consumer capitalism: Towards a critical cultural criminology of youth', *Crime, Media, Culture*, 5, 2: 123-145.
- McGowan, Todd.** 2016. *Capitalism and Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Millington, Gareth.** 2016. "I found the truth in Foot Locker": London 2011, Urban Culture, and the Post-Political City', *Antipode*, 48, 3: 705-723.
- Nioche, Claire.** 2016. Sovereignty. In Hewson, Mark and Coelen, Marcus (eds) *Georges Bataille: Key Concepts*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Peck, Jamie.** 2010. Zombie neoliberalism and the ambidextrous state. *Theoretical Criminology*, 14, 1, 104-110.
- Prynn, Jonathan.** 2014. 'iPhone 6 launch: Thousands queue outside Covent Garden Apple store to get hold of latest handset', *Evening Standard* (19/09/2014).
- Smith, Oliver.** 2014. Contemporary adulthood and the night-time economy. Hampshire: Palgrave.
- Smith, Oliver and Raymen, Thomas.** 2018. Deviant Leisure: A Criminological Perspective. *Theoretical Criminology*, 22, 1, 63-82.
- Standing, Guy.** 2011. *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury
- Streeck, Wolfgang.** 2016. *How will Capitalism End?* London: Verso.
- Winlow, Simon and Hall, Steve.** 2006. *Violent Night: Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture*, Oxford: Berg.
- Winlow, Simon and Hall, Steve.** 2009. 'Living for the Weekend: Instrumentalism, consumption and 'individualism' in youth identities in the North East of England', *Ethnography*, 10, 1: 91-113.
- Winlow, Simon and Hall, Steve.** 2013. *Rethinking Social Exclusion: The End of the Social?* London: Sage.
- Winlow, Simon, Hall, Steve, Treadwell, James, and Briggs, Daniel.** 2015. *Riots and Political Protest: Notes from the Post-Political Present*, London: Routledge.
- Žižek, Slavoj.** 2000. *The Ticklish Subject*, London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj.** 2009a. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, London: Verso.
- Žižek, Slavoj.** 2009b. *Violence*, London: Profile.

Corresponding authors: Anthony Ellis, University of Salford, UK: [a.j.ellis@salford.ac.uk](mailto:a.j.ellis@salford.ac.uk)

