Everything starts with an 'E': Exclusion, ethnicity and elite formation in contemporary English clubland

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Abstract

Early Club Studies emphasised the inclusiveness of club cultures and the PLUR ethos of 'peace, love, unity and respect' alongside a polarised characterisation of nightlife contexts, as either commercial, alcohol-oriented nightclubs offering 'mainstream' pop music, or 'authentic'/'alternative' underground dance clubs associated with widespread illicit drug use. This paper adds to the growing body of research problematising these simplistic characterisations of club cultures and leisure venues across the night-time economy, emphasising elements of fragmentation and segregation alongside the continued importance of social structure and resultant social and spatial exclusion. The authors explore how informal processes - such as club launches, internet promotions and dress codes - together result in the production and reproduction of two contrasting forms of English clubland elites: 'cultural elites' produced through the social, cultural and spatial exclusion of electronic dance music of black origin and its minority ethnic, working class and lower income followers from Manchester city centre dance clubs; and 'consumer elites' produced through the economic and cultural exclusion of working class and lower income club-goers from nightclubs in London's West End. The complex and interweaving practices of cultural distinction and structural discrimination which produce such elites are often closely intertwined with the formal and informal regulation, marginalization and criminalization of specific cultural forms. The paper therefore argues for the construction of more nuanced conceptual understandings of the social divisions and inequalities within nightlife and in studies of young people's leisure opportunities more generally.
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