

## **‘A cathartic moment in a man’s life’: homosociality and gendered fun on the *puttan tour***

### **Abstract**

Rarely addressed in academic scholarship, the *puttan tour* is a well-known form of entertainment in Italy where young men drive around in small groups with the aim of spotting street sex workers. On some occasions the participants will approach the sex workers to strike up a conversation. On others they will shout out insults from their car then drive away. This paper aims to advance a detailed analysis of this under-explored cultural practice drawing on a diverse body of scholarship exploring the intersection of masculinity, leisure, and homosociality. By analyzing stories of *puttan tours* gathered mostly online, including written accounts and *YouTube* videos, our aim is to explore the appeal of the *puttan tour* through an analysis of how homosociality, humor and laughter operate in this example of gendered fun. To this end, we look at the multiple and often equivocal meanings of this homosocial male-bonding ritual, its emotional and affective dynamics, and the ways in which it reproduces structures of inequality while normalizing violence against sex workers.

### **Introduction**

As a teenager growing up in Italy in the late 1980s, Isabel, the first author of this paper, recalls how every now and then on a Saturday the ‘boys’ of her group of friends would meet late at night after the ‘girls’ had gone home and drive to a nearby city for a *puttan tour*. The *puttan tour* – ‘whore tour’ in English – consists of a small group of young male friends who, usually at night, drive around to spot street sex workers, approach them to strike up a conversation, or shout insults at them from their car. The aim of the *puttan tour* is not for the ‘tourers’ to purchase sexual services, but to spend time together, exchange jokes, laugh and have fun while engaging with the (real or

imagined) spectacle of street prostitution. While not unique to Italy, the *puttan tour* is typically understood as a common ritual for young men in the country.<sup>1</sup>

When in her previous work Isabel briefly reflected on this experience, she commented on how the acceptance of the *puttan tour* as a form of entertainment reflected “the normalized male objectification of prostitute women, both as sexual bodies and, in this particular case, as a source of mockery upon which masculine identities are performed and reinforced” (Crowhurst 2007: 83). While mostly interested in addressing the role of the *puttan tour* in the material and discursive construction of outdoor prostitution in Italy, Isabel also made reference to a rather generalized and homogenous notion of masculinity in parallel with the other few studies that briefly mention and attempt to make sense of this common ritual. Agustin, for example, has written that the *puttan tour* is about young men spending time together, looking for and at street sex workers, sometimes drinking, taking drugs together, and “in general, being men” (2006: 77). Similarly, Leonini (1999) claims that the *puttan tour* is a complex ritual predicated upon a particular construction of masculinity which is not about actual sexual consumption but sharing the transgressive act of engaging with prostitution. Two more authors briefly mention the *puttan tour* describing it as a lighthearted activity to reinforce male group identity (Monzini 2002), and as a rite of passage to reinforce the camaraderie of groups of young men (Barnao 2006).

This paper builds on these sparse accounts of the *puttan tour*, framing it as a ritualistic, performative and collective practice of male-bonding predicated upon gendered fun and shared entertainment. It advances a more detailed analysis of this under-explored and often taken-for-granted cultural practice in Italy, drawing on a diverse body of scholarship concerning the intersection of masculinity, leisure, humor and homosociality. More specifically, by analyzing stories of *puttan tours* gathered from written accounts and *YouTube* videos, our aim is to explore the appeal of the *puttan tour* through an analysis of homosociality, humor and masculinity. To

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<sup>1</sup> The term *puttan tour*, while mostly used to refer to the practice described here, is sometimes adopted to indicate the kerb-crawling of punters interested in buying sexual services. This is however more frequently described as ‘*andare a puttane*’, or ‘whoring’.

paraphrase Pascoe (2007), the gendered fun imbricated in the *puttan tour* is, for the ‘tourers’, a way of constructing and making sense of the social world and in so doing reflecting, reinforcing but also re-negotiating dominant meanings of gender. Rather than merely describing what the *puttan tour* is, we are interested in what it ‘does’; while, as noted above, it is certainly a common ritual and is perceived as lighthearted fun, we are interested in how it both troubles and affirms hegemonic forms of masculinity. To this end, we look at the multiple and often equivocal meanings that are attributed to this collective homosocial male-bonding ritual, its affective and emotional dynamics and residues, and the ways in which it reproduces structures of inequality. While the *puttan tour* appears to be evidence of a creative form of male sociability, we argue that this activity and its construction as merely an innocent and fun ritual associated with youth masculinity can, at the same time, re-assert problematic forms of male privilege that normalize hostility and violence against sex workers.

The discussion that follows takes the *puttan tour* as a ritualized male leisure activity and focuses on three entwined themes: masculinity and leisure, homosociality and leisure, and the role and purpose of laughter and humor in male leisure practices. These themes are used to situate the *puttan tour* within a broader conceptual framework which will foreground our discussion of the data. We then present the methodology, followed by a brief overview of how the Italian context contours the *puttan tour*. In the remaining sections, drawing on the data, we mirror the literature review by looking at the *puttan tour* as a male youth leisure activity, the centrality of togetherness and homosociality, and the role of emotions, humour and gendered fun. As we note in the conclusion, the exploration of these themes develops our analysis of the complex ways in which “leisure activities are intimately connected with gendering processes that induce broad social impacts” (Pringle et al 2011: 107).

### **Leisure activities and gendered power**

Leisure is highly political and politicized and gender plays a central role in leisure choices, experiences, access, and constraints (Henderson et al 1989; Aitchison 1999; Shaw 2001). In contrast to traditional accounts, which framed leisure in terms of simply freedom or escape, leisure is now widely understood as bound up with power (Rojek, 2010) and is therefore both reflective and constitutive of hegemonic masculinities and femininities. Leisure remains a contested term, and the ways that gender contours leisure is equally disputed (Aitchison 2003), but to understand the *puttan tour* we start from the basis that leisure is “a site both for the construction of hegemonic masculinity and its reinforcement” (Wearing 1998:83). In these terms, leisure spaces and practices can clarify or ‘express’ (Spracklen 2013) hegemonic masculinity.

Equally, Wearing also suggests that leisure practices and spaces can be sites where “fissures in such hegemony occur [and] where traditional masculinity may be challenged” (Wearing 1998:83). Some leisure practices might therefore also provide the opportunity to more creatively negotiate gendered power relations, if not explicitly undermine or challenge hegemonic and normative gender altogether. Following this account, recent analyses of men’s leisure practices develop Anderson’s (2009) notion of multiple, softer and ‘inclusive masculinities’, pointing to examples ranging from contact sports (Channon and Matthews, 2015; Murray and White 2017) to fashion (Duffy 2014). Rather than simply reinforce hegemonic masculinities, these activities and others might be practices for resisting and re-imagining dominant masculinity. We return to Anderson’s work later, but for the moment Nayak’s (2006) discussion of masculinities is worth reciting in terms of how it takes both approaches. Echoing Wearing’s understanding that leisure might provide spaces of fissure or challenge, Nayak uses the figure of the palimpsest to argue that through leisure young men entwine, erase, reassert and reconfigure new and old practices of being, belonging and doing masculinity. His account works with an understanding of masculinities as fractured, multiple, intersectional and context specific while equally recognizing that traditional and contemporary forms of masculinity exist in a relationship played out against a backdrop of changing leisure spaces as well as changing socio-economic contexts. By employing the figure of

the palimpsest, Nayak demonstrates that while masculinity might well be changing, that does not necessarily equate with a complete erasure of power, sexual politics, or, as we understand it, other, more progressive forms of hegemonic masculinity.

Nayak's framing of leisure and masculinity helps to clarify our own thoughts on the *puttan tour*. As discussed in depth later, the authors have struggled with this example; recognizing on the one hand that it is a productive and perhaps even creative way of negotiating the transition from adolescence to adulthood. On the other hand, we are keenly aware of how it reproduces often reactionary and problematic masculinity which is then explained on the basis that adolescence is merely a transitory stage. Pringle et al claim that many researchers of masculinity and leisure fail to "discuss their conceptualizations of the workings of power as associated with gender" (2011: 110) and O'Neill's (2015) critique of Anderson similarly foregrounds our concerns here. Anderson's optimism evades a deeper analysis of gendered power relations which is critical when analyzing practices such as the *puttan tour* and the broader sexual politics in which they are located. Indeed, highlighting the ways that hegemonic masculinity is produced, resisted or constituted through leisure alerts us to the ways leisure and gendered relations of power are articulated. That is to say, despite recognizing that masculinities are fraught and liable to change or be challenged, specific leisure practices can reproduce problematic forms of masculinity, which, at one extreme, are deeply embedded within patriarchal, homophobic and sexist power structures; Chess and Shaw's (2015) review of #Gamergate being one recent example. By looking at the gendered dimensions of leisure and fun that form the basis of the *puttan tour* we approach this practice as deeply entwined with violence against sex workers. While recognizing masculinity as fluid and contingent, we echo Wearing's (1998) point that leisure can be a site through which to challenge as well as reinforce hegemonic masculinities.

Another point to be taken from accounts exploring the intersections of masculinity and leisure is a robust debate about homosociality and, secondly, what is actually meant by 'masculinity'. Central to many accounts of men's leisure is Sedgwick's understanding of

homosociality as discussed in *Between Men* (1985). Here, the term is understood as triangular in structure where women serve as a conduit through which male bonds are developed, maintained and strengthened. Men's relations with women are not only subordinate, but also instrumental in their bonding with other men (Sedgwick 1985: 229). When put to work in leisure studies, homosociality typically refers to patterns of male bonding found in activities such as the *puttan tour*. Activities such as this are not only enjoyed predominantly by men, but their execution depends upon, or can lead to, men bonding at the expense, exclusion or negation of women and 'others' – see for example, 'girl hunting' (Grazian 2007), practices to sexually humiliate and/or assault women for men's amusement (Flood 2008), and 'girl watching' (Quinn 2002).

As Flood notes, much of the literature on homosociality concerns the role of homophobia as constitutive of hegemonic masculinity. Much of this literature concerns competition between men but in the work of Evers (2009), Thurnell-Reid (2012) and Anderson (2009) a slightly different discussion of homosociality opens up. Drawing heavily on Sedgwick, Thurnell-Reid (2012) foregrounds friendship as not simply about the negation of women or homosexual men. Anderson (2009), in a similar vein, challenges Connell's (1995) interpretation of hegemonic masculinity as always in opposition to homosexuality. Anderson's work has been crucial to a recent unpicking of homosociality and masculinity, in particular its reliance on the trope that it always occurs at the exclusion of women or homosexual men. His work proceeds from the hypothesis that young men are less homophobic than older generations resulting in a 'softer' and more egalitarian form of masculinity. Equally, and in contrast to Connell, Anderson suggests that there is no longer a single hegemonic masculinity, but that multiple forms of masculinity exist and are valorized alongside each other. These 'typologies' (Evers 2017) of masculinity do not necessarily compete for hegemonic dominance, but may comfortably exist alongside each other. Similarly, in their work on masculinity and homosociality in Italy, Ferrero Camoletto and Bertone (2016) illustrate how homosocial bonding both reproduces and disrupts naturalized and dominant gender hierarchies and models. In sum, as this body of work suggests, conceiving masculinity as

contradictory, contextual and apt to both resistance and change means challenging the idea that homosociality always reinforces male bonding at the expense of women, and that hegemonic masculinity always occurs through the negation of the feminine.

One way through which such complex dynamics of homosocial bonding have been theorized is through humor. For Kehily and Nayak, drawing on their study of secondary school men, “heterosexual masculinities are organized and regulated through humor” (1997:69). In their work, humor is not only central to masculine identities, but is also linked to ‘differentiated heterosexualities’ (1997:70), which we take to mean again multiple forms of masculinities. They draw firstly on the notion of humor and laughter as a means of resistance, a technique most famously explored by Willis (1977). Following Willis, humor is a coping strategy and means for subversion and resistance as well as a creative solution to exclusion. Kehily and Nayak equally frame humor as constitutive; producing specific forms of masculinity that can be both oppressive to other students, especially women, as well as a means of social conformity to hegemonic masculinity. For them, humor is therefore linked to negation as well as achieving prestige and functions as a ‘disciplining’ tool to maintain normative masculinity.

The link between humor and status is of course not new. Coser (1959) drew attention to how humor can affirm status and momentary control. While her research was conducted in the workplace, the relationship she drew between power and humor remains a compelling argument. As it relates to the discussion at hand, humor is also bound up with aggression, which for Kotthoff entails “teasing, mocking, parodying, and ridiculing” (2006:13). Moreover, sexually aggressive joking served not only as a means of establishing and reciting hierarchies, but “signalled familiarity and a certain sense of belonging, even in their aggressiveness towards out-groups” (Kotthoff 2006:14). This is again a core feature of the use of humor in groups, and a clear way of demonstrating exclusion – making jokes at others – and inclusion – sharing values and perspectives (Kotthoff 2006). More importantly, “[s]exual joking often seems to play a role when desires cannot be satisfied” (Kotthoff 2006:17). For the *puttan tour*, this may well be the case; as

Hickey-Moody and Laurie argue, “[h]umor enables people to express desires contrary to social rules without actually breaking any” (2016:218). But homosociality and humor can produce distinct effects and need to be explored in their context. Hickey-Moody and Laurie argue that “[m]en are everywhere seen to be failing at being men, and practices of ridicule allow these failed men to be contrasted with the hegemonic ideals to which men are expected—against all odds—to aspire” (2016:220). Kotthoff (2006) similarly points to the importance of context and situation, and very usefully, the role of humor in challenging hegemonic masculinities and femininities through, for example, self-deprecation. These complex and contrasting perspectives clearly emerge in Ferrero Camoletto’s (2014, 2013) analysis of the constructions of male heterosexuality among young Italian men. Here we see men who, when discussing their sexual practices, laugh at other men and women to reinforce their hegemonic status. In contrast to this, other respondents are either willingly self-deprecating or make themselves the object of their male friends’ mockery. This allows them to mark their sexual failures and awkwardness as a shared laughing matter and therefore acceptable through the collective fun they arouse; acceptable, however, only as long as these laughable ‘missteps’ are understood as temporary or age-specific.

Once again, as we have seen with leisure and masculinity, work on humor and masculinity points in different directions. On the one hand, it can shore up privilege at the expense of women or gay men. Equally, humor can be employed by men as a means to bond and, in some cases, parody one’s own failings in fulfilling normative adult masculinity. The discussion below echoes this ambiguity. It is concerned primarily with men in late adolescence negotiating the hitherto unsure world of adulthood and adult sexuality, one that is deeply marked by structures of power and inequality but one where their own dominance is both a source of potential ‘awkwardness’ as well as potential prestige; with the latter not yet guaranteed. The term awkwardness here is thus deployed to capture a sense of ambiguity; the tourists have not yet achieved the status of normative adult masculinity such that the humor central to the *puttan tour* is directed both towards their own ambiguous status as ‘men’, as well as outwards towards the sex workers. As

demonstrated in more depth later, our argument here is that such ambiguity and awkwardness are legitimated by their youth, in ways that would not be acceptable in adulthood.

To summarize, the literature drawn on here invariably represents multiple shifts in thinking about homosociality, humor, leisure and masculinities. Masculinities are not fixed and transform under different conditions and in different contexts. But while this is more or less now given, there are different ways of situating leisure within this, from accounts which emphasize resistance and creative solutions, to those which suggest more of a palimpsest of both traditional and modern forms of masculinity. Likewise, we can identify a trend towards challenging the idea of there being a single hegemonic masculinity, and instead the belief that we are now witnessing the emergence of a more inclusive masculinity resulting in homosociality becoming less exclusionary or reactive and, equally, resulting in multiple valorized types of masculinity. Finally, and central to our analysis, humor, laughter and shared fun serve as an optic for thinking about the way that modern masculinities are enforced and undermined, often again producing or challenging heteronormativity, homosociality and hegemonic masculinity. Overall, a key theme from the literature is the need to keep power at the forefront and, indeed, this forms a key theme in our analysis.

## **Methodology**

This paper draws on the analysis of various documents which can be broadly grouped in two typologies of ‘stories of *puttan tours*’. The first includes the small number of *ex-post facto* accounts of *puttan tours* and explanations of the practice that are posted on the internet – on publicly viewable blogs, fora, and other websites<sup>2</sup> – and published in *How Much?*, Carla Corso and Sandra Landi’s 1998 edited collection of interviews in which, as the subtitle explains, *Clients and prostitutes tell their*

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<sup>2</sup> A *Google* search of “puttan tour” reveals approximately 24,500 results, many of which are only vaguely relevant to the subject of this paper. Of these, 25 were selected as specifically addressing in narrative and explicative form the practice analysed here.

stories.<sup>3</sup> These written texts are reflective narratives that present the *puttan tour* as a complex and purposeful ritual structured through age, gender and sexuality. The second typology of documents analyzed reflects the fact that “stories have become increasingly visual” (Plummer 1995:112), and comprises videos of *puttan tours* uploaded on the video-sharing website *YouTube*. We selected *YouTube* as the video-sharing website with the highest number of *puttan tour* videos publicly viewable without the need for a login or registration. By inputting “puttan tour” on *YouTube*’s search engine we obtained “about 2,160 results” (in December 2017)<sup>4</sup>, the vast majority of which, however, are not the ‘live accounts’ of *puttan tours* that we were seeking but were instead videos somehow related to sex work. Of the over 2,100 results, we identified 31 videos of *puttan tours* based on relevance, meaningful length and understandable content. These vary in length between 18 seconds to over 15 minutes. They were posted between May 2007 and March 2017, and have been viewed between 150 to over 17,000 times. The videos show *puttan tours* with two to five young men, with two exceptions: one is made by two middle age men, and a second one by two young women and a man. The videos show *puttan tours* that took place in urban and suburban localities in at least 10 of the 20 Italian regions.

For data analysis purposes, the content of the videos, including dialogues and visual components, were summarized in written texts. We then carried out a qualitative content analysis of all the data collected which led to inductively generated codes and categories, and subsequently to the themes and patterns discussed in the next section. When analyzing the videos, we had to take into account that the relationship between the story and reality is somewhat collapsed: the videos feature the *puttan tours* in action, video-recorded with a mobile phone in the very moment they are taking place. While portraying ‘real action in action’, however, the videos are also

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<sup>3</sup> The book referred to here is one of three that Corso co-authored detailing her own experiences as a sex worker and those of other sex workers and clients in the Italian sex industry in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

<sup>4</sup> It is possible that *YouTube*’s policies on nudity, sexual and hateful content may have limited the amount of *puttan tour* videos publicly viewable. The videos uploaded on *YouTube* do not contain graphic nudity or sexual content, but some of them include racist and sexist language directed against street sex workers, and have therefore been flagged to be reviewed by *YouTube*. At the time of writing this (December 2017), they remain publicly available. The ethical, epistemological and methodological implications of reporting material that we have ourselves used as part of our own research form part of a forthcoming paper.

conceived and produced as accounts of *puttan tours* for others to consume. These products are therefore analyzed here as stories of *puttan tours* aimed at being uploaded to publicly viewable websites to be shared and memorialized. This does not mean that we view these recordings as staged. Rather, we approach and analyze the videos as embedded in a dramaturgical framework wherein the tourers provide a live account of their *puttan tour* to an imagined audience, which is vicariously present during the action via the materiality of the video-recording mobile phone. The short texts used to describe the videos and their content suggest that they are mostly aimed at an imagined audience comprised of other men who are invited to ‘join in’ in the fun. Indeed, most of the comments added by the viewers, although limited in number, appear to be written by men. This was relevant in our making sense of the data which was also analyzed in relation to the double male gaze – from within the tourers’ group and from the *YouTube* viewers without – shaping the gendered dynamics of the shared ‘adventures’.

As explained so far, most of the data upon which the analysis of this paper is based was gathered from publicly available websites. There is limited space here to discuss the methodological implications of this, however two points need to be briefly addressed. The first pertains to the process of data mining from public websites. We accessed public data that we found useful, analyzed it and cited it in this paper without seeking the consent of those who uploaded the material. Following guidelines on internet research (British Psychological Society 2013, AOIR 2012), we took the position that those who posted their videos and writings on publicly available, non-password-protected websites wished to share their data with different and unknown viewers, with no expectation of privacy, and with an awareness of the variety of uses that their data could be made of once uploaded. Secondly, we acknowledge that, while online spaces present the researcher a vast amount of data, not everyone can or wishes to generate publicly available online data and that participating in online spaces entails the privilege of being able to do so (Tucker 2009). As Morrow et al state, “the everyday lives we encounter in online spaces [...are] produced and consumed as commodities, by those with the power to frame their

everyday lives as meaningful” (Morrow et al 2016: 531). In this respect, on the one hand our research on the *puttan tour* was made possible by the availability of online data posted and made public by some tourers. On the other hand, while the perspective of street sex workers on this practice was not the focus of this paper and instead forms the basis of a forthcoming project, we need to at least point out that there is, at this stage, no equivalent online public account of the *puttan tour* as told by sex workers. That online data is infinite does not disallow its partiality and the absence of voices and perspectives which are regularly missing or silenced in public exchanges outside the virtual framework. Indeed, the internet reflects and reproduces the problematic social structures within which it exists (Morrow et al 2016).

### **The *puttan tour* in the Italian context**

We know very little of the history of the *puttan tour* in Italy, how and when it became a familiar practice and, for some at least, an established ritual. It is likely that the passing of the current prostitution law in 1958 which abolished state-regulated brothels and partially criminalized prostitution, played a part in facilitating the development of the *puttan tour* by creating the conditions for an increase in the visibility of street sex workers.<sup>5</sup> The latter, until the late 1980s, were mostly Italian women but the composition of prostitution started to change significantly in the early 1990s with the arrival of migrant women (and to a lesser extent men and transgender women) who now constitute the largest presence in the relatively large Italian outdoor prostitution sector (Crowhurst et al 2017). The historical visibility of sex workers in public spaces has not made their presence ordinary or normalized to the point of being taken-for-granted or ignored, however. Similar to what Chapuis (2016) has observed in the well-established red-light district in Amsterdam, in Italy the stigma attached to prostitution has not waned nor has the moral otherness of people involved in the sex industry been undermined simply because it is more visible. The

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<sup>5</sup> The decades after the passing of the new prostitution law were also the time when passenger cars became a widespread means of personal transport in Italy, thus making it possible for young men to have access to them (ISTAT 2011) – another factor that is likely to have facilitated the diffusion of the practice that is so reliant on the car.

spaces occupied by street sex workers, be it urban or suburban main or side roads, parks, or petrol stations, remain part of the ‘immoral landscape’ (Symanski 1981) of the country, and therefore continue to attract kerb-crawlers, curious voyeurs, and *puttan tourists*. The ‘Puttan Tour Roma’ t-shirt,<sup>6</sup> which portrays a map of the areas of the city where street sex workers can be found, provides an example of how street sex workers, as paradigmatic sexual dissidents of the urban scene (Walkowitz 1992) are central in the creation of an erotic topography (Chapius 2016) that makes “the sexual possibilities and pitfalls of the city legible” (Hubbard 2002: 369).

It should not be overlooked that street prostitution also attracts the attention of law and order enforcers and in the past two decades it has been the target of various punitive local-level ordinances against sex workers and their clients (Crowhurst et al 2017). Whilst these measures have negatively impacted on the safety and health of sex workers (Crowhurst et al 2017), they have had little to no effect in reducing outdoor prostitution, a feared outcome by those who thought that the ordinances would pose a real threat to the survival of the *puttan tour* (see for example, Bossi 2008). If anything, they may have contributed to reinforcing its tension between desire of, and anxieties towards, sex workers. Moreover, the recent criminalization of clients, who until the 1990s had been relatively ignored by prostitution policies and their implementers,<sup>7</sup> may be reinforcing the perceived danger, and therefore excitement, of the experience as ‘vicarious kerb-crawling’ without any actual sexual consumption.

A final comment pertains to the name of this practice, which is far from having a simply descriptive connotation. ‘Puttan’ is short for ‘puttane’ (whores), a feminine noun which like ‘whore’ is socially loaded in signifying and reflecting the stigma attached to women who engage in sex work as “traditional models of female dishonor” (Pheterson 1993: 46). The word ‘tour’ accentuates the motionality of the experience and conjures images of a sightseeing trip entailing

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.prezzishock.it/Puttan-Tour-ROMA--Indispensabile-come-ultima-spiaggia-per.name.852754.auction\\_id.auction\\_details](http://www.prezzishock.it/Puttan-Tour-ROMA--Indispensabile-come-ultima-spiaggia-per.name.852754.auction_id.auction_details)

<sup>7</sup> As Bertone and Camoletto (2009) among others have pointed out, engaging with prostitution in Italy, during the time of state-regulated brothels (i.e. until 1958), was viewed as a socially acknowledged rite of passage for young men to enter the world of sexual male adulthood. This view only started waning in the 1980s with the radical change in the composition of and social response to prostitution briefly outlined in the text. Now the figure of the client is more ambiguously perceived, as is reflected in some of the data analyzed.

the observation of ‘something’ different from anything one is normally accustomed to, possibly even exotic, scary or curious. The ‘touring’ of the ‘puttane’ emphasizes both the movement and the gendered gaze involved in the practice which, with some resemblances to *flânerie*, is dependent on the ability of men to exercise their privileged gaze on sexualized others while driving around and remaining, potentially, unseen (Jordan and Aitchison 2008).

### **The *puttan tour* as an ‘obligatory passage’: visions from adulthood**

We start the exploration of the data with an analysis of post-hoc accounts of the *puttan tour* presented mostly from adult men’s perspectives. For them, the *puttan tour* is characterized as a collective, gender and age-specific activity carried out by young men. What is meant by ‘young’ is not clearly determined, however most of the accounts analyzed make reference to the age of transition from adolescence to adulthood, more specifically from late teens to early twenties. For men in the older age group the *puttan tour* is often described as a rite of passage and a mandatory experience, as these extracts from online fora show: “at the age of sixteen it is compulsory in Rome. They don’t even give you a driving license if you’ve never been on one”<sup>8</sup> (Termometropolitico 2011); “it is an obligatory passage” (Gamesvillage 2010); “it’s a must for a teenager” (Russia-Italia 2008); “every average and respectable male must have taken part in a *puttan tour* at least once in their life” (Charlie 2008); and, asked rhetorically, “who has never gone on a *puttan tour*?” (Superzeta 2002). In the caption of his commemorative *puttan tour* video, a middle-aged man writes that *puttan tours* “are part of the background of each of us, they are part of the adolescent life of all Roman and Italian boys!” (Video 1’ 2016). In the video, the same man also refers to the *puttan tour* as “a dogma [sic], at eighteen years of age, for any man growing up” (ibid.). While the term ‘dogma’ may not be used correctly here, it signifies the indisputability and indispensability of the *puttan tour* as a process of initiation, a *rite de passage*, that young men participate in to be confronted with the desire, danger and disgust associated with the world of sex

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<sup>8</sup> All quotations drawn from the data have been translated into English by the authors.

for sale (Hubbard 2000). By approaching the latter from the safety of the car, the tourers can vicariously experiment with what male adulthood feels like. As Andrea claims in his interview with Corso and Landi, “going out to look at prostitutes is like touching transgression, even if we are staying out of it. We like it, it makes us feel like grown-ups” (Corso and Landi 1998: 108).

Turner (1966) explains that rites of passage are rituals that foster transition from one social state to another. Such transitions, Turner details, are marked by three phases: separation, the liminal period, and aggregation. This is useful in making sense of the identification of the *puttan tour* as a ritual which is predicated upon its construction as a marker of detachment from adolescence, the point of departure, towards the phase of destination, the future of adulthood, when “the passage is consummated” (Turner 1966: 359). In this final phase of re-incorporation into a stable state, the ritual subject has rights and obligations and “is expected to behave in accordance with certain customary norms and ethical standards binding on incumbents of social position” (Turner 1966: 359). In contrast, the liminal ‘days of the *puttan tour*’ are viewed as neither regimented nor unchanging, and are rather an ambiguous and ever-shifting time of transition, when, as Turner characterizes this phase, the ‘passengers’ negotiate and experiment with attributes of the past and the coming stage (ibid.)

While liminality and transition are often experienced as times of anxiety and uncertainty, in the accounts of former tourers who have ‘consummated the passage’ and write from the perspective of adulthood, the *puttan tour* is looked back at nostalgically, with a longing for what they perceive to be the untroubled youthfulness it symbolizes. In his blog, Prepuzio (PrepuziO’ blog 2009) writes about the insouciant times when he would go on a *puttan tour* with friends, who, like him, were optimistic about the future and unbothered by the little studying they did at university. Bossi (2008) in an evocative piece entitled ‘Farewell to the *puttan tour*’ also sentimentally looks back at the ‘age of the *puttan tour*’ when, despite being students with no money, it was possible to have fun and dream big (Bossi 2008). On another website, the *puttan tour* is described as “a cathartic moment in a man’s life” (Nonciclopedia 2016) – a time of freedom, and

an opportunity for the tourers to share excitement and curiosity, inciting together the emotions that the *puttan tour* may conjure, and laugh at each other precisely for those very shared emotions. Comments on other fora feature recollections of *puttan tours* laced with a nostalgic sense of ‘those were the days!’

In these post-hoc accounts, the lightheartedness of the age associated with the *puttan tour* is also often extended to the nature of the practice, presented as an innocent ritual and an innocuous practice of masculine companionship whose purpose is not hurting the sex workers. Prepuzio writes that “the greatest transgression consisted in asking for the price of the sexual service, and then [we] skid away, embarrassed and laughing at what was viewed as a good-humored and innocent prank while the whore would curse at us” (Prepuzio’ blog 2009). On a forum, a participant comments: “I remember some amazing puttan-tours about 10 years ago along the main road in Rimini, and then we would go to the gros [possibly a locality] to laugh *with* the trans, we used to do it, more than anything else, to be together and have a laugh, and then we’d end up the night in a mcdonald (sic) in Riccione, fuck, what amazing memories being 18” (Ilmeteoform 2007; emphasis added). Bossi insists that the *puttan tour* was “devoid of eroticism and sleaziness” and “we would never, under any circumstance, say anything unbecoming to the girls: we would talk to them about all sorts, and occasionally our mischievous gaze would end up on their tits. And the girls, tour after tour, would remember our names” (Bossi 2008). In these short recollections the emphasis of, now adult, tourers is on the shared silliness and fun of the experience – silliness and fun which were sometimes met with the anger of the ‘whore’, but more often shared, the accounts suggest, with the ‘girls’ and ‘trans’ themselves with whom the tourers ended up chatting and laughing. In the quotation above, Bossi is adamant that the *puttan tour* was only ever benign and centered around shared and respectful humor, lacking any form of crassness or abuse. The *puttan tour* is also presented as a fun-filled male bonding ritual which had little to do with sexual desire. Although the latter was not completely absent – the tourers’ did gaze at the ‘girls’ tits’ – this is described as a naughty ‘slip of the eye’, which somehow would endear the ‘girls’ to the tourers.

These mischievous looks are presented as almost inevitable, but it is also firmly emphasized that the *puttan tour* was not sleazy or erotic – it was about the fun and not ever about the sex. This distinction is important because it creates a divide between the respectful and respectable young *puttan tourers*, looking for a way to find entertainment together, and the sleazy clients who also drive around in search of street sex workers, but with the intent of buying sexual services. This is implicitly frowned upon and condemned in the online fora threads analyzed, where buying sexual services from sex workers is viewed as something that ‘losers’ do, and certainly not for ‘real men’.<sup>9</sup> Presenting a narrative where going on a *puttan tour* was entirely about male friends having fun together, and *not* about buying sex or ‘being horny together’ almost functions as a way of positioning the ‘tourers’ on a high ground of goodness and respectable gendered fun. Indeed the hierarchical policing of what counts as acceptable masculine behavior and what is inferior and contemptable can also be present within the group itself. This is captured by Francesco, a middle-age man at the time of the interview with Corso and Landi, who remembers that he was often annoyed by some of his friends who, during a *puttan tour*, protected by being in the group, “would insult the girls. Some, excited and impotent at the same time, blew off their frustration in this way; others were simply ignorant, insensitive and certainly full of hang-ups” (Corso and Landi 1998: 62). Here the spite for the inappropriate sexual and emotional tensions released by such friends are tinged with an accusation of cowardice for using the collectivity of the male group as a protected vantage point from which to insult the ‘girls’.

Another aspect that emerges from these melancholic narratives of past and innocent times is how they contrast to adulthood, replete with endless responsibilities that need to be fulfilled in the context of economic crisis and more complicated relationships with women. This bleak scenario awaits the still oblivious young tourers, it will crush their hopes and dreams, dissipate the excitement of ‘hanging out’ together and will be substituted with a new “desire to stay at home in our own shell” (Bossi 2008). Given Italy’s lingering history of patriarchal familism, built on the

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<sup>9</sup> See for example: <https://forum.ilmeteo.it/thread-139521.html?highlight=puttan+tour> and <http://www.gamesvillage.it/forum/archive/index.php/t-847590.html>

“strong cultural convictions that masculinity is the ‘natural’ expression of ‘tradition’ and ‘social order’” (Ruspini 2009: 127), the authority and dependability expected of adult men, even in times of great socio-economic changes, is presented here as almost asphyxiating. Adulthood with its burdens is viewed as an encumbrance to male freedom and bonding, of which the *puttan tour* is a trope, and is therefore valorized and treasured. The *puttan tour* assumes a distinctive biographical quality, to borrow from Thurnell-Read’s (2012) analysis of stag tours, in that it signifies ‘epochal’ changes in a man’s life and the inevitable passage from adolescence, idealized as untroubled and feckless. The deployment of melancholia for the past and its youthful leisure times reinforces the construction of the *puttan tour* as a necessary, benign and innocuous ritual associated with the pleasures of youth. Nostalgic memories of the *puttan tour* are thus stripped of any negative connotation, emotion and implications, erasing the anxieties and tensions that may have come with it as well as the gendered power and inequalities that it reproduces. These problematic aspects, almost erased in the romanticized post-hoc accounts, emerge more clearly in the videos and more recent online comments analyzed in the next section.

### **What happens on the *puttan tour*: togetherness, bonding and gendered fun**

As discussed above, while predicated upon the presence, visibility and various levels of engagements with street sex workers, the *puttan tour* is generally not about purchasing sexual services. Instead it is first and foremost viewed as a homosocial male bonding ritual where, in parallel with other homosocial masculine practices, the main goal is for the tourers to spend time and have fun together, rather than satisfying any possible “heterosexual desire of the individuals involved” (Thurnell-Read 2012: 259). As a tourer observes online, “it entails friendship, travelling, adventure and cohesion amongst males. And if, as often happens, the *puttan tour* ends up being a simple hunt for the ‘ladies’, mixed with hearty laughs, jokes, but little substance apart from bothering them, then that doesn’t really matter” (Boomvenus 2017). Echoing these sentiments, Andrea explains that “we enjoy the fact of being together [...] many times we just stay out chatting

for hours, just like that, not about important things” (Corso and Landi 1998: 108). The primacy of intimate relationships with other men is here emphatically and explicitly valued and presented as an anchor of male identity and homosociality. Similarly, in the videos analyzed, the touring friends do not refrain from displaying the affection, intimacy and familiarity that bind them together. They tell in-jokes, elatedly recall their past group adventures, sing together, tease each other’s idiosyncrasies and laugh about them *with* the group (Hickey-Moody and Laurie, 2014), often use nicknames for each other, and in some cases have a special name for their ‘clique’. When a friend is missing, the tourers pine his absence and lament the imperfect group vibe which may lead the *puttan tour* to ‘not be the same’ and lead to the inevitable loss of fun. A successful *puttan tour* is one where all friends are present and where the camaraderie and cohesiveness of the group is sustained by keeping each other emotionally roused. In the videos, this is generally done by discussing at length where to drive to find the sex workers and how best to hold the mobile phone to avoid being seen by them – loud confabulations that build up excitement are punctuated by collective explosive laughter. ‘So much laughter’, ‘what fits of laughter’, ‘what cosmic laughter’ are some of the comments found also in online fora, where laughing together is an essential aspect of the *puttan tour*. In the videos, giggles and bursts of laughter are sparked by almost all interactions in the car: funny remarks and jokes, burping, passing wind, randomly shouting out of the car window, or the sight of street sex workers and their ensuing reactions. The latter, always met with great hilarity, vary from in-group only evaluations of the physical attributes of the sex workers spotted on the streets, for example, ‘nice ass but ugly face!’, ‘what amazing boobs’, ‘those boobs were staying up on their own!’, to insults shouted directly from the car: ‘what great tits, congratulations!’, ‘asshole, go find a job!’, ‘fucking whore!’, ‘negrona!’<sup>10</sup>

Laughter is the visible manifestation of ‘having fun’: the louder, the more raucous, vulgar and incessant the tourers’ laughs are, the more fun they are meant to be having *together* and the stronger the performance and reinforcement of their collective masculine identity and superiority

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<sup>10</sup> ‘Negrone’ is a racist insult that is similar in meaning to ‘big fat blackie’.

(Hickey-Moody and Laurie 2014). Coming in close proximity with the ‘transgression’ of prostitution, as one tourer puts it, provokes excitement, and laughter can thus be seen as a coping strategy to release and dissipate the simultaneous emotional tensions that permeate the experience of the *puttan tour*. This can be observed in videos where the tourers display fear of the police and, more frequently, of pimps. In particular, the specter of the bad pimp who will punish the tourers for the trespassing and abuse of *his* space and women often force them to drive away hurriedly and to worriedly check that they have not been followed. When it is established that this is not the case, loud laughter signals the end of danger and emotional release. The *puttan tour*, as already indicated, can thus be experienced as a time of catharsis, where strong emotions of desire and fear can be shared and ‘laughed off’. Finally, to recite a point previously made on the relevance and meaning of laughter, it is worth emphasizing that laughter is about power and status. Laughing at sex workers, collectively humiliating them from the car and then driving away is a means to consolidate both the superior hierarchical gendered status, power and control of the tourers and the construction of sex workers as abject bodies whose debasement and injury remain unquestioned matters of course. What we therefore see in the data is laughter at, but also with, and alongside their friends.

The maintenance of fun, hilarity and togetherness is not just based on mutual boosting, cheering and laughing at sex workers, but also on the policing and rebuking of any less than enthusiastic and participative group member. This is seen in Video 2 (2013) when a reluctant tourer, sitting in the back of the car on his own, absorbed in texting on his mobile phone, is made fun of for being such a ‘faithful’ boyfriend to his long-distance girlfriend. Made to feel disloyal to his friends, the young man changes attitude and becomes more involved, and soon takes charge of recording the touring on the mobile phone, re-vitalizing the group dynamics. The previously explored role of women as a conduit to cement male homosocial bonding is significant in this interaction. By reproaching their friend and his inopportune display of attachment to his girlfriend, the tourers assert his homosocial obligation such that “male-male friendships take priority over

male-female relations” (Flood 2008: 342). Similarly, the presence of women as a spoiler of male fun and bonding is emphasized in an online forum where suggestions of what to do with friends on Saturday nights are sought. When it comes to discussing going out with a mix of male and female friends, some contributors write that women are boring, they do not get male camaraderie, and when they join a *puttan tour*, one post states, “they don’t make any jokes and don’t even laugh” (HardwareUpgradeForum 2006). Clearly women should not be invited on a *puttan tour*, implies one of the replies. The exclusion of women is thus viewed as a necessary condition for unrestrained male relations and behaviors and therefore for a meaningful *puttan tour*. The presence of female friends or, worse, of girlfriends, represents a conspicuous disruption of homosocial male bonding, which can only happen when women are excluded. As Bossi (2008) recalls in his blog, the *puttan tour* was “despised by girlfriends and feminists.” Women negatively affect male group dynamics by constraining the tourers’ freedom to unleash emotions that may be seen as too hostile or even too feminized. They prevent men from engaging in activities that can only be shared among men. More speculatively, the female presence can be seen as instigating the tourers to become aware of the broader implications and meaning of their actions. By censoring unbecoming behaviors and emotional displays, just by being present and disapproving, women as ‘killjoys’ make men accountable for what they would rather just see and experience as plain fun.

Another aspect that strongly emerges from the accounts analyzed is that the active participation of all tourers in the *puttan tour* is part of a collective effort to defy what the *puttan tour* is often viewed as an antidote for: boredom, having nothing better to do, and therefore having to go back home (likely to be the parental home<sup>11</sup>) after a night out. Asked about what he thinks the reason for this practice may be, Andrea replies that “the first thing that comes to mind is that sometimes there is nothing better to do, we don’t know what to do and the *puttan tour* has become a common and frequent entertainment” (Corso and Landi 1998: 108). Similar sentiments are displayed in other posts: “we used to do it after a mediocre and exceedingly boring night, in the

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<sup>11</sup> In Italy most young men and women live with their parents until marriage (Ruspini 2016)

darkest hours, which were filled by our laughter” (Bossi 2008); “with friends on a Saturday night, after having been clubbing it was one of the favorite ways of passing time” (Ilmeteoforum 2007); “if you have nothing else to do on a Saturday night, what else is better?” (caption to Video 3 2013); “it’s Monday evening and there is fuck all to do in Messina [city], so we go on a puttana tour” (caption to video 4 2009); “Senigallia [city] and what is there to do? The puttana tour!” (caption to video 5 2008). The lyrics of the song ‘puttantour’ by the satirical rock band Gem Boy also describe how a dull evening can be brightened up by a *puttan tour*. “every evening we meet up, we feel drab and sad, asking ‘what can we do?’ It’s so hard staying in a bar all night, so where shall we go? There is nothing to do here! We jump in the car and we go...” (Puttantour 2000)

The emphasis on the ever-present ‘lurking’ of boredom (Steinmetz et al 2016) and the threat of ‘doing nothing’ while ‘hanging out’ reinforces the collective role that the group of friends has in coming up with other experiential possibilities to engage in while they are together. Similar to what Joelsson (2015) and Torbenfeldt Bengtsson (2012) point out in their studies of youth and gender, boredom is not viewed as ‘being boring’ or a characteristic of the individual, but as a condition imposed on the group by external factors. Thus, the choice to go on a *puttan tour* can be viewed as a creative way of resisting and finding a solution to an institutional environment that offers limited affordable leisure opportunities, and to a cultural and socio-economic context that creates the conditions for significantly delayed household independence, in turn compelling groups of friends to meet up and spend time outside the (parental) house. However, to reiterate a point advanced throughout the paper, that the form of entertainment chosen to defy boredom is predicated upon gazing at, and being hostile towards, street sex workers is revealing of the normalization of gendered fun that reproduces traditional forms of masculinity and that encourages men’s dominance over women and others (Bird 1996). The post-hoc accounts discussed earlier confute this by presenting a more goliardic picture of the *puttan tour*, somehow enjoyed by all those involved, including sex workers themselves. However, more recent accounts, written or video-recorded, reveal a practice that is a means to territorialize space, to re-establish

the masculine power disturbed by sex workers who have ‘taken ownership’ of the public realm, and to vilify them as a fun-generating practice. The street, re-constituted as a leisure space, becomes a site where masculine hegemony can be exercised, unless a more dominant man occupies it, for example the feared pimp, in which case the tourers are careful to stay away and not to challenge his authority. Otherwise, the videos show that from the car the tourers uninhibitedly shout at sex workers, and at times also at random pedestrians. In Video 6 (2015), in a full display of masculine and economic power and privilege, a tourer waves a handful of banknotes outside the window and directs various sexual remarks at street sex workers as the car drives slowly past them. Online fora discussions also mention the practice of throwing bread at, or shooting sex workers with water pistols or air-rifles. The following post provides a chilling account of one such practice: “Ha ha, ha, I’ve done many *puttan tours* with my friends. [...] Once we were in a new BMW320 [...] and we had air-rifles, mafia-style...with the rifles out of the windows...we drove past them and started shooting and they ran away scared and yelling, and they would climb everywhere to escape from us, oh my god, how fantastic when I think about it, then we had to skid away ourselves” (Gamesvillage 2010)

These hostile and disturbing actions are performed from the moving car, keeping a distance from sex workers. When the car stops and the sex workers are approached by the tourers, the interaction is generally less hostile, albeit not necessarily less verbally aggressive. One of the tourers usually asks for and tries to bargain the price of sexual services, often making appreciative remarks on the body of the worker, sometimes asking to see their ‘tits’ or ‘cunt’, while the other tourers muffle their giggles and are careful to record the exchange without the sex workers’ noticing. In Video 3, after shouting insults, a group of tourers stop at a petrol station. One of them exits the car and is left alone with a sex worker with whom he engages in a short, inaudible conversation. When he returns to the car, his friends hail him as a great hero. He shows them that he had snuck a cigarette from the woman, provoking great hilarity, and that he had been smitten,

and has ‘fallen in love’. As the car speeds up, and other sex workers are spotted, another member of the party leans out and shouts ‘fuck you!’

Here the tourers, as in all other videos or written accounts, are only ‘playing’ at being clients. The sexual act is not a part of the objectives of the *puttan tours* we analyzed and the exchanges between the tourers do not include any form of homoeroticism, of ‘being horny together’, or any explicit talk of sexual acts. Sexualized expressions, appreciative or highly demeaning and in some cases hateful and racist, are only used to refer to sex workers and their bodies, keeping the tourers entertained and excited. While the tour is predicated upon a sexual practice, it is itself less about sexuality, though at the same time needs sexuality or the sexualization of the ‘whore’ to make sense and provide excitement.

## **Conclusion**

We started this paper with a review of different accounts of leisure, masculinity, homosociality and humor. While there remains a dominant view that there is a privileged, hegemonic masculinity, we also touched on Anderson’s (2009) argument that there is now a more inclusive masculinity challenging the singular model. This work also rests on the understanding that masculinity is no longer entirely dependent upon the negation or exclusion of women and gay men. While recognizing the strength of this work, we have provided here an example of a masculine practice which demonstrates a more traditional model of homosociality, one which, through shared gendered fun, is predicated on abuse and at times physical violence towards sex workers and, in this sense, accords with earlier work on masculinity. The second point that marks our analysis in contrast to Anderson is our concern, following O’Neill (2015), about the obfuscation of power in the inclusive masculinities work. In agreement with Evers (2017), we would like to propose that we are not witnessing multiple forms of masculinity here, as if there were typologies of equally validated or stable masculinities, but instead that masculinity is assembled and constituted in different ways dependent upon context. We have framed the *puttan tour* as one such example

where the tourers' sense of masculinity is assembled in different ways throughout the event; from abuse to fear of being caught, to declaring love as the last example demonstrates – with all drawing great laughter. The analysis of these stories of the *puttan tour* suggests a fragile sense of normative masculinity, one modelled on the exclusion of women, as well as and alongside the tourers' own ambiguity and awkwardness about the display of (public) sex and sexuality. Notably, this is not about a sense of 'lack' or 'incompletion', as if their masculinity is left wanting in the face of a more adult-centric world of confident or easy sexual relations, or that they will in future achieve a normative masculinity. Ambiguity and awkwardness are rather integral to the humor of the event, directed both inwards and outwards, and are legitimated by the tourers' youth, a temporary context that allows and even validates their gendered fun in ways that will be longed for by adult men when reflecting back on their youth.

The *puttan tour* demonstrates that masculinities are not simply assembled in the group, or dependent upon the intimacy of the members, but respond to and are enabled by a wider material, socio-historical and political context. In much of the current masculinities literature there is an emphasis upon post-industrialization, but we are cognizant of the fact that, not only is this just one of the many backdrops against which leisure is performed, it is, in our example, less important than other influencing factors. To name a few, we have seen that the tourers' behavior and this practice more widely occur in the context of the legacy of misogyny, reflecting here Nayak's (2006) work on the palimpsest, as well as a lack of youth access to private space, the wide availability of the car, and laws that criminalize sex workers forcing them to operate in vulnerable and dangerous situations. Mobile technologies can also not be underestimated here, given their importance in dispersing, normalizing, and giving visibility to those who are privileged enough to want to 'be' and make themselves visible.

To return to another point advanced earlier, the differential visibility of the bodies of the tourers, active, engaging, having fun, and of those of street sex workers, secretly and non-consensually filmed, and insulted, present and reinforce the story of the *puttan tour* as a form of

entertainment where the fun is more important than the injury inflicted because it is not viewed as an injury in the first place. The normalization and ritualization of the *puttan tour* as a form of age-specific, youthful fun and homosocial bonding that should be condoned and even encouraged because it serves as simply a rite of passage, simultaneously erases the possibility of viewing it as an injurious and damaging practice that contributes to the maintenance of violence against sex workers.

Finally, recent work on homosociality and male leisure has identified examples of fissures in male privilege; here we find something more complex. On the one hand, the *puttan tour* asserts male ownership of place – in competition with other men – but, in retrospect, it also speaks not of a longing for that ownership but of a period of male bonding and silliness which is will soon vanish. Accounts of the *puttan tour* explored here waver between a melancholic masculinity and a catharsis of adult responsibilities and problems. The data therefore illustrates a tension between the reflective, evocative accounts of youthfulness in a complex ‘adult’ world and the *tourers’* own desires to capture or recapture a period where adult, normative masculinity is yet to be achieved.

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