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### **Fuelling the Panic: The Societal Reaction to Boy Racers**

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# Fuelling the Panic: The Societal Reaction to Boy Racers

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## **Abstract**

Fuelled by media coverage of reckless, irresponsible and anti-social driving, young (male) motorists are an area of concern for politicians, police and citizens more generally. In media and popular discourses the symbol of the boy racer has come to represent deviance, anti-social behaviour, criminality and risk on the roads. This paper focuses on a local moral panic concerning boy racers in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland. Five elements, which characterise a moral panic, are identified and include: *concern*, *hostility*, *consensus*, *disproportion* and *volatility* (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994]). Urban regeneration played a key part in this particular moral panic in terms of class, cultural and intergenerational clashes between racers and outside groups. The moral panic was further institutionalised through the use of measures such as anti-social behaviour legislation. Moreover, it was symptomatic of wider societal concern regarding the regulation of young (male) motorists and the related governance of urban space and incivilities. The discussion draws on data collected via participant observation with the drivers, semi-structured interviews with members of the outside groups and content analysis of media reports which focus on the culture.

## **Keywords**

Boy racers, car culture, deviance, masculinity, moral panics, youth

## Introduction

As well as providing the benefits of (auto)mobility and a temporary means of escape from working life, the car provides a social space for youths away from the parental home. Passing their driving test and owning (or having the use of) a car is a rite of passage and a critical moment for many youths in Western societies (Thomson *et al.* 2002). The car and its related cultural practices are also crucial avenues for the construction of gendered identities. However, when in the hands of youths, the car is viewed as a lethal weapon and a threat to the 'respectable' motoring majority. It becomes an object of debate, at the heart of which lies concerns about morality, mobility, violence and sexuality (O'Dell 2001). As A.L. Best (2006, p.8) notes: 'The car is an all-too-often contested terrain over which parental control is exercised, where parental anxiety and fear intensify and, sometimes, intergenerational tensions mount'. The appropriation of the car by youths becomes an area of concern for parents, politicians, police, road safety charities and the media. In the United Kingdom, the government and authorities have implemented various measures and controls to regulate and temper what is (stereo)typically seen as problematic, risky and dangerous driving on the part of young males. Recently, measures have included powers made available under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004, such as seizure of vehicles and dispersal orders.

This paper sheds light on a moral panic concerning a particular car culture known in the United Kingdom as boy racers. The discussion draws on data collected with the particularly prominent boy racer culture in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland. It is argued that the boy racer phenomenon provides fertile ground for a moral panic due to the culmination of various factors. These include the automobile as a contested object (and its framing in discourses of risk and danger) and the inter-related connotations and contestations concerning youth and masculinity (and thus the related transition from youth to adulthood). Societal groups also contest over boy racers' occupation of urban space, which is linked to moral expectations concerning etiquette and the (re)definition of certain behaviours as 'anti-social'. In order to ascertain whether a moral panic was present, the discussion utilises Goode and Ben-Yehuda's (2009[1994]) moral panic framework which includes the elements: *concern*, *hostility*, *consensus*, *disproportion* and *volatility*. The paper begins with a general overview of boy racer culture. It then provides an overview of moral panic literature, which helps to frame the discussion. An overview of methods is then provided. The latter half of the paper provides an analysis of the societal reaction to Aberdeen's boy racers, arguing that a regional moral panic was present. The five moral panic elements are discussed in turn (*concern*, *hostility*, *consensus*, *disproportion* and *volatility*) and the author highlights the importance of urban regeneration, class and intergenerational clashes in fuelling the panic.

## Boy Racers: Rebels of the Road

Known in the United Kingdom as boy racers, the image of a young male driving a modified car with a spoiler, alloys, lowered suspension, and loud exhaust and stereo system has become intertwined with notions of deviance and risk on the roads. Films such as the *Fast and the Furious* franchise and television programmes such as *Top Gear* and *Pimp My Ride* have often been cited by the media, politicians, road safety campaigners, police, and citizens more generally, as promoting and inciting deviant

driving practices amongst young motorists. The BBC programme *Top Gear* is regularly criticised for being 'obsessed with speed' (Holmwood 2006) and promoting a 'laddish, yobbish attitude amongst young drivers' (Plunkett 2005). The chief executive of national road safety charity, *Brake*, claimed that: 'Top Gear quite blatantly glamorises fast cars and in fact knocks the government's very own speed enforcement. Research quite clearly shows that drivers' attitudes can be influenced by the messages similar to that which Top Gear can promote' (Townsend 2006). The *Fast and the Furious* films have also been blamed for inspiring youths to 'duel on public roads':

Dozens of cars have television screens built into their sub visors, which is illegal, or the backs of headrests. Invariably they are used to show hardcore porn or scenes from the cult films *The Fast and the Furious* and its sequel *2 Fast 2 Furious*, both about illegal street racing in Miami and said to be responsible for increasing interest in cruising and racing in the UK. (Thompson 2003)

As a collective practice, boy racer culture emerged from unauthorised gatherings of young people in modified cars, which occurred in retail parks and industrial estates late at night during the 1990s (Bengry-Howell 2005). These gatherings provide an outlet for youths who wish to socialise with like-minded car enthusiasts, while they have increasingly been presented as a social problem by the authorities and the media:

Ask the average road user what image is conjured up by the phrase 'boy racer' and they are likely to describe a strutting adolescent driving an Escort XR3i, with spoilers, yellow foglights and extra bass speakers, who practises handbrake turns in the local car park. (Spinney 2000)

Thus, boy racers have become one of the early twenty-first century's 'folk devils' (Cohen 2002[1972]) – a macho and delinquent image fuelled by extensive media coverage and reality television *exposés* focusing on reckless, irresponsible and anti-social driving. Reflecting such images, young motorists in general are an area of concern for politicians, police, communities and citizens. It is important to also note that a more recent incarnation has seen a growing number of female participants (girl racers) who are as passionate about their cars and driving as the boys (Lumsden 2010).

This paper focuses on the boy racer culture in the city of Aberdeen, Scotland, which is locally referred to as the 'Bouley Bashers'. The culture in Aberdeen became an object of political concern and scrutiny from the mid-1990s onwards; however such groups have occupied Aberdeen's seafront since the late 1960s. The Beach Boulevard, a quarter-mile stretch of road, is the main thorough-fare from the seafront to the centre of Aberdeen, and forms part of the drivers' 'cruising' circuit. From the 1990s onwards, this area of Aberdeen underwent vast redevelopment, a result of which was contestation over the use of this urban space by the drivers. Residents' concerns over dangerous driving and anti-social behaviour resulted in a proliferation of media reports centred on the detrimental effects the boy racers had on this area of the city and the lives of residents. According to the local press:

For more than 30 years they've been at it – speeding recklessly up and down the Beach Boulevard. In that time the leisure complex has grown massively and become

a magnet for families. But that hasn't stopped the madness of the boy racers – or led to the authorities driving them off the roads. (Ewen 2002a, p.4)

Hence, as we shall see, urban regeneration played a vital part in the societal reaction to the racers who were viewed as 'matter out of place' (Douglas 1966).

## Moral Panics

Stanley Cohen (2002[1972]) and Jock Young (1971a) were the first to systematically use the concept of moral panic in their work on societal reactions to deviance. Young (1971a) can be credited with coining the term in the edited collection *Images of Deviance*, with Cohen (2002[1972]) developing the concept in his seminal book *Folk Devils and Moral Panics*. Using Howard Becker's (1963) interactionist approach to the study of deviance and a model of collective behaviour derived from disaster research, Cohen (2002[1972]) illustrates how the media played an important role in creating a moral panic with regards to the Mods and Rockers. In this well cited passage, Cohen (2002[1972], p.1) states:

Societies seem to be subject, every now and then, to periods of moral panic. A condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests; its nature is presented in a stylized and stereotypical fashion by the mass media; the moral barricades are manned by editors, bishops, politicians and other right-thinking people; socially accredited experts pronounce their diagnoses and solutions; ways of coping are evolved or (more often) resorted to; the condition then disappears, submerges or deteriorates and becomes more visible.

For Cohen (2002[1972], p.30), the most important factor is how the media came to interpret and present the situation for, 'it is in this form that most people receive their pictures of both deviance and disasters' and 'reactions take place on the basis of these processed or coded images'.

The social constructionists Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009[1994]) argue that moral panics consist of five main elements. The first involves *concern* over the behaviour of a specific group and the consequences that their behaviour will have on society (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994], p.37). This concern can be manifested through opinion polls, media attention and proposed legislation. Secondly, moral panics are characterised by *hostility* towards the group in question. A clearly identifiable group must be viewed as responsible for the threat. This can include the division of 'us and them' and the use of stereotypes such as 'good' and 'evil' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994], p.38). This is followed by *consensus*. Here, there must be: 'a certain minimum measure of consensus or agreement, either in the society as a whole or in designated segments of the society – that the threat is real, serious, and caused by the wrongdoing group members and their behavior' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994], p.38). Thus, moral panics do not have to take place on a national scale in order to fit the required criteria of a moral panic. *Disproportion* will also be present and entails:

...a sense on the part of many members of the society that a more sizeable number of individuals are engaged in the behavior in question than actually are, and the threat, danger or damage said to be caused by the behavior is far more substantial

than, is commensurate, above and beyond what a reasonable appraisal could sustain. (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994], p.40)

Finally, moral panics are also characterised by *volatility*. They: 'erupt fairly suddenly (although they may lie dormant or latent for long periods of time, and may reappear from time to time) and, nearly as suddenly, subside' (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994], p.41).

A number of problems have been highlighted with regards to the moral panic concept. There has been a tendency for previous studies to overlook the role played by the folk devils themselves, further neglecting to acknowledge the plethora of groups/voices involved (Young 2007, p.56). As well as accounting for the proliferation of media forms, we need to be aware of the role that subcultural media can play in the construction of subcultural identity. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) claim that folk devils are less marginalised than they once were and as well as being articulately supported in the same mass media that castigates them, their interests are defended by their own niche and micro-media. They argue that these forms of media '...suggest that both the original and revised [moral panic] models are outdated in so far as they could not possibly take account of the labyrinthine web of determining relations which now exist between social groups and the media, "reality" and representation' (McRobbie and Thornton 1995, p.560). This point is all the more pertinent given the proliferation of internet and communications technologies, and the rapidity at which their use is becoming deemed a normal aspect of (both public and private) everyday life. The use of social networking sites (such as *Facebook* and *Twitter*) has repercussions for how individuals/groups organise and interact, and how they engage with the traditional 'mass media'. However, on the other hand, these new tools of communication can themselves become the focus of societal concern and moral panics. In particular, children and youths' use of digital media is seen as problematic due to the risk of the transmission of harm (Payne 2008). In the discussion that follows, we will see how the boy racers' own forms of subcultural media (such as websites) also became an area of concern.

## Methods

Data was collected via participant observation with the culture in Aberdeen from September 2006 to August 2007. Semi-structured interviews and ethnographic interviews (informal chats) were also conducted with participants. Access to the culture was aided by Grampian Police who regularly met with a group of drivers from the beach area of the city. These 'Drivers' Group' meetings took place every few months and it was here that I met the two main gatekeepers: Debbie and Robert.<sup>1</sup> The main location for the research was Aberdeen's seafront and the nearby Beach Boulevard. In total, around 150 hours were spent in the field. I also accompanied drivers to car shows and events across Scotland (referred to in the culture as 'meets' or 'cruises') and to local garages, scrap yards and car stores. Internet sites, which were created and utilised by informants, were a further source of data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of the outside groups. This included police officers, a local councillor, Member of Parliament (MP), Member of the Scottish Parliament (MSP), journalists, council officials, and local residents. Content analysis was also employed regarding media reports (both local and

national) that focused on the culture. Over 200 articles were collected between August 2003 and September 2008 from daily local newspapers: the *Press and Journal* and the *Evening Express*; and two free newspapers distributed weekly across Aberdeen: *The Independent* and *The Citizen*. Relevant articles from national media outlets such as *BBC News Online*, *The Times*, *The Guardian*, and *The Scotsman* were also analysed.<sup>2</sup> Finally, official documentation from Aberdeen City Council and the Scottish Government,<sup>3</sup> and data provided by Grampian Police in relation to road traffic offences and the use of anti-social behaviour legislation were also analysed.

## **The Societal Reaction to Aberdeen's Boy Racers: A Regional Moral Panic**

### *'No Space to Race': Urban Regeneration*

From the 1990s onwards, Aberdeen's seafront underwent vast redevelopment, a result of which was increased contestation over the use of this urban space by young motorists. Schemes to attract the wealthy middle-classes back to the inner city have become central to urban redevelopment strategies. In addition, urban revitalisation strategies are aimed not just at attracting middle-class gentrifiers as resident taxpayers, but also at bringing them back to urban areas as consumers (Lees 2003). Thus, city space is shaped to and shaped by competitive pressures (Park and Burgess 1921). The Beach Boulevard road links the nearby city centre to a retail complex, leisure centre, cinema, restaurants, hotel, health club and sports centre. From 2000 onwards, a large number of high-priced luxury flats were also built in the area. An increase in the residential population, coupled with the commercial and retail revitalisation of the locale resulted in complaints from citizens concerned about the effects of speeding, street racing, and other forms of anti-social behaviour. Thus, the drivers were also of concern to the local council (who were keen to attract consumers and tourists to Aberdeen's seafront), the police, and the media (which was always eager to report on the boy racer menace). For instance, a report claimed that:

Residents around Aberdeen's beach area are living in fear that they will become the next road accident victim...as they sit in their own home. Rising numbers of boy racers on the Beach Boulevard are making nearby householders' lives a misery. Recently a Boulevard couple got the shock of their lives when a car overturned and slammed into the front of their home. (Flynn 2000, p.9)

Urban regeneration of Aberdeen's seafront contributed to the moral panic concerning young drivers. An influx of middle-class residents contributed to the societal reaction and the pressure on authorities to tackle the problem. This is reminiscent of Johansson's (2000, p.25 original emphasis) observation that moral panics in the first half of the twentieth century involved a struggle against 'bad culture' and thus were 'mainly expressions of *class distinctions*, the defence of the social order and the moral mission to educate the working class'. Thus, there was a desire from the new (bourgeoisie) residents to exclude working-class people in general from the area. According to a politician:

It was obvious the strength of the feeling and in addition to the people at the top of the Boulevard, Wales Street, that sort of area, there was a new element because there's been a lot of housing built at the bottom end, the beach end of the Boulevard and a lot of those people that had paid a lot of money for their houses were getting

involved. So there was a more middle-class influx which was variable and wanted to see something done about the problem'. (Interview with politician, May 2006)

Working-class residents, many of whom had lived in the area for more than a decade, echoed his sentiments:

- Interviewer: Have the new flats or businesses at the beach changed anything?  
May: Well, since the new flats have gone up they're doing more about it because they just didn't do anything about it before.  
Peggy: I think it's them that are most affected because we're on Constitution Street and we're further back. I think it's been them who have complained a lot.  
May: I'm not surprised if you're paying about £200,000 for a house and you can't sleep in it. One man said at the meeting across in the school that he'd slept one night in the house since he'd bought it.

(Interview with residents, June 2006)

Outside groups adopted a whole host of measures in an attempt to cleanse the urban space of deviant drivers. This included redesigning the road layout by creating a single carriageway, installing traffic lights, double yellow lines, CCTV cameras, and implementing parking restrictions. Grampian Police also ran a series of operations (publicised in the local media), which were designed to catch speeders and detect various road traffic offences. Police officers also introduced road safety educational events and met with a group of drivers from the beach area in what came to be known as the 'Grampian Police Drivers' Group'. A proposal to close the Beach Boulevard road each evening was put to Aberdeen City Council by the local councillor; however councillors voted against the proposal. Drivers were provided with alternative ('legitimate') spaces in which to meet once a week (such as the exhibition centre car park). Finally, the most notable measure adopted in response to racers included the use of powers (such as dispersal orders and seizure of vehicles) under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004. The remainder of the paper will now outline the moral panic by utilising the five elements identified by Goode and Ben-Yehuda (2009[1994]).

### *Concern*

The virtual spaces available to the culture in Aberdeen for self-expression were a topic of concern for the outside groups. There was concern regarding Internet sites which focused on car modification. The local press claimed that these websites were used to coordinate the activities of drivers and provide information on how to evade the authorities:

The drivers' website, which boasts almost 500 registered users, provides tips on evading the law, and gloats of the largely teenage drivers' high-speed exploits, most of them closely associated with the long, straight Beach Boulevard. (Bew 2003a, p.3)

A forum section is peppered with boasts about high-speed chases with police as part of a criminal 'hall of fame'. It also contains tips on high-performance modifications for cars, mechanical advice and sales information...Among the items posted on the site include boasts of 'racing' up the city's Westburn Road at 90mph and overtaking 'undercover cops' at 80mph. (MacNab and Bew 2003, p.9)



Local police were reported as being aware of the websites but unconcerned. The press also reported that an ex-police officer, hiding behind the name, 'Graniteman', was using these websites to inform members of the car community on how to evade the law. 'Graniteman' was reported to have informed members of an Internet site on the details of unmarked police cars, the penalties faced for traffic offences, and how to avoid being disqualified if they had committed a crime (Summerhayes 2003, p.4). As a result of media attention and pressure from residents and state representatives, many of these websites were shut down. However, a year later the *Evening Express* reported that two new websites had been set up. The headline read: 'New Websites Spark Fears of Street Racing: "Bouley Cruisers" Condemned' (Ritchie 2004a, p.14). Residents were reported to be furious about the new websites which they believed would 'encourage dangerous driving at the Beach Boulevard and destroy their hopes of a peaceful life' (Ritchie 2004a, p.14).

In addition, the physical space occupied by the culture – the Beach Boulevard – was a cause for concern and was referred to in press reports as 'notorious' and 'infamous' (Maddox 2007, p.22). The media reported that: 'For years residents living alongside the Boulevard have been plagued by boy racers using the strip as their private playground, playing loud music and revving their engines' (Tout 2007a, p.12). The drivers have 'colonized this leisure sector of the Granite City, rendering it uninhabitable in the evening for anyone who does not thrill to the souped-up excesses of the internal combustion engine' (*Press and Journal* 2003a, p.14). Hence, we can conceptualize the measures adopted by the outside groups in response to the racers as attempts to (re)colonise this space and address the problem of the barbaric bouley basher natives. The Boulevard's reputation was conveyed in the ITV series *Drivers from Hell* 2002 where Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard was named as the worst area in the United Kingdom for illegal street racing. Local newspapers also reported in 2006 that Grampian was at the top of a national league table for the number of road deaths per region. Although this included the entire Grampian region, the headline read: 'City is Top of League Tables for Road Deaths' and referred specifically to the Beach Boulevard (Urquhart 2006, p.7).

The Beach Boulevard provided drivers with a space to engage in exhibitionism. Public performances and the display of cars were important rituals in the culture. These were ceremonies of style, cultural display and resistance (see Cohen 2002[1972]). However, for the outside groups, this exhibitionism was achieved via dangerous driving and anti-social behaviour. As a councillor stated: 'The gathering of souped-up vehicles has turned the beach into a mechanical catwalk'. In a letter from Grampian Police supporting the road closure it was claimed that: 'The nature of the road layout at the Boulevard and the opportunity it provides for exhibitionist behaviour lies at the heart of the problem' (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.21).

The drivers were perceived of as dangerous and reckless and of having no respect for the laws of the road and the risks presented by the car. A state representative commented: 'The cars can go faster and there have been some horrific stories of races down there'. There was a 'prophecy of doom' (Cohen 2002[1972], p.38) whereby members of the outside groups were concerned that the situation would not improve or would deteriorate further. MSP Lewis Macdonald claimed that: 'Another

serious accident is waiting to happen unless something is done' (Flynn 2000, p.9). According to a report by Aberdeen City Council:

Despite the enforcement, education and diplomatic efforts, all measures have failed to strike at the heart of the 'Boulie Cruiser' culture. The 'Boulie Cruiser' culture by its nature is inexhaustible, repopulated by new, young drivers who feel empowered by their newly found position behind the driving wheel. (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.169)

It was not just their driving which caused concern. Residents also voiced concern over their engagement in anti-social behaviour. For instance, a resident highlighted the amount of litter left at Aberdeen's seafront by the racers: 'This anti-social element are also responsible for the costs to society of cleaning the beach front every morning, the disgusting mess left causing offence to local residents and visitors alike' (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.59). Council officials listed the following anti-social behaviours which drivers were claimed to frequently engage in:

Council Official 1: Speeding, noisy exhausts, noisy music, littering, wheel spinning, racing, urinating, parking in areas where they're not allowed to park.

Council Official 2: Cars driving on the grass.  
(Interview with council officials, May 2007)

A local resident listed a host of problematic behaviours:

It started off with the number of people, the noise, the music, because even though it's down there when you turn the base up and hear 'thump, thump, thump', it's like the room's vibrating. Revving engines. They're sitting down there revving their engines. Racing. The speeds they go up and down here is scary. Side-by-side racing each other and when they're parked there every other car that goes up and down thinks it's, like the custom is to toot the horn. So everybody that goes past toots their horn. (Interview with Phil, resident, August 2006)

There was also the assumption that large groups of racers would encourage criminal behaviours such as drug dealing. In a report on a modified car show, a local bystander commented:

I didn't know what was going on, so went into the car park for a closer look. It looked like there were about 200 cars there. It was all young people in them and I wonder if this is going to take over from the Beach Boulevard as the place the boy racers go...I think there will be great concern, especially with the number involved. It could open a door to drug dealing or other criminal activity. (Nicol 2001, p.2)

This assumption is reflected in a statement by a police officer who claimed that: '...because there are large groups of kids congregating, there's always going to be the criminal element. It's a good way to get rid of car stereos, to buy drugs and stuff like that'. The drivers were also portrayed as irresponsible and of having no respect for the law. Another officer claimed: 'The reason that they're so bad, that they're so high risk, is that they don't have this appreciation of anything that's dangerous'.

### *Hostility*

There was *hostility* towards the drivers. The boy racers ('roughs') were deemed of as a threat to the majority of ('respectable') motorists, the local community and any visitors to the beach who were unlucky enough to cross their path. Metaphors of war were used to describe relations between the drivers and the outside groups. For instance, in an editorial comment in the *Evening Express*, the proposed road closure is referred to as signalling victory to the racers:

The Beach Boulevard must not be closed because of boy racers. It is as simple as that. All a closure will achieve is to shift the problem elsewhere. It's already happening. Shutting the road will also send a clear signal that the police and the authorities are washing their hands of those who break the law. They would rather close a public highway than tackle the problem properly. If councillors endorse the closure today, then the Bouley Bashers will win and that cannot happen. (*Evening Express* 2006a, p.6)

Another report demonstrates this battle analogy by claiming that 'peace is on the agenda' (Walker 2005a, p.4) at a meeting between racers and residents. A debate over dispersal orders between two MPs was reported in a headline as a 'war of words' (*Evening Express* 2005a, p.10). Emotive words were used to exaggerate the action taken against the racers. Anti-social behaviour had to be 'slashed' (*Evening Express* 2006b, p.24). Measures were portrayed as a 'war' or 'battle' with residents 'celebrating victory' (Tout 2007b, p.18) over the racers. Police operations were referred to as a 'blitz', 'campaign' or 'crackdown'. The residents and drivers are referred to as 'rivals' (Simpson 2007, p.21), coming 'head-to-head' (Walker 2005a, p.4) with one another at community meetings. 'Weapons' would be used in the 'Bouley War' (McClintock 2005, p.18). This view was further reiterated by Debbie, a member of the racer culture, who informed me that it was 'very much an us and them situation' (Fieldnotes, September 2006).

Negative symbols were used to refer to the car enthusiasts in Aberdeen. Words such as 'rowdies' (Marshall 2007, p.1) were used. The outside groups referred to 'rogue', 'hooligan', 'menacing', or 'yobbish' elements of the group. The youths were seen as 'noisy', 'thoughtless' and 'troublesome':

We have the same problem at football. It's the hooligan element. It's a minority that spoils it for the majority. However there's always the potential when you get a young guy, young female behind the wheel of a car, when they're sitting at the lights, the potential for it to change from ok to hooligan. It's a very, very fine line. (Interview with officer 4, Antisocial Behaviour Unit, August 2006)

A citizen of Aberdeen reiterated this view by claiming that: 'This is a classic case of the hooligan elements dictating the way we live' (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.64). As one council official stated in an interview: '[We're] communicating to the rogue element that we're watching them and we have, and will, continue to deal with them'. Another resident claimed that: 'They are just young neds with no life, intent on ruining ours' (Bew 2003a, p.3). Thus, a further representation of the car enthusiasts was to portray them as 'senseless', 'idiotic', 'childish' or 'foolish'. A journalist stated: 'We've all seen them, if you're driving, you see these fools getting in the way'. A resident suggested: 'If they are determined to behave like children – treat them like

children' (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.136). The mentality of the boy racer was also conveyed at a council meeting:

Superintendent Watson's colleague Inspector Buchan observed that the predicament was well summarized by the flippant remark of a boy racer who, when it had been put to him that all the money and effort he put into his car might be better directed to his home, had remarked: 'You can sleep in your car but you can't race your house'. (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.6)

Hence, the image of the racer was linked to the theme of affluent youth (see Young 1971b). Outside groups referred to the amount of money youths spent modifying their cars:

It never ceases to amaze me the types of people that are driving down there because when I was their age I couldn't afford a car. You stop some of them and they're paying £1500 to £2000 for insurance. Their car is not worth £2000 but you know they're adamant that they're going to do it. In one way you've got to applaud them because they have the tenacity. (Interview with officer 1, Roads Policing, October 2006)

Outside groups called for greater use of anti-social behaviour legislation, which tackled the emotive heart of the culture expressed via the practice of modification and driving performances. A citizen of Aberdeen objecting to the road closure stated: 'I am convinced that by confiscating a prized possession, for a given period, these individuals would NOT reoffend' (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.63).

Thus, deviant individuals may be condemned because they represent examples of 'dodging the rules' (Young 1971b). There is a direct conflict of interest between the outside groups and the car enthusiasts. This is reflected in statements from police, concerned members of the public, and local residents who express 'moral indignation' by condemning young drivers who appear to 'opt out of the notions of deferred gratification, hard work and responsibility implicit in the basic normative rules of Western society' (Young 1971b, p.199). Instead, these youths appear to live for the moment, flaunt their disposable income and take advantage of their adolescent years.

Their activities were also viewed as deliberate attempts to provoke a reaction from the authorities. According to a local politician: 'Some of these guys watch this really, really carefully so there'd be a sense of victory that the council had decided not to close the Boulevard and so I wouldn't be surprised if the problem was going on'. In reference to the enforcement of parking restrictions by traffic wardens, a council report stated:

A practical consideration of enforcement is that City Council Officers are not empowered to step in and prevent offenders from driving off from the locus. The nature and mentality of Boulie Cruiser offenders is such that they would be likely to play cat-and-mouse with officials and derive pleasure in baiting officialdom and undermining their authority. (Aberdeen City Council 2006, p.175)

### *Consensus*

The outside groups were in agreement that racers at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard were a problem that must be tackled. A whole host of deviant driving behaviours and anti-social behaviours were identified and related to the culture. Crucially however, it was the racers' *mere presence* at the Beach Boulevard which was of concern to residents who wished to claim this urban space for themselves. There was also a general consensus amongst societal groups that the threat of the Bouley Bashers would continue or increase further. This was attributed to 'more and more young people acquiring faster and more powerful cars' (Flynn 2000, p.9). The regional manager of the Patio Hotel stated: 'racing has been a problem since the hotel began, but over the last four months it has got worse. I want to see action which will stop this before someone gets hurt' (Bearcroft 2000, p.3). A local councillor also claimed: 'This is not a new problem. It has been going on for 20, 30, maybe even 40 years, and it is definitely getting worse' (Workman 2004, p.1). In another article, which reported on a car crash at the Beach Boulevard, the same councillor claimed that: 'his constituents were convinced that it is only a matter of time before someone died on the notorious road' (McIntosh 2005, p.6). These accounts all provide examples of 'prediction', 'where there is the implicit assumption, present in virtually every report, that what had happened was inevitably going to happen again' (Cohen 2002[1972], p.26). The Bouley Bashers were referred to in media reports as a 'problem that just won't go away' (*Press and Journal* 2003a, p.14).

Furthermore, residents who had agreed to meet with police, council officials and boy racers, believed that they would be unable to come to an arrangement with them and thus that the problem would continue. One of the residents remarked: 'To be honest what will be said at the meeting is they (the Bouley Bashers) will try and calm everyone down and the problem will get worse' (Bew 2003a, p.3). Another resident claimed: 'This is a bold move by the police and I'm surprised some Bouley Bashers have agreed to it, but I can't see it working'. Thus, there was a consensus amongst residents that the meetings would be unsuccessful and that the behaviour of the Bouley Bashers would continue and/or deteriorate further. This links back to the previous element of *hostility* in that an 'us and them' mentality is evident with the Bouley Bashers playing out as the villains in this narrative, while local residents and businesses are the victims.

### *Disproportion*

There was *disproportion* with regards to the number of individuals reported to be involved in deviant behaviour and the assumption that all of the drivers at Aberdeen's seafront were up to no good. In press reports there was an 'over-reporting' of the activities of boy racers reminiscent of that associated with the Mods and Rockers of the late 1960s in Cohen's (2002[1972], p.20) study. Reports exaggerated the seriousness of events, the numbers involved in deviant behaviour and the effects of this behaviour. The mode and style of presentation in media reports was characteristic of typical crime reporting. This included 'sensational headlines', 'melodramatic vocabulary and the deliberate heightening of those elements in the story considered as news' (Cohen 2002[1972], p.20). There was 'exaggeration' (Cohen 2002[1972], p.19) as to the number of drivers who belonged to the culture. Here, there was a concern that a more sizeable number of individuals were involved in deviant behaviour than was actually the case, as was observed during fieldwork with the culture. In reports there are claims of 'scores of young

drivers' (Grant 2003, p.6) who are 'congregating' and have 'colonised the leisure sector of the Granite City' (*Press and Journal* 2003a, p.14). These 'over-excited, adrenaline-fuelled youngsters' move 'in packs behind the wheel' (*Press and Journal* 2003a, p.14) and once moved on by the police 'arrive back in droves' (Hepburn 2004, p.1). The boy racers were seen to invade space, causing disaster and mayhem wherever they went. As one local newspaper stated: 'Aberdeen's newest park and ride scheme has been overrun by boy racers. Scores of car-mad youngsters are roaring into the floodlit car park at night' (Nicol 2001, p.2). The culture was referred to as a 'crew' (Walker 2005b, page unknown). The boy racer phenomenon was a problem that was 'spreading' across towns and cities in the United Kingdom. Their driving style was also exaggerated by references to 'excessive' or 'extreme' speeds, 'roaring engines' (*Evening Express* 2006c, p.16) and 'madly revved' engines (*Press and Journal* 2003a, p.14).

The type of 'distortion' (Cohen 2002[1972], p.19-20) evident in local media coverage of the events concerning boy racers also lay in the mode and style of presentation of the reports. Headlines appeared such as 'Beating the Bouley Boys' (Ewen 2002b, p.4), 'Speeders Snared in Blitz at Beach' (Gribble 2002, p.2), 'The 80mph Madness of the Bouley Boys' (Ewen 2002a, p.4), 'Tycoon Set to Take on Boulevard Race Pests' (Bew 2003b, p.5), 'New Websites Spark Fears of Street Racing' (Ritchie 2004a, p.14) and 'Flower Power Could Help in War on Bouley Bashers' (Lawther 2005, p.10). Metaphors associated with driving were used to explain reactions to the racers. Headlines featured such as 'Police Launch Campaign to *put the Brakes* on Boy Racers at Esplanade' (*Press and Journal* 2003b, p.7, emphasis added) and 'Residents *Rev up* a Protest over Bouley Bashers' (*Evening Express* 2004a, p.10, emphasis added). In addition, proposals to close the Beach Boulevard were reported as a 'bid to *curb* racers' (*Evening Express* 2005b, p.10, emphasis added).

In media reports, it is unclear the number of offences which occurred at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, reports tend to highlight convictions or police operations which feature dangerous driving such as speeding or illegal street racing. A Freedom of Information Request submitted to Grampian Police in 2006, gives an indication of the numbers and types of motor vehicle offences recorded and/or reported for the Beach Boulevard (Grampian Police 2006). In 2004, there were 80 offences recorded and 339 reported motor vehicle offences. Of the reported offences, 184 (54 per cent) were 'lighting offences', while only 19 (7 per cent) were 'speeding in restricted areas'. In addition, there were 7 'dangerous driving offences' (2 per cent of all reported offences), 9 'driving carelessly' offences (3 per cent), and 4 'other speeding' offences (1 per cent) in 2004. Given that the majority of reported offences involved 'lighting', it is curious that press reports instead choose to focus on issues surrounding speeding or dangerous driving, which thus serve to present these as being more frequent than is indicated via police records of reported offences. A similar pattern is evident in offences reported/recorded in 2005 with 195 motor vehicle offences reported and 109 offences recorded. Again, the majority of reported offences were 'lighting offences' (44 in total, 22 per cent). There were 33 reports of individuals 'driving carelessly' in the area (17 per cent of the total recorded offences). 2005 is a notable year in that the police implemented seizure of vehicles powers and the dispersal orders in response to racers, thus it would be understandable if a greater number of offences were reported/recorded due to higher police presence. It is also debatable whether all the drivers who were caught speeding or driving

dangerously were members of the culture. For instance, a 27 year old was reported as having been caught speeding at 80mph in the beach area (Ewen 2002a, p.4); however the majority of those who participate in the culture are in their late teens and early twenties, so it is unclear whether he was a motorist passing through the area or a member of the culture. Another report claimed that police had caught 'four drivers exceeding the limit by 30mph or more in Aberdeen' (*Evening Express* 2004b, p.2). However, of the four motorists, only two were caught in the beach area whilst the other two were caught in other areas around Aberdeen.

Furthermore, the drivers I interviewed claimed that they drove sensibly:

Most of us just want to sit on the trammers<sup>5</sup> and chat to our mates. We spend too much money on our cars to write them off by driving like idiots and I worked hard to earn my licence. I don't want to lose it cos that would affect my whole life. Besides, I can't afford the petrol to be doing laps all night. It tends to be the same group of friends that don't behave. I've seen myself reporting their licence number to the police if they have been driving dangerously, swerving all over the road and cutting people up. It's not that I'm grassing or being a snitch but you can see an accident is going to happen and we don't want that or our cars getting damaged. It doesn't make us look good. (Interview with Debbie, October 2007)

According to Robert:

It's a minority at the beach who spoil it for the majority. They spoil it for those who have an interest in cars. You can see from the last 'Drivers' Group' meeting that nothing illegal goes on and it's all about having a laugh, socialising and talking about cars. It's not like people think the beach is with speeding and racing. We always say to those on the [website] forums that if you speed on your way to a meet then it's your problem and we want nothing to do with it. We don't want the website's name dragged through the mud. (Fieldnotes, April 2007)

What is also interesting is the marginal or invisible role girl racers played in the local press. The deviant status of the Bouley Basher is applied to young male motorists. There are constant references in reports to boy racers and the words used to describe them have largely masculine connotations. The only article in the local media which featured two girl racers was titled: 'I didn't spend £30,000 on my car just to damage it by being an idiot Bouley Basher' (Ritchie 2004b, p.4). This reaffirms the gendered stereotype that girls are not risk-taking drivers (but inept or incompetent as in the traditional 'women driver' stereotype), and hence serves to disassociate them from the boy racer/Bouley Basher label. However, through participant observation at Aberdeen Beach, it became evident that a growing number of girls participate in the culture either as drivers (girl racers) or passengers in the boys' cars. The gender element is relevant to *disproportion* since the press emphasises and exaggerates the role of the young males, while marginalising and excluding the female drivers.

### *Volatility*

Finally, an element of *volatility* was present in media reports. The moral panic concerning the racers erupted in 2003. In terms of media coverage, a Lexis Nexis search of reports in local newspapers the *Evening Express* and the *Press and Journal* with the key words 'boy racer' and 'bouley' unearthed a total of 441 and 277 articles respectively between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2008. In terms of

tracing the eruption of the panic, we see an increase in media coverage in 2003, which coincides with the first residents moving into the new Bannermill luxury flats. However, the moral panic fully erupts in 2005 when a host of measures were implemented in response to the drivers. This included dispersal orders and seizure of vehicles powers which became available to police and the local authority after the introduction of the Antisocial Behaviour Scotland Act in 2004. Moreover, media reports also followed the council vote with regards to the proposed closure of the Beach Boulevard road, a measure which could potentially influence the wider citizens of Aberdeen, and was a topic of debate from 2005 to 2006. National media coverage on Aberdeen's boy racers was scarce overall. In 2005, there were a total of nine reports in the national press including newspapers such as *The Times*, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman* and *The Mirror*, and also four reports on *BBC News Online*. These reports largely focused on the implementation of the dispersal order at Aberdeen's Beach Boulevard and/or the potential road closure. Therefore, the moral panic regarding Aberdeen's boy racers was regional in nature, in terms of its coverage in the local press and public debates, although it also occasionally surfaced in the national press at key moments, such as Scottish parliamentary debates over the implementation of anti-social behaviour legislation.

### **Conclusion: Fuelling the Panic**

This paper has highlighted the continuing relevance of the moral panic concept for understanding social reactions to deviant youth cultures such as boy racers. The reaction concerning boy racers in Aberdeen, Scotland can be seen as evidence of a regional moral panic. The moral panic arose as a result of an increase in the residential population at Aberdeen's seafront. This was coupled with the development of the area via leisure and retail facilities. As a result, there was greater impetus on the authorities and politicians to tackle the boy racer menace. Urban regeneration contributed to class, cultural and intergenerational clashes. A plethora of voices were involved in the response to racers. This included local residents, businesses, politicians, the media, council officials, the wider public and the young motorists (folk devils) themselves. However, the media played a key role in sustaining interest in the issue, thus fuelling the moral panic. The five elements required for a moral panic were evident. These included *concern*, *consensus*, *hostility*, *disproportion* and *volatility* (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 2009[1994]).

The young male driver is a recurring topic of debate and mirrors wider societal concerns regarding the transition from youth to adulthood, the regulation of automobility, and the rights to use of public space. Young male motorists will thus continue to be framed as problematic and risky by the media, authorities, government, and through their representation in popular discourse(s) such as films and reality television. Through their appropriation of the modified car, these youths are thus seen to directly challenge the moral order of the roads, plunging them into chaos and disarray and threatening the 'respectable' motoring masses. For the youths, the car was a vital tool in aiding their journey through the roads of late modernity. However, the car modification scene has become intertwined with the symbol and/or myth of the boy racer.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, the measures proposed and/or implemented to tackle boy racers can be said to have added fuel to the fire. This is most evident in the use of anti-social



behaviour legislation, which resulted in the institutionalisation of the moral panic (see Best 1999). From 2005 onwards, the authorities utilised a number of powers available to them under the Antisocial Behaviour (Scotland) Act 2004 and included seizure of vehicles and dispersal orders. Coupled with the already tainted, sensationalist, emotively, politically, and morally charged symbol of the boy racer, the use of this (somewhat contentious) legislation furthered the media interest in the topic. As a result, young motorists were further stigmatised through the use of this legislation and the tendency to (mistakenly) label car modifiers as boy racers.

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## Note

<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used throughout in order to protect research participants' identities.

<sup>2</sup> In addition, Lexis Nexis was used to search the *Evening Express* and the *Press and Journal* for reports which included the keywords 'boy racer' or 'bouley'. National newspapers were also searched using the keyword 'bouley basher'. The additional

search was conducted in June 2012 and hence covered 1 January 2000 to 31 May 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The Scottish Government was known as the Scottish Executive until its 'rebranding' by the Scottish National Party in 2007.

<sup>4</sup> However there were three separate deaths from 1999 to 2006. Two of the victims were pedestrians and the other was a passenger in a car. See Ewen (2002a, p.4) and Workman (2005, p.3).

<sup>5</sup> The 'trammers' were a space adjacent to the Beach Boulevard where the drivers parked their cars and congregated, and where the last remnants of the city's old tramlines remained.

<sup>6</sup> For detailed discussion of the boy racers' reaction to their labelling by societal groups see Lumsden (2009).