Stereotypes & Stilettos: An Ethnographic Study of the Impact and Origins of the 'Essex Girl' Stereotype

Richard Corlett

'Where are you from?' is one of the most innocuous questions you can ask someone. And yet, if you are one of the 1.7 million inhabitants of Essex, it is not uncommon to quickly dismiss it with a non-committal reference to 'the South East' or to answer with the equally vague, 'near London'. This response, as this essay will explore, is inclined to be the norm, rather than the exception. It is this simple act of detachment and the willingness of Essex natives to distance themselves from their identity, which compelled me to investigate the truth behind my home-county's poor reputation. After all, Essex has much to brag about—it is home to countless sites of Anglo-Saxon ruins, the best-ranked schools in the country, and some of the most picturesque villages in Britain. Yet, there is no county more denigrated, more maligned than those 1300 square miles north east of the capital. The accent—readily mocked and easily imitated—is infamous for its speed, volume and reckless disregard for grammar. However, no facet of the Essex identity brings more shame than the 'Essex girl' stereotype. She is loud, vulgar and performs sex acts indiscriminately. Equipped with bleached-blonde hair, surgically-enhanced cleavage and gravity-defying heels; she has such a fondness for fake tan that her skin has taken on an orange hue. Her reputation is so notorious that she has even managed to find herself in the Oxford English Dictionary, coupled with a less than flattering definition:

Essex Girl. n. Brit. Derogatory.

A term applied to a type of young woman, supposed to be found in and around Essex, and variously characterised as unintelligent, promiscuous and materialistic

(OED, 1997)

Her fame was sent into the stratosphere with arrival of the 2010 reality TV show, The *Only Way is Essex* (or 'TOWIE', as it is affectionately known by its followers). Claiming to epitomise the lives of the average young person in Essex, the programme has sparked furious debate regarding the authenticity of the stereotype it promotes. I set about distinguishing the fact from the fiction – what did girls from Essex really feel about the stereotype of the 'Essex girl'? This initial truth-finding expedition quickly began to evolve into something broader. I noticed in the answers of my informants how the TV series had begun to reshape the very language with which people described the 'Essex girl', remoulding her somewhat in its own image. As I delved deeper, it was clear that the 'Essex girl' had intrinsic links with the cult of celebrity - with pre-existing stereotypes being grounded and perpetuated by tabloid stars. My set of female informants, while in good humour about the reputation of their county, ultimately revealed to me the damaging effect of this stereotype and its ability to misrepresent them before they have even opened their mouths.

Origins

The stereotyping of people from Essex dates back to the 1980s. Simon Heffer was the first to coin the term 'Essex man', who he described as "young, industrious, mildly brutish and culturally barren", and of course, "breathtakingly right-wing" (Heffer 2010). 'Essex man' was said to embody to the successes of the Thatcher revolution—a generation of men who found sudden and considerable wealth through middle-class professions and entrepreneurship, as opposed to working in heavy industry. Whereas 'Essex man' held political connotations, his female counterpart emerged as a form of social commentary—representing the downside to these economic transformations. Winterman observes that, "his partner 'Essex Girl' became even more legendary. A social statement rather than a political one, she quickly became shorthand for everything that was shallow, vulgar and stupid about society" (2010).

One of the first interviews I conducted was with Julie, a middle-aged small business-owner. Having witnessed the rapid economic rejuvenation of the area first-hand, she recounted the visible changes in the behaviour of the women around her. "When their husbands began to make money, they immediately wanted to show it off. They started dressing differently, and spent more time on their looks' she explained. Then there were the ones who saw the men with a bit of cash, and were like bees to honey. The way they'd get their attention would be to dress as provocatively as they could get away with" (Julie, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012).

One cannot understand the concept of the 'Essex girl', without appreciating this socio-economic context. At its core, the stereotype is characterised by the excessive prioritising of self-image and the material over the pursuit of endeavours deemed to have more substance or value for society. Thorstein Veblen was the first to define this practice as 'conspicuous consumption' – which has been refined to mean "the act of buying a lot of things, especially expensive things that are not necessary, in a way that people notice" (Longman American Dictionary 2000: 296). The body therefore becomes the stage on which statements of wealth and upward social mobility can be played out, which may account for the obsession with image found in Essex.

However, the socio-economic context of the 'Essex girl' only partially explains the phenomenon. The stereotype has evolved beyond displays of rampant materialism—as this project will later explore, the stereotype has in fact evolved in the public consciousness and undergone significant transformations at the hands of the tabloid media.

Methodology

My research took place in 'the Elms' public house in Leigh-on-Sea over three separate evenings (5th, 6th, 7th April 2012). The innately social setting provided a less inhibited atmosphere for research, as informants were relaxed and available to talk for extended periods of time. The location also provided a wide range of demographics, which were vital for an accurate, more holistic cross-section of views. 18 women were interviewed, with the age range of informants falling between 18

and 70 years old. However, for privacy reasons all names in this ethnography have been replaced.

The research which took place on a Friday night was the most pivotal, as self-identifying 'Essex girls' were said to frequent this bar to 'pre-drink' prior to migrating on to a night club. If the closest adherers to the stereotype were to be found, they were most likely to be at this place, at this particular time. It is important to note that out of the 18 women interviewed, four were self-identifying 'Essex girls'.

Participant observation was achieved as I embraced the regional accent ('Estuary English'), meaning that I would not be identified as an outsider and be distrusted. To facilitate a more natural discussion, I adopted an unstructured interview technique to elicit a freer-flowing discourse with my informants. However, certain questions were avoided – namely, addresses to the sexual elements of the 'Essex girl' stereotype. Unless these topics were raised by the informant first, I decided that such issues were too sensitive to be directly addressed, as my role as an unfamiliar male towards an all-female set of informants could have been misinterpreted. Therefore, while a deeper analysis of the misogyny facing 'Essex girls' (particularly the assumption of promiscuity) could have been facilitated through simple questions such as, 'why do you dress the way you do?', or, 'what message are you trying to send out with your choice of clothing?'—I ultimately resisted.

Only one set question was posed to every informant—which five words would they associate with 'Essex girls'? At the start of each interview, it was important to learn their instinctive responses, without the chance for

ethnographer—influenced or over-thought reactions. This simple technique was illuminating as I was able to study each adjective and consider where it had originated from. Many words were so explicitly derived from media-vocabulary that the focus of my study shifted away from finding the truth behind the 'Essex girl', and became more of an exploration of how the media can redefine the stereotypes that already exist in the public consciousness.

The Impact of Stereotyping

Early in my research, a distinction in attitudes emerged between informants who spent the majority of their time in Essex, and those who had spent extended periods of time out of the county. University students on their Spring break provided the most enlightening responses. One of the first interviews I conducted was with Bethany—a student at the University of Warwick, who had barely left the county until she went to university. She said: "My Mum told me not to drink Malibu and Coke because people would know I was from Essex. I didn't understand what she meant, until I started meeting people during Fresher's week, when they would laugh when I said where I was from" (Bethany, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). She went on to recall that: 'once, I was struggling with work and someone pointed out to me that, "Essex girls can't write their own name, so why should you expect to complete a Maths degree?" (Bethany, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). It was clear that she understood the humour in what was said, but she recalled it with a disheartened expression on her face. One can see the potency of the stereotype when one considers that a student studying at a top university can still be branded as 'unintelligent' by her peers

because of her background. Perceptions of place are therefore inseparable from the perceptions of those who supposedly inhabit it. Consequently, the act of withholding any admission of where you are from is seen as the only route to escaping negative preconceptions.

I found that in anticipation of being profiled by others, many would avoid any connection to the 'Essex girl' stereotype by modifying their behaviour—especially in a professional setting. Tina, 23 years old, explained to me that, "You can avoid a hell of a lot of aggro[1] if you don't tell anyone you're from Essex… but with an accent like mine, it's not really an option" (Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). Her accent is so thick, that even though I had grown up in the area, I found it difficult to catch every word. "It's well annoying, I had this important job interview in London, but I was shittin' myself that when they heard me speak, they'd think I was thick or just common", she recounted (Tina, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). I asked her how she dealt with the situation: "I went into the job interview and spoke the Queen's English, sounded all posh… then on my first day, I walked up to my boss and said 'alright, mate'" (Tina, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). She re-enacted the dumbfounded expression on her employer's face and let out a shrill laugh. The necessity to conceal something as instinctive as the way you talk shows the weight that these preconceptions hold. 'Accent-Reduction' classes are popular for newly-settled immigrants, but according to Garrett, they are increasing in popularity for those in Britain with strong regional accents, causing them to "face social or career barriers" (2010: 13). Tina's behaviour demonstrates the ubiquity of the 'Essex girl' stereotype and the damaging effect it has. The notion that a strong

[1] Aggression or conflict.

Essex accent would signal a lack of intelligence, and thus should be avoided, highlights that a severe class divide has the potential of being forged through the constant re-enforcement of negative images. Ultimately meaning that the social mobility that 'Essex girls' are famed for, could be in jeopardy of being suspended.

The influence of the media in promoting detrimental images could be seen in one anecdote that 19 year-old Stephanie told me. "My school, Westcliff High School for Girls, had just received Academy status for outstanding achievement, and planned to rename themselves Westcliff Academy for Girls, so they could show it off,' she paused, stifling laughter. The school board intervened because they realised that the abbreviation would be WAGs" (Stephanie, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). 'WAGs' is an acronym, used by the British tabloid press to describe the wives and girlfriends of high-profile footballers. It implies a gold-digger who finds a rich husband, and spends her time showing off her wealth and newfound social status. Clearly, the marrying of this image with an all-girls grammar school would have been damaging to the public perception of the institution and its alumni.

The discomfort regarding Essex's increasing notoriety, however, was not shared by those who were unlikely to interact with those outside of the county—which ironically, described all the informants who self-identified as 'Essex girls'. "Glamorous, classy, successful…" was 23 year-old beautician, Racquelle's description of an 'Essex girl' (Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). She wobbled slightly on her six-inch heels, and readjusted her bra strap as she told me: "I think Essex is the best place to live in England, maybe the world. It's definitely the new LA" (Racquelle, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). Her reference to Los Angeles, instantly conjures up images of Hollywood—the

hub of celebrity culture. The socio-economic background of Essex has already been explored, with it certainly holding a character of self-reliance and economic upward mobility, but the 'Essex girls' I spoke to only made reference to this idea in the narrow frame of the celebrity 'rags-to-riches' narrative.[2] I began to focus on where these ideas where coming from, and why Essex had become synonymous with celebrity culture.

After all, the task of describing an 'Essex girl' in five words delivered surprising results. Many words were to be expected—'orange', 'dumb', 'loud', 'slutty'[3]— but I instantly recognised terms such as 'vajazzled'[4] and 'reem'[5] as coming from the television series, *The Only Way is Essex* ('TOWIE'). It was a breakthrough for my research when I realised that the stereotype was being articulated in terms of the television show—meaning that it was actively shaping people's perceptions of 'Essex girls'. Indeed, the subject of 'TOWIE' seemed inescapable in every conversation I had. "Whenever I go anywhere else, people will ask me 'Have you been to Sugar Hut?[6]', 'Have you met Joey Essex?', 'Can I see your vajazzle?'", recounted Natalie, a 26-year old accountant (Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). "At first I thought it was funny, but now, I genuinely think that everyone thinks we are like the girls from 'TOWIE'" (Natalie, Leigh-on-Sea: 2012).

[2] The notion that through the vehicle of fame, one can be transformed from a position of relative poverty to one of affluence.
[3] Promiscuous.
[4] The decoration of the female genitalia with rhinestones—popularised by Amy Childs on 'TOWIE'.
[5] A synonym for 'awesome', used frequently by Joey Essex on 'TOWIE'.
[6] The Brentwood nightclub often featured on 'TOWIE'.

The producers of the show describe Essex as “the place where nail bars, nightclubs and tanning salons are a big part of everybody’s life” (Langley, 2010). Indeed, for five series, the series has depicted the cast balancing beauty treatments with binge-drinking. Reactions are strong at the mention of ‘TOWIE’, with 30 year-old Maria lamenting that “there is no difference between an ‘Essex girl’ and a girl from Manchester or Glasgow. It’s such just that we have a fucking TV show about it” (Leigh-on-Sea: 2012). Jessica, a self-identifying ‘Essex girl’ agreed that “Most girls in Essex actually have jobs, unlike them on TV”, but she paused, only to admit that “it would be epic to have a life like theirs, though” (Leigh-on-Sea, 2012). Those few slightly wistful words were enough to drive my investigation to explore the dialectical relationship between media and culture. Glynn writes that the primary characteristic of TV shows such as ‘TOWIE’ is that “tabloid television ‘reflects’ or ‘mirrors’ the changes occurring in the society of which it is a part” (2000: 231) It led me to wonder whether programmes like ‘TOWIE’ are actively creating the ‘Essex girl’ stereotype, or if it is merely a reflection of a phenomenon that already exists.

The Impact of the Media

I began asking my informants to name famous figures from Essex, either from history or the present day. Nearly every name given to me met the criteria of being a ‘celebutante’—a person with no discernible talent, and yet high visibility in the media. The most common names given to me, aside from the ‘TOWIE’ cast, were topless-model Jodie Marsh, and Big Brother-winner, Chantelle Houghton. The two are the walking embodiments of the ‘Essex girl’ stereotype, and through their lives as

tabloid-fixtures, they promote the idea to those from outside the county that they are the norm as opposed to the exception. Bryant and Oliver note that, “repeated exposure to mass media fare may function as a form of cognitive rehearsal, thereby strengthening sex-typed scripts in memory” (2009: 349). The human mind constantly categorises the world around it, so that information is easier to process and organise —it is the very nature of how stereotypes come into being. Women who conform to the stereotype and are in the media, consolidate pre-conceptions, and begin to erode critical thought and scepticism on the issue.

Many informants told me that they felt men had more misogynistic attitudes towards them because they were from Essex, with one commenting that “because you’re from Essex, they say things that they wouldn’t dare say to other girls” (Tanya, Leigh-on-Sea, 2012). It is possible that male behaviour has been shaped by their consumption of tabloid media, which not only projects the image of the ‘Essex girl’ as sexually promiscuous, but implies that it is acceptable to mock and objectify them as a result. Glynn explains that tabloid journalism normalises sexism in its writing style (2000:227), meaning that high visibility of ‘Essex girls’ in the media could cause men to behave towards them in a way that they wouldn’t with other women.

Indeed, the role of the media is clear in how stereotypes are readily accepted outside of Essex, but whether the media is actively cultivating adherents to the ‘Essex girl’ phenomenon is difficult to decipher. Social cognitive theory would potentially explain the perseverance of the ‘Essex girl’ phenomenon, as the young are exposed to media coverage of Essex women who become rich and famous for being unintelligent and over-sexed. Bryant and Oliver note that imitation often

occurs when an adolescent sees 'a same-sex media model engaging in sex-typed behaviour that is rewarded' (2009: 349). It is feasible that the adherents to the stereotype are the symptom of a localised aspiration, derived from a wider society that already over-values the power of celebrity. Young and impressionable Essex women are informed by the media that you can become rich and successful on the basis of appearance alone and thus, the stereotype begins to become somewhat of a reality. However, it should be stressed that my forays into social cognitive theory are limited by my lack of fieldwork data regarding the media consumption history of self-identifying 'Essex girls'. To determine the degree of imitation that may be occurring in the Essex sub-culture, evidence taken by an ethnographer with an extensive background in psychology would be needed to further substantiate such claims.

Conclusion

Until I conducted my research, I felt a degree of disconnect between the negative images I saw in the media and the individuals who had to live with fallout of the gender and class-based suppositions that accompanied them. It is clear that the ubiquity of the 'Essex girl' stereotype can be disabling and abhorrent to women finding their place in the outside world, leading them to shed any association to their place of origin. While my research has vastly improved my understanding of the formation and impacts of negative stereotypes, to claim that it provides an exhaustive account of the 'Essex girl' phenomenon would be inaccurate. Assessing the 'Essex girl' using only women from one town in a very large county, would be reductive, and would lead me to be as guilty as those who base their perception of

every woman from Essex on the ‘Essex girl’. Although what is abundantly clear from my research is that the more notorious the ‘Essex girl’ becomes, the more that the majority of natives will go out of their way to assert to the rest of the world that as far as they are concerned, ‘the only way is *not* Essex’.

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