Binge Drinking – Do They Mean Us? Living Life to the Full in Students’ Own Words

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[to cite]:


[url]:

http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/12447/volumes/v33/NA-33

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ABSTRACT
This paper attempts to further understanding about young people and their excessive alcohol consumption, focusing particularly on students. The study aimed to identify and explore the role and position of alcohol in students’ lives, and the perceived benefits that alcohol offered. Undergraduate student researchers were recruited and trained to conduct focus groups. Major findings focused on the way participants consumed alcohol, the language they used to talk about their behavior, the means by which they rationalized their behavior, and the perceived benefits they gained from drinking alcohol. The implications of this research for consumers and policy makers are discussed.

INTRODUCTION
The discussion and analysis of young peoples’ drinking habits has captured the interest of academic researchers from a range of disciplines. The underlying assumption of much research has been that excessive alcohol consumption is problematic or deviant behavior, and the focus is often on examining the negative impacts of alcohol consumption. This study attempts to explore the area of young people and their alcohol consumption using young peoples’ voices to present the findings, focusing particularly on students. Rather than judging students’ alcohol consumption or approaching it as a problem-solving exercise, in this primarily exploratory study we attempted to progress towards identifying and understanding: firstly the role and position of alcohol in the lives of students, and secondly the perceived benefits that alcohol offered. Taking this approach should facilitate a better understanding of the attractions of excessive alcohol consumption, and hence its importance in students’ lives.

LITERATURE OVERVIEW
Excessive alcohol consumption amongst young people has been recognized as a major problem for Western countries. Binge drinking is of particular concern in the UK and is prevalent among people between the ages of 16 and 24 (Strategy Unit 2004). It is acknowledged that alcohol plays a key role in the lives of many undergraduate students (e.g. Ardenekan 2005; Christie et al. 2001; Gill 2002; Goftron 1990; Webb et al. 1996) with recent research suggesting that half the UK student population regularly binge drink (see Ardenekan 2005) and students’ alcohol expenditure was nearly £1 billion in 2004, £300 million more than on food (Curtis 2004).

Gill (2002) provides a very useful review of the past 25 years of research looking at drinking behavior focusing on undergraduate students and based in the UK. However, all 18 of these studies used questionnaires as their main method of data collection and the majority of studies have focused on identifying the amounts of alcohol consumed and the negative effects of alcohol consumption. It is generally agreed that many university students tend to drink above what the government defines as sensible limits (Webb et al. 1996) and are more likely to do so than the general population (Gill 2002). Webb et al. (1996) identify pleasure; habit; to increase confidence; anxiety/stress and social pleasure as the key reasons for students’ consumption of alcohol (on a methodological point these choices were researcher-generated, although respondents were given the option to cite self-generated responses under the ‘other’ category). Questions left unanswered by this research, and other related studies, are that in spite of focusing exclusively on student respondents, the studies do not identify factors associated with excessive alcohol consumption other than those that could be true for the population as a whole. Although one might conclude from these findings that the student sub-group of the population is no different from the wider population in its drinking behaviour, it is likely that the research methods used (researcher-generated closed options, a focus on negative aspects of drinking) skewed the findings away from developing a valid and reliable picture of the role of alcohol in students’ lives.

In any attempt to understand the so-called binge-drinking culture, it is important to examine the context specific aspects of student drinking culture. Gill (2002) suggests that factors such as ‘student demographics’ need to be explored in more detail and Dowdall and Wechsler (2002) argue that a major shortcoming is the failure of studies to understand or communicate the broader context or the ‘alcohol environment’ of students’ lives. It is important to appreciate those aspects of students’ lives that make them distinct and therefore worth studying. For example, any discussion of students and alcohol should discuss students’ access to bars and the existence of alcohol promotions that can be found on and off campus. This leaves us with the following question: what is it about being a student that leads to a tendency to drink excessive amounts of alcohol whilst at university?

Another potential obstacle to forming a clear picture of alcohol consumption is the terminology employed by alcohol researchers and policy makers. In recent years the term ‘binge drinking’ has assumed common usage. However, there exists confusion regarding this terminology – i.e. whether it refers to alcohol consumption over a prolonged period or whether it refers to the specific amounts drunk in a particular session (and associated with this, there exist differences in the amounts classified as worthy of the term) (Gill 2002). This confusion of terminology serves to cloud our understanding as researchers (Measham 2004) and also understanding by the population under study (of how their own behavior would be classified). Further, it is argued that the commonly understood definitions of binge drinking result in the majority of young people becoming included in the definition (see Measham 2004) in essence promoting the normalization of binge drinking as a behavior. Researchers have encouraged the use of less emotive and loaded language for example ‘heavy sessional drinking’ (Measham 1996; 2004) but the term ‘binge drinking’ continues to be used by the UK government, media and commentators, making the issue of terminology difficult and confusing for researchers and consumers alike.

Therefore a number of characteristics associated with previous studies help make our contribution to research in this field innovative, timely and ultimately important. There is a lack of research focusing on understanding the positive aspects of alcohol consumption, which is essential if we hope to fully understand

1With special thanks to our ‘student researchers’ who let us into their world and ultimately helped us to explore this topic.

2The UK government’s ‘sensible drinking guidelines’ recommend limiting alcohol consumption at 14 units of alcohol for women and 21 units for men. Since 1995 there has been a move towards changing the message focus to daily recommendations of 2-3 units for women and 3-4 units for men (Strategy Unit 2004)
young peoples’ or students’ high levels of alcohol intake. By starting from a different standpoint to the majority of studies, we have tried to be less judgmental in our approach, seeking to understand young peoples’ behavior in their own terms. This approach should help encourage students’ understanding of (and in some cases change) their behavior and public policy or university welfare departments to tackle excessive consumption through an approach that is centered in an understanding of why the experience of being a student may encourage alcohol consumption.

Our paper also contributes methodologically. We argue that research needs to ensure greater engagement with the population under scrutiny. In order to understand the behavior of young people—particularly with regards to activities that are considered deviant in some way—we need to find means by which to ‘enter’ their culture. By enlisting the help of members of the population under study, academic researchers are able to understand more about the context in which much public policy is situated. This kind of approach mirrors trends within other areas—for example studies of childhood and young consumers (e.g. Banister and Booth 2005; Pole, Mizen and Bolton 1999). Further, Dowdall and Wechsler (2002) have identified the need for more studies featuring ‘thick description’ in order to gain insight ‘into how the participants view their own conduct’ (p17). We argue that by enlisting the voices of our participants to present and discuss our findings that we can hope for a ‘truer’, more authentic account of the role of alcohol in students’ lives.

RESEARCH DESIGN:

Our research aimed to discover more about the drinking habits of undergraduate students, by exploring the role that alcohol plays in their lives and the benefits that alcohol consumption offers. Our experience with students is primarily restricted to the academic context of lectures and tutorials, but we wanted to use methods that would allow us to take our understanding beyond this context. We considered it important to enlist the help of experts within the area who would be able to aid our quest and ultimately provide us with a fuller range of insights and findings—undergraduate students.

Our research was based in a campus university in the North West of England. Picking up on the criticism of many student-focused studies (made by Dowdall and Wechsler 2002), the university campus has nine bars. Most of the university’s undergraduate students live on campus during their first year and in the nearby city (approximately three miles from the campus) in their second year, with some students choosing to return to campus living arrangements in their final year. Alcohol prices on campus tend to be low, and there are high numbers of drinks promotions in the city centre. The university has its own university nightclub in the city centre, which has recently stopped offering drinks promotions, presumably following government efforts to curb excessive alcohol consumption.

Five undergraduate second year student researchers were recruited on the basis of their competence in running focus group discussions as part of a practical workshop on a marketing research module. We specifically recruited second year student researchers as previous studies have suggested second year students tend to be adjusted to university life yet free from the stresses of final year study (Webb et al. 1996). These student researchers were invited to a training session, where proposed methods were discussed and students were invited to contribute to the research design. The student researchers suggested changes to the focus group guide and also the style of language to be used within the research. The final discussion guide was circulated to all student researchers and agreed by them.

The student researchers were asked to recruit participants from their friendship groups for a discussion about alcohol consumption and students’ social lives whilst at university. The researchers were not asked to select on the basis of age or gender or amounts of alcohol consumed, but instead to select a group of their friends who enjoyed each other’s company. The researchers were told that the discussions should be between 1 hour and 1.5 hours long and they should be based around the guided but informal discussion schedule. Although there were topics and lines of questioning that we wanted included in all discussions, the student researchers were advised to manage the discussion in such a way that it resembled ‘normal’ social interaction. Our researchers received a gratuity payment for their part in this research procedure, which included a sum for the transcription of the discussion.

Our student researchers were given consent forms, which explained to participants the broad aims of the research and the ethical responsibilities towards them. A key aspect of our approach was that all respondents were granted anonymity. In practice this meant that although consent forms were collected, the student researchers were requested to keep hold of these. The researchers changed all participants’ names, and were asked to ensure that there was nothing to identify the participants within the transcripts. Table 1 gives the key information that was collected from participants along with their pseudonyms for the purposes of this study. As you will see the majority of students were 19 and 20 years old, there was a mixture of males and females and a mixture of courses studied, reflecting the friendship groups of our researchers. Each group had between 4 and 7 participants (researchers were asked to aim for approximately 6 participants).

Our data were analyzed through a process of initially reading and rereading the transcripts and two academic researchers independently identified key themes and patterns to emerge from the data. We then compared insights and looked for alternative explanations from the ones that were identified. There was also an instance where we contacted the group moderator to check our understanding of one aspect of the discussion, again to ensure that we had interpreted the conversations as accurately as possible.

Student researchers were employed in order to capture the authentic voice of our participants. As a consequence it is important to note that the language used and stories told were more explicit in nature than those we heard in our earlier research with this population (Piacentini and Banister 2006). Notably, the student data collected for this study contains swearing and reference to illicit behaviors (e.g. drug taking, sexual behaviour), which have been retained and reported, in the interests of preserving the authentic student voice.4

FINDINGS

We aim to shed light on two aspects: firstly the role(s) alcohol plays in the lives of our participants; and secondly why does it play this role? We structure the first part of our findings around firstly the language and rituals of alcohol consumption in an attempt to find out more about the role or position of alcohol in students’ lives. We then explore the means by which our participants explained or

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3See literature review—Dowdall and Wechsler called for more explanation of the factors (and context) associated with student life.

4Please note that we have followed our reviewers’ advice and left in place the language used, in order to reflect the ‘voices’ of our participants, and hope this language is not viewed as offensive or problematic.
rationalized their high levels of alcohol consumption, typically referring to expectations of student life, the temporary nature of student life and the key benefits of alcohol—particularly as a social facilitator.

**Language and rituals of alcohol consumption**

In any attempt to hear and understand the voices of research participants, it is important to first become acquainted with and then form a shared understanding of, the language used (Banister and Booth 2005). It became immediately clear that the term binge drinking had assumed common usage by our participants. Ironically, rather than using it as a loaded or negative term, our participants seemed to accept its applicability to their particular situation, using it as a kind of ‘standard’ or term of reference. The following exchange was fairly typical of its usage.

**Justin**

*I consider myself a medium binge drinker, cos when I go out I get wrecked, but I probably go out once a week so….*

**Laura**

*Yeah*

**Tina**

*I guess I’m a medium drinker because (Group laughter) I do drink every night, I do drink every night, but I don’t binge drink every week.*

It was important to recognize the shared culture in which our participants consumed alcohol. In each discussion group there was at least one mention of an activity that could be considered a key ritual involving alcohol, and in some cases rites of passage marking entrance into particular friendship groups. These ritualistic activities were then explained ‘to the tape’ demonstrating the extent to which our participants (and our researchers) saw themselves as a somewhat exclusive group, utilizing practices and rituals which could be unfamiliar to ‘outsiders’ of the student culture.

**Des**

*Can you just tell me about the dirty pint, obviously I know but the tape doesn’t*

**Rhys**

*Well a dirty pint is where you have a pint full of spirits. Think about downing a pint of spirits, you aren’t going to be well afterwards.*

**Harry**

*The alcohol is worth about £25. Literally you’ve got to accept that you will be sick when you do a dirty pint. You drink it, raise your glass to the crowd then go to the bathroom and then just vomit like a bastard*

**Rhys**

*You get wasted, absolutely wasted. Whenever I feel like being sick I hold it in, I hate being sick.*

The ‘dirty pint’ was also referred to within another group (although not by this name). It seemed to be a fairly masculine activity. The assumption by both groups was that this was something in which to participate and endure, not necessarily something to be enjoyed.

**Mark**

*For your birthday Jack, what did we put in your drink?*

**Jake**

*That was really nice…[said sarcastically]*

**Mark**

*Didn’t we spend twelve quid on it, put 12 shots in? that Baileys curdled…*

**Jake**

*It was fucking horrible*

**John**

*But he knew what was in it…*

**Mark**

*Yeah. It wasn’t like we only put a few shots in ha ha ha*

In addition ritualistic drinking games were discussed whereby the forfeit involved drinking copious amounts of alcohol.

**Brian**

*Actually I’ve a good example of this, there was a few of us, I don’t think everyone here was there, maybe not, but we were drinking Absinthe.*

**Des**

*Just for the tape what’s Absinthe?*

**Brian**

*Absinthe is… What percentage is it?*

**Rhys**

*70%*

**Brian**

*Yeah 70%. We were playing a drinking game of darts and it involved pretty much every person every few minutes downing either a shot of absinthe or whisky. And we were drinking beer at the same time. We drank a lot. And a few days afterwards my head felt genuinely not right, I was genuinely worried and other people that were there said the same thing, for a few days, my head really wasn’t in the right place*

**Brian**

*When something like that happens you realize that alcohol can be quite nasty*

We played alcoholic Screw-Ball-Scramble. It was awesome… It was well funny, we tricked you [directed at the moderator], because, because, we were really masters at screw-ball, and we played a game.
basically, who ever wins gets furthest and then whoever gets least furthest has to drink. We started off, and we like "oh we can’t do it, we can’t do it" and then kept fucking up on purpose, and he fucked up on the first one, and I finished it, jack finished it, and he had to drink seven fingers. [Chris]5

Some participants talked specifically about initiation practices that were specific to their social group; again the discussion suggested this to be a fairly masculine activity. The female members of the groups seemed to be ‘in the know’ about the particulars of the practice but did not acknowledge participating.

Dean: There’s like an initiation thing for the new members of the club [i.e. his group of friends] where you have to down a flaming Drambuie so we were showing them how to do it (laughter)
Lisa: That sounds a good one
Alison: oh my god!

Mark: I know, within this group, the ‘Beer Bong’ is quite important part of our social group
Mark: how important do you feel this Beer Bong is, and how did you feel after it got stolen.
Vicky: Have you got it back?
Mark: Can you just explain what the Beer Bong is?
Jack: I couldn’t sleep…
Des: The Beer Bong basically is an aquarium tube, which is see through err, approximately 3/4 of an inch in diameter, two meters long and with a funnel6
Mark: And do you find that’s good for social, and it’s a good laugh yeah?
Des: It’s a good laugh yeah while you do it, it’s not just to get drunk, well it is to get drunk but…
Vicky: It’s also quite funny
Des: We sing a song… and it’s like a drinking game

Drinking games, and special drinks fulfilled a means to gain initiation into a social group, but seemed to be a primarily masculine activity. Female group members also discussed rituals associated with alcohol consumption, but these predominantly concerned night-out preparations and discussions the following morning. For female participants these pre and post night out rituals seemed an important aspect of the drinking occasion and also functioned as a bonding activity, providing key aspects of group membership.

Penny: (laughs) Started getting ready about three hours before we went out. Took me 40 mins to have a shower, shave and wash and dry my hair!
Suzy: The four s’s!
Penny: Didn’t have a clue what to wear so everyone is like a panel and they have to judge, and if they can’t make a decision we don’t get out any quicker! There’s a lot of enjoyment in getting ready though, I quite like, it kind of prolongs the evening…

In the following exchange, female group members talked about their habit of discussing the previous night’s proceedings. The male group members rarely mentioned their pre-night preparations (typically claiming to take 10 minutes) yet there was agreement by both sexes concerning the need for post-night-out ‘hangover foods’.

Claire: We have one [discussion] in the bedrooms in the morning don’t we? Where everyone will go into someone’s bedroom and sit on the bed and chat about what we did the night before
Lisa: Dean do you do that?
Dean: Oh yeah all the time! [said sarcastically]
Leanne: What do you do Dean?
Dean: I just go to sleep on Alison’s bed all day
Leanne: Would you take anything maybe take a hair of the dog and have another beer?
Dean: You have to eat bacon
Claire: Oh no a McDonalds
Anna: Coke and a Kit Kat
Lisa: Yeah that’s what Sally Clarke says!
Liz: And these aspects of the whole process of sorting yourself out talking to your friends about it, are they as important as the night before do you enjoy them to some extent?
Anna: Yeah
Lisa: Yeah they are a good laugh especially if someone can’t remember what happened and you can just make up stuff that’s really funny

Explaining and rationalizing excessive alcohol consumption

In seeking to understand some students’ tendency to consume excessive amounts of alcohol, it is useful to explore their rationalizations for behaviour, particularly in the context of widespread knowledge regarding the potentially destructive nature of alcohol consumption. The key themes here related to student expectations regarding their current and future lives. Students felt it was almost expected of them to consume excessive amounts of alcohol, with these expectations existing both within and outside the student community. This rationalization for consumption was also supported by their (primarily negative) experiences when not drinking in alcohol type situations. Most of our participants seemed fairly clear that their alcohol consumption would subside once they left university, and they used this as a means by which to rationalize any current excesses.

Fulfillment of expectations

One of the key themes to emerge builds on the expected student identity also discussed in Piacentini and Banister (2006). Participants tended to think that high levels of alcohol consumption were a key aspect of being a student.

[Discussing whether drinking is expected of him] Definitely, definitely, football bar crawls, peer pressure, you get abused if you don’t drink, you’re forced to do things you know you shouldn’t do like the ‘dirty pint’.7 Potentially they have the power to kill you. [Rhys]

Lisa: You have to really because I don’t think you would have the proper uni life if you didn’t drink
Alison: Yeah.. (Claire: yeah...Anna: yeah)
Lisa: because you wouldn’t get as many friends you wouldn’t get the whole uni experience (Suzy: social thing) unless you were friends with other people who drank but there’s not that many people at uni who don’t drink

5Chris refers to a game named ‘screw ball scramble’ which involves moving a ball bearing from one end of a course to the other. In this version whoever loses (ie does not get their ball bearing as far) had to face the forfeit of drinking lots of beer.
6In this example the ‘beer bong’ is used as a social means by which to consume alcohol.
7Please see previous explanation of the ‘dirty pint’
Alison: I don’t know anyone actually
Lisa: I don’t
Claire: No well when I’ve gone out and not drank I usually end up having a crap night because everyone else is pissed and not making sense and you just get pissed off with them well I do anyway I just like I want to go home

Vicky: When you subscribe to uni, part of the course is going out and getting pissed with your mates
Jake: If someone said you can go out tonight and everything is free, you can’t drink you would be like urgh no.

These discussions hint at the potential for students to become ‘segregated’ within universities according to their behavior and attitudes toward alcohol. There are certainly undergraduate students within the university who do not drink yet our participants seldom mentioned these non-drinking students and did not seem to socialize with them.

Key benefits of alcohol consumption

There are a number of key benefits that were associated with excessive alcohol consumption, and these are explored in this section. As the previous discussions demonstrated, a number of activities surrounded alcohol consumption and facilitated group cohesion. However, the social value of alcohol to students did not stop here, and we now move on to talk about the role of alcohol in facilitating social interaction.

Provision of social facilitation

It quickly became clear that for many of our participants alcohol provided a clear social function and constituted a key aspect of students’ social lives at university, reflecting the findings from our previous research (Piacentini and Banister 2006). There were two aspects to its role of social facilitation, which are neatly summed up by the following exchange. Firstly alcohol, and more specifically getting drunk, provided a means by which to meet new people and secondly it provided a social bond within the social group (as mentioned previously).

Justin I think especially to meet new people in the start of uni and stuff, like, all going out and getting drunk is the best way to get to know each other, in a relaxed atmosphere.
Tina Like whenever you go out in a group it’s always to drink, it’s never go out as a group to go to the cinema or anything like that (Group agreement)
Laura It’s things like getting, if you get totally wrecked then it’s a sign of a good night (laughter)

Alcohol was also perceived to facilitate social interaction via its effect on individuals’ personality characteristics. There was the belief that consuming alcohol allowed participants to enact (both positive and negative) aspects of their characters, which remained hidden or subdued while sober. Therefore participants used alcohol as a tool with which to enact positive possible selves, primarily a more confident and outgoing possible self.

“… it gives you confidence when you try to meet new people” [Sarah]

“… Yeah drink does give you that bit extra confidence. Well I wouldn’t have met my girlfriend now, if I hadn’t been drunk, it gave me confidence to go and talk to her” [Rhys]

However, participants also balanced these positive selves with the potential enactment of negative possible selves. Many participants—both male and females—identified aggression as a characteristic associated with alcohol consumption, which had negative connotations.

I think it [alcohol] definitely gives me more confidence and sometimes it makes me a bit more aggressive depends on the situation where and when I drink [Justin]

Ryan Basically Sarah hit me once and then it didn’t really hurt that much
Carl Yeah?
Ryan No and she said can I hit you again and I said yes and she absolutely fucking pummelled me
Carl I reckon it causes a lot of arguments too. [Harry] will know about this. My ex-girlfriend used to drink quite a lot, get really, really pissed, have so many arguments. Ruined my night all the time, hated it. That’s one of the reasons why I don’t drink. [Rhys]8

There was also concern exhibited by some participants (particularly males) that they would not be perceived as being aggressive. In the following exchange the participants are looking at a photograph of Rhys (taken while drunk) on the wall.

Brian- Look at his face!
Rhys- Not violent, it’s not violent!
Brian- I didn’t say it was violent
Rhys- Disgraceful behavior yeah but not violent

One participant saw the potential for what was normally perceived to be a positive characteristic—confidence—as interpreted negatively when exhibited in excess.

The thing is I see myself as quite a confident person I think that alcohol can sometimes make me a bit irritating and I can go a bit too far and people can be like “fuck off” [Tina]

Therefore it is generally acknowledged that alcohol consumption could have both positive and negative effects on social facilitation, despite this providing a key rationale for alcohol consumption. Participants managed the risk of enacting aspects of their undesired/negative self, necessitating balancing the positive effects (e.g. social facilitation) with possible negative effects (e.g. hangovers and embarrassing situations).

Achieving an altered state—drinking to get drunk

The overall picture that emerged was one of students drinking primarily to get drunk. Our participants liked being drunk and deliberately sought to achieve this ‘altered state’. They rationalized their behavior as temporary and this allowed them to disregard the particular dangers and risks involved with high levels of alcohol consumption. Alcohol consumption helped them to achieve some

8Rhys’ comment here appears contradictory in the sense that he has talked openly about consuming alcohol and then says he doesn’t drink. This kind of claim was noticed with quite a few participants in the sense that if they felt they did not drink heavily, they would classify themselves as non-drinkers, but often this lighter drinking was classified as such in comparison with others who might be very heavy drinkers.
of the aspects associated with student life, traditionally a time to study hard whilst playing hard, utilizing drink to lose inhibitions and bond socially.

The findings supported previous studies that claim a significant proportion of students drink with the sole intention of getting drunk (e.g. in the US, a figure of 48% has been identified [Marklein 2004]). There were numerous unprompted discussions in which students noted the extent to which they drank with this outcome in mind. In the excerpt below the participants talk about the tendency to drink to get drunk, and Laura draws a comparison with three of the group participants—Tina, Dennis and Ryan—who she views as drinking for alternative reasons—primarily to relax. She hints that their motivations for alcohol consumption are at odds with her motivations and those of many of her friendship group.

**Justin**
I don’t see the point personally of going out and having a couple of drinks

**Ryan**
Yeah

**Justin**
And not

**Ryan**
See all or nothing

**Justin**
Yeah

**Laura**
Unless you’re a steady drinker yeah

**Justin**
Yeah I wouldn’t go out and have two or three pints and come home and go to bed

**Laura**
Yeah like Tina and Dennis and Ryan will drink cos it’s like something that you do in your evening to have a relax or whatever? It’s not like a lot of people probably... I don’t know about you Sarah but if you go out, then, we’ll go out and get totally drunk cos that’s the only time you properly drink alcohol

**Jason**: Do they put the percentage on the drink to stop you drinking it because…

**Chris**: No…

**Jason**: I go for the higher…

**Chris**: Yeah

**Jason**: The more pissed it gets the more I’ll buy it…but why?

**Vicky**: Its not the case of how much alcohol is there, its how the alcohol affects you…

Participants continuously discussed the cost of drinks, and the challenge of maximizing their expenditure to achieve the ‘best’ result. This represented a kind of cost-benefit analysis, using limited funds to achieve tangible results (drunkenness) from their expenditure.

**Tina**
When we went for a drink with you guys in the Friary before you went to that house party like we had two drinks each and it was a tenner, so you do start to realize that we could’ve had like four bottles of wine for that….

**Laura**
You could’ve bought a CD or something or a DVD or could have bought a present for a loved one (group laughs)

However, this attitude was not universal, with some students acknowledging that sometimes they would drink smaller amounts of alcohol to enjoy the taste.

**Rhys**
If you don’t want to drink, then you shouldn’t drink at all. If you think about it, you go into a pub, you drink three pints, that’s six quid on average, and

unless you’re Ben three pints isn’t going to get you pissed, so there’s no point in drinking. Then you just need a wee…..

**Rhys**
No it is, if you think about it, it’s just pissing away money. I’d rather just have one coke or something

**Brian**
Yeah but I can buy a bottle of wine, drink it throughout the evening, not to get drunk, just because I enjoy it…..

**Rhys**
The taste of the wine yeah. Food, wine goes well with food.

**Brian**
Yeah. I do the same with beers. I’ll just get a couple in and drink them slowly through the night just to enjoy them rather than to get really drunk.

However, the comments made by Rhys and Brian provided the exception rather than the rule. The indication was given that few of the participants would drink solely because of a liking for the taste of alcohol. In fact few of them drank when there was no intention to go out and socialize. However, they acknowledged that this was a pastime that they might enjoy in the future and many of them talked about drinking wine with their meal at their parents’ house (i.e. away from the student context).

**Relief from boredom**

There was also an element of rationalizing alcohol consumption because it was considered to provide relief from boredom. Many of our participants mentioned this. We should pick up on Dowdall and Wechsler’s (2002) point regarding the importance of understanding our participants’ context. The university the students attend is positioned just outside a small city. Undoubtedly there are fewer activities to keep the students entertained than might be the case in other non-campus universities based in larger livelier cities.

**Laura**: Sobriety is boring

**Ryan**: I got bored to death by just sitting in my room sort of thing so I think alcohol could make it more fun (Dennis laughs)

[And later in the same discussion]

**Ryan**: Do you know what I think if I had like an X-box

**Laura**: The internet you need the internet

**Ryan**: Yeah if I had the internet or an X-box I wouldn’t drink that much I’m just bored like I’ve watched all the DVDs we’ve got I’ve got nothing to do

**Tina**: Actually that’s true

**Ryan**: I wish this was actually a group session instead of this

**Dean**: Time just goes quicker if you’re drinking

**Ryan**: Yeah definitely

However, one participant felt negatively about the assumption that students tend to drink excessively; and pointed out that he had other things in his life, inferring that this limited his ‘need’ for alcohol (again suggestive that boredom encouraged students to drink excessively).

[Group 4]

**John**: I find great pleasures. I find other pleasure in life not just alcohol consumption like some students. [Chris laughs]

**John**: I have some hobbies…

**Mark**: What pleasures? [Background noise of laughter]

**John**: mmm…

**Chris**: Not too graphic please Andrew

**John**: I quite like soccer and bedroom sports
Experiences of not drinking in alcohol type situations

As part of their discussions about drinking to get drunk, participants talked about ‘drinking situations’ where they had specifically remained sober. Their responses illustrate the challenges associated with the ‘drink sensibly’ message.9

[Group1]

Jack: Tried it once [not drinking] and then about half way through the night I just thought f**k it and started drinking

Carl: And if you and if you have gone to these situations and haven’t drank how did this effect your night?

Ryan: I actually went in a nightclub when I hadn’t drunk before it was really crap [group agreement]

Jack: You notice how dodgy all the clubs are and how mingling10 everything is [group agreement]

Tina: And the sleazy sorts of people that are there

Jack: And also when everyone else is drunk and they all seem to be having a really good time and you just want to be in that place yeah

Experiences like this tended to rationalize students’ alcohol consumption. In addition it led many of our participants to avoid socializing in ‘alcohol type situations’ (i.e. particularly clubs and late night bars) if they did not intend to consume alcohol.

The future...life after university

The ‘alternative boundaries’11 that students experienced were clearly viewed as temporary. Participants’ alcohol consumption and positive attitudes towards excessive intake seemed to be justified on this basis. There was an assumption they would make the most of their years at university and their consumption would become more ‘normalized’ on leaving university and would begin to conform with the boundaries common to the rest of society.

Dean: Cos I feel like I feel like I should be making the most of my time here I try and make sure that I do go out for a big night a week once or twice a week once a week once every fortnight trying to make sure I do go out

Ryan: The thing is you’re only gonna be at university for three years or four years for some people and for those three years it’s an experience you gotta mean I wouldn’t want to like look back and say at university I had a proper flat time like and it was shit

After you have left uni you won’t go out during the week as much and you will probably go out one night at the weekend not both [Lisa G3]

The key justification here is that by consuming high levels of alcohol, students are only doing what students do and they will cease once they become ‘full working adults’. However, for one of our participants the reputation of students as big drinkers was something that she viewed negatively.

Laura: The thing is though you are a student and like I find that people don’t take you seriously ohhh they are like students they get pissed every night and do f**k all and I actually don’t

Ryan: Well that’s you’re saying something’s inherently wrong with that? Just

Laura: Well yeah there is in that you want to be taken seriously

Ryan: Well while we’re young why don’t you just get on with it

Laura: Well yeah cos the thing is like we’re in the top 15% of the country and people take the piss out of us

Participants’ discussions of the temporary nature of their behavior seemed to revolve around the expectation that their drinking habits would change once they left university. Some participants predicted alcohol would maintain a socialization function—particularly for workplace networking—but the majority of discussions indicated an expectation that alcohol would take on more of a relaxant role, no longer functioning as a key social aid.

Dennis: If I’ve got a stressful job I’ll probably still be drinking in the evenings

Justin: I think I think I’ll be more likely to have a relaxing drink a relaxational beer if I wanted my wife to open it and pour it into a glass for me

Tina: That’s it you’ll be more likely to be in as well

Justin: Yeah you won’t have time or the energy to go out

Laura: Although it depends where you live, say if you live in cosmopolitan London and like you went out to like nice swishy bars and stuff

Dennis: I’d rather go to a village pub

Mark: What about when you get a job?

Vicky: Yeah. I don’t intend to drink as much

Des: It depends on money…which could affect it

John: I want a job like Scouse Dave, who is a beer sampler

Mark: So you think when you get more money you will drink better drinks?

Peter: You will drink to enjoy it, and not get drunk

Mark: So you will buy Budweiser, Peter?

Jake: That’s why I don’t worry about drinking hardly now, if I drank as much as I drink now for the rest of my life I would probably have liver problems.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Our choice of methods provided an extremely successful means by which to encourage our participants to ‘open up’ and discuss their alcohol consumption habits in a frank manner. We are confident that our use of student researchers and friendship groups enriched both the range and depth of our findings. Students were able to talk about their alcohol consumption in comfortable surroundings (generally the home of the student researcher) and the
transcripts reflected the researchers’ success in engaging in discussion that focused on core themes of interest yet resembling everyday conversations for the participants. However, it should also be noted that the use of relatively untrained qualitative researchers provided one of the study’s major weaknesses with students perhaps failing to reach sufficient depth in certain areas, which in parts made the task of analysis and interpretation difficult. There were some instances when meanings and language were checked with the student researchers—thus helping to bridge potential gaps between informants’ stories and the authors’ analysis and interpretation.

Our major findings focused on the way participants consumed alcohol (e.g. rituals), the language they used to talk about their behavior, the means by which they rationalized their behavior, and ultimately the enjoyment and perceived benefits they gained from drinking alcohol and being drunk. Alcohol provided an important social facilitator, a kind of social fuel and confidence booster that helped our participants to meet new people and have fun.

Owing to our focus and space limitations we have not been able to report the negative experiences associated with alcohol that students discussed. However, suffice to say that our participants felt so strongly about the importance of alcohol in their lives that despite negative experiences—e.g. hangovers or doing something they later regretted whilst drunk—any reduction in consumption was temporary (e.g. students might take one night off alcohol). Participants reconciled their behavior with widespread knowledge concerning the health effects of high levels of alcohol consumption by emphasizing that their drinking habits would change on leaving university, and this provided a key rationalization of what they saw as a temporarily excessive intake. On this note it would be extremely interesting to track students’ alcohol consumption on leaving university and identify whether their behavior does in fact change in the way they have predicted or whether alternative rationalizations are sought.

It must be acknowledged that some issues could be restricted to the particular context of our study. A different university, city and of course different participants might have led to a different range of discussions and findings. It would be useful to conduct further studies specifically talking to students who do not drink alcohol (or drink very low levels of alcohol) and identify how they experience life as a student and deal with what our participants might consider a void left through not drinking or drinking in lesser amounts.

In terms of the implications of our study for policy makers and university welfare departments, a number of key issues emerged. Despite being aware of the dangers associated with high levels of alcohol consumption, our participants perceived these dangers as primarily concerned with long-term alcohol abuse (dependency) and so were able to rationalize their behavior as temporary and less worrying. In this sense students saw themselves as a ‘special population’ and to some extent beyond the health promotion messages concerning alcohol, as post-university they would settle down with alcohol assuming a role as a relaxant rather than specifically a social tool. This has important public policy implications because it suggests that alcohol campaigns focusing on students would need to use different approaches and messages. It would be useful for alcohol health campaigns to pick up on some of the rituals which accompany alcohol consumption—so for example the preparation, post-episode and day after socialization—recognizing that for many young people, their enjoyment of drinking is not just about the alcohol but also the wider environment which accompanies this. It was also interesting to see how our participants had taken on the terminology used by media, researchers and health professionals, but using it in a primarily positive way, with the sense that a binge session reflected a good night out. This suggests that the use of more formal language might be helpful and less likely to be adopted by young people, serving to normalize the activity and therefore lesson the impact of the message.

Consumers and specifically students can take away from this study an improved understanding of how they use alcohol to facilitate social interaction and bonding and may feel encouraged to question their need for such high levels of consumption. Policy makers and health professionals can begin to build a more detailed and in depth understanding of the importance of alcohol in students’ lives. Any recommendations or alcohol reduction messages need to start from this premise—i.e. situated in an understanding of the particular context of students’ lives—the primary social activities, the bars and drinks promotions, the rituals and language and ultimately the perceived benefits that alcohol offers. However, students could be provided with more advice and information to help them recognize when alcohol has taken on a role beyond that which seems to be the norm (e.g. signs to look out for in friends), how to drink and socialize safely (e.g. organizing transport home at the beginning of the night) as well as ensuring that universities facilitate plenty of social activities in order to ensure that students do not need to drink in order to have a good social life while studying.

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