Exploring College Students’ Perceptions of Negative Consequences of Binge Drinking Through Consumer Collages

Dariusz Siemieniako, Bialystok Technical University, Poland
Krzysztof Kubacki, Keele University, England

Binge drinking among young people has become one of the most pressing social problems throughout developed economies. The discussion of its negative consequences has not moved far beyond quantitative research using the factors identified by Wechsler et al. (1994). The purpose of this paper was to investigate students’ perception of negative consequences of binge drinking using consumer collages. Our findings indicated that young people's perceptions of various negative consequences of binge drinking were much more complex and ambiguous than it was portrayed in earlier studies.

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ABSTRACT

Binge drinking among young people has become one of the most pressing social problems throughout developed economies. The discussion of its negative consequences has not moved far beyond quantitative research using the factors identified by Wechsler et al. (1994). The purpose of this paper was to investigate students’ perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking using consumer collages. Our findings indicated that young people’s perceptions of various negative consequences of binge drinking were much more complex and ambiguous than it was portrayed in earlier studies.

INTRODUCTION

Young people’s binge drinking remains one of the most pressing social problems throughout Western economies (Banister and Piacentini 2006). Although significant number of studies investigating excessive alcohol consumption has been carried out over the last twenty years (see for example Wechsler and Nelson 2008), the debates about negative consequences of alcohol consumption have not moved far beyond the original list of factors identified in 1994 by Wechsler et al. Further, extensive quantitative research into binge drinking, focusing mainly on factors contributing to binge drinking (ibid.), has not been paralleled by the same level of qualitative research exploring consumers’ perceptions of their excessive consumption. Only in the last few years we have witnessed an emergence of research exploring for example young people’s socialising and alcohol (Griffin et al. 2009; Szmigin et al. 2008). The purpose of this paper is to investigate young people’s perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking. As the definitions of binge drinking vary across countries (Oei and Morawska 2004), the understanding of binge drinking in this research was based on Martinic and Measham’s (2008) concept of extreme drinking, which includes intoxication, motivation to get drunk, enjoyment of the process, desirability of its outcomes, and long-term experience with alcohol enabling an individual to control their drinking.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Students Binge Drinking

Although the role of alcohol consumption in college students’ life, as well as its causes, have been well documented (Banister and Piacentini 2006; Gill 2002; Makara-Studzi ska and Urba ska 2007), the proportion of students engaging in binge drinking remains high. Johnston et al.’s (2006) research indicates that 40.1% of students in the US binge drink, while in the UK the proportion is even higher—with about 50% of the student population regularly binge drinking (Ardenakan 2005). In Poland, where this research was carried out, the data available show a very similar picture: underage binge drinking remains among the highest in Europe (Hibell et al. 2000; Supranowicz et al. 2006), and it is on the rise among college students (Makara-Studzi ska and Urba ska 2007).

College students’ binge drinking has attracted attention from researchers within the fields of preventive health, psychology, sociology and social marketing literature. A significant part of the literature is dedicated to investigation of individual, economic, political and organisational factors influencing alcohol consumption behaviours (Dowdall and Wechsler 2002; Wechsler and Nelson 2008). For instance, factors such as demographics (Kushner and Sher 1993; O’Malley and Johnston 2002; Presley et al. 1996), psychographics (Camatta and Nagoshi 1995), culture (Menagi et al. 2008), and involvement in other activities (Weitzman and Kawachi 2000; Wechsler et al. 2002) have all been explored. Further literature focuses also on the amount of alcohol consumed (Pickard et al. 2000; Williams and Clark 1998).

Negative Consequences of Binge Drinking

In an attempt to understand students’ perceptions of the phenomenon of binge drinking, it is important to look beyond its causes and quantities of alcohol consumed. Researchers have looked into both positive and negative consequences of alcohol consumption (Kushner et al. 1994; Park 2004; Park and Grant 2005; Wechsler et al. 1994); though, hardly any studies offer more than a mere identification of consequences and the frequency of their occurrence. Yet, as the proportion of students binge drinking remains high, one might conclude that for them positive consequences outweigh those negative ones. While students’ perceptions of positive consequences have been recently well documented in the literature (Banister and Piacentini 2006), it is also important to identify and explore students’ perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking in order to fully understand the phenomenon.

The last two decades have witnessed some important research into negative consequences of alcohol consumption: their overview can be found in Table 1. Since the influential paper of Wechsler and colleagues (1994), their 12-item Negative Alcohol Consequences Scale has shaped the research agenda. Researchers have explored negative consequences amongst different subgroups of the population: college students (Cismaru et al. 2008; Park 2004; Rundle-Thiele et al. 2008), patients in emergency rooms (Cherpitel et al. 2004), adult men (Peasey et al. 2005) and alcohol dependent patients (Chrostek Maj et al. 2005). Further, two types of research can be distinguished: studies employing more holistic approach and trying to investigate a wide range of negative consequences (Cismaru et al. 2008; Park 2004; Park and Grant 2005; Rundle-Thiele et al. 2008; Wechsler et al. 1994), and studies focused on in-depth exploration of some specific consequences, such as alcohol addiction (Chrostek Maj et al. 2005), alcohol related traffic accidents (Murry 1991), and alcohol influenced sexual behaviour and violence (Hill et al. 2005). Different authors proposed also various categorisations of negative consequences. For example, in their original work Wechsler et al. (1994) talked about direct and second-hand effects, Rundle-Thiele et al. (2008) distinguished between short-term and long-term health risks. In their latest paper focused on students, Wechsler and Nelson (2008) proposed four main categories: academic performance, social relationships, risk taking behaviours and health (see Table 1).

METHOD

This paper is based on a larger research project using collages to investigate the role of alcohol consumption in young peoples’ life. It reports the findings focusing on one of the most important issues which emerged throughout the data collection and analysis—young people’s perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking.

One of the key limitations of earlier studies into negative consequences of alcohol consumption was their research method. Conducted using researcher-generated quantitative questionnaires (Park 2004; Park and Grant 2005; Rundle-Thiele et al. 2008; Wechsler
TABLE 1
Negative Consequences of Binge Drinking

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Article</th>
<th>Negative Consequences</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wechsler et. al (1994)</td>
<td>Negative Alcohol Consequences Scale includes 12 items: have a hangover, do something you regret, miss a class, forget where you were and what you did, get behind in school work, argue with friends, engage in unplanned sexual activity, get hurt or injured, damage property, not using protection when having sex, get into trouble with campus and local police, require medical treatment and alcohol overdose. Secondary binge effects include: been insulted or humiliated, had a serious argument or quarrel, been pushed, hit or assaulted, had your property damaged, had to take care of drunken student, had your studying/sleep interrupted, experienced an unwanted sexual advances, been a victim of sexual assault or date rapes.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Park (2004)</td>
<td>Based on Negative Alcohol Consequences Scale (Wechsler et al. 1994): being sick/hangover, sexual activity/kissing, fight/argument, school problems, consequences due to another person’s drinking/taking care of others, accident, aberrant behaviour/said or did something should not have/out of control, trouble with authorities/legal, blackout, drinking and driving, bout of depressed mood, other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Park and Grant (2005)</td>
<td>Based on Negative Alcohol Consequences Scale (Wechsler et al. 1994): have a hangover, miss class, behind in school, regret something, forget where you were, argue with friends, unplanned sex, not using protection, damage property, trouble with police, got hurt or injured, overdose.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cherpitel et al. (2004)</td>
<td>Difficulties with: relatives (personal relationships), work, police or other authorities, physical health, psychological health, mental well-being. Other negative consequences mentioned: alcohol dependence, harmful drinking/alcohol abuse, alcohol-related accidents.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hill et al. (2005)</td>
<td>Violent gang activities, poor school performance, intimate partner violence, risky sexual behaviours, sexually transmitted diseases, sexual assault and acquaintance or date rape.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rundle-Thiele et al. (2008)</td>
<td>Short-term health risks: dehydration, headaches, vomiting, hangovers, anxiety, depression and other mood changes, impotence and reduced fertility, impairment of co-ordination and movement, injury or death from accidents, falls, attacks, and suicide attempts. Long-term health risks include: alcohol dependence, cirrhosis of the liver, pancreatic disease, cardiovascular disease, neurological disorders, cancers foetal, abnormalities memory loss, impaired ability to learn, liver cancer hypertension.</td>
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<td>Cismaru et al. (2008 and 2009)</td>
<td>- Social problems: violence and alcohol’s role in reducing inhibitions and encouraging high-risk behaviour, reduced levels of self-control and an impaired ability to assess risk factors. - Suicide, homicides, and sexual assaults, as well as increased risk of contracting HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases due to higher instances of unprotected sex. - Contributes to: drowning, falls, fires, poisonings, and self-inflicted injury. - Negative health effects: liver cirrhosis and several types of cancer. - Underage drinking may contribute to growth and endocrine effects that upset the hormonal balance necessary during puberty to ensure normal development of bones, organs, and muscles. - Alcohol-related motor vehicle accidents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wechsler and Nelson (2008)</td>
<td>- Academic performance: missing class, falling behind in schoolwork, and lower grade point average, a relationship mediated by fewer hours spent studying. - Social relationships: antisocial behaviour, including vandalism and getting into trouble with the police when drinking. - Risk taking behaviours: including engaging in unplanned sexual activity and failure to use protection during sex, injury and death in motor vehicle crashes. - Health: reductions in cognitive and psychomotor performance (which may lead to negative health consequences), alcohol dependency, death from alcohol-related unintentional injuries. Second-hand effects of alcohol: disruption of sleep or study, property damage, verbal, physical or sexual violence, noise disruptions, property damage, and police visits in neighbourhoods near schools with high binge-drinking rates.</td>
</tr>
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et al. 1994), they assumed no significant differences between students and the population as a whole (Banister and Piacentini 2006), and minimised the contribution students’ self-observations could make. By employing qualitative method we are able to explore students’ perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking and their meaning in the context of students’ life. In attempting to explore the phenomenon on young people’s own terms we are able to better understand the complexity of their attraction to binge drinking and associated negative consequences of excessive alcohol consumption, thus extending our current understanding of it. The main advantage of projective techniques is their ability to penetrate “consumers’ inner thoughts and feelings about products, services, people, behaviors and situations” (Chang 2001, p.253), especially when it is difficult for informants to express them verbally during more traditional research situations such as interviews or focus groups. As the line between positive and negative consequences of alcohol consumption can be very thin, and separating them is often difficult, collage with its lack of fixed borders (expressed through juxtaposition, overlappings and shifting margins and centres) appears to offer significant advantages as a research method (Vaughan 2005).

In the last ten years we have witnessed a growing interest in projective techniques amongst academics and practitioners (Boddy 2005; Slabbinck and Van Kenhove 2009). This revival, fuelled mostly by the increasing use of qualitative methods in consumer studies (Heisley and Levy 1991), has been often attributed to the work of authors such as Belk et al. (1989) and Holbrook (1988). Recently collages have been used to explore the nature and structure of nostalgia (Havlena and Holak 1996), understand consumer desire in different cultural contexts (Belk et al. 1997), study the relationship between young consumers and brands (Hogg et al. 1999) and the role of brands in defining, expressing, and communicating self-concepts in children and adolescents (Chaplin and John 2005).

PROCEDURE

Students between 20 and 21 years old were drawn from a group of fourth year business students studying at a university in the Polish city of Białystok. 82 students participated in the study: 48 females and 34 males. All data were collected in December 2008. Participants were divided into fourteen groups run in three sessions (4 female groups, 3 male groups and 7 mixed groups), with five groups working simultaneously in the first two sessions and four groups in the last session. Participants were asked to bring a variety of popular magazines which they read regularly in order to use materials that reflect their worldview and communication style; some further materials were also provided by the researchers. Each group was told to prepare a collage entitled “Alcohol in students’ life.” They were given a piece of paper (format B2: 50x70.7cm), glue and scissors, and were asked to cut out relevant materials to construct a collage within 45 minutes. Each session was fairly informal.

All groups were given complete freedom to choose the most suitable for them way of approaching the task. Similarly to Belk et al. (1997), we encouraged students to try and express their feelings, intuitions, imaginings, fantasies, and associations. The respondents were asked to use photographs, pictures, diagrams, patterns, words, letters or whole sentences in order to create and communicate their own understanding of the given subject. Markers were also provided to enable students to make connections between various elements of their collages. Once the collages were assembled, the researchers collected them and after initial analysis brought them back to the class a week later. Then, each group was given 10 minutes to present and discuss the interpretation of their collage. During the course of each presentation they were questioned by researchers in order to better identify the reasons behind selection and layout of images, pictures and words, and their meaning. This part was particularly important as “telling a story about a picture—what a person does reflect how he structures and interprets life situations and reacts to them” (Levy 1963, p.4). All presentations and discussions were filmed using digital camcorder.

FINDINGS

The collages were content analysed using verbal commentary provided by the participants, focusing on their understanding of the negative consequences of binge drinking. After the initial analysis of collages and their interpretations, emerging categories were clustered using categories identified by Wechsler et al. (1994) and Wechsler and Nelson (2008) as the overwhelming majority of negative consequences can be captured within their categories. Due to the domination of mixed-groups collages our findings are presented thematically rather than by gender, noting any differences when observed; the collages are presented in Figures 1 through 6.

Academic Performance

The indicators of poor academic performance caused by binge drinking identified by Wechsler and Nelson (2008) were not coherent with students’ perceptions. Some students, counter-intuitively, talked specifically about their positive associations between alcohol consumption and academic performance. One of the key issues to emerge was inseparability of alcohol consumption and preparation for classes and exams. It became immediately clear that for students any occasion to gather together to study was also treated as an opportunity to consume alcohol. A ritualistic character of that behaviour seemed to motivate them to participate in it, with the promise of excessive alcohol consumption during or after studying seen as a reward for their hard work. For example, one collage showed an image of an intoxicated male student with texts saying “studying sober [you] risk death and injury,” and ‘pleasure’ further below (Fig. 1). It was explained by a female student in this way:

“As you can see, in the middle, we placed a picture which is quite funny for us, you know, when you have something to drink, just a little bit, you may feel kind of “blured” [laughs], it definitely applies to students, “studying sober [you] risk death and injury.”

In all earlier studies using quantitative surveys, it was assumed that good academic results would be prioritised by students (Wechsler and Nelson 2008; Hill et al. 2005; Park 2004; Park and Grant 2005). However, this was clearly at odds with students’ expectations, which tended to be oriented more on their social life than academic performance. This difference was highlighted by a male student’s reference to the collage saying “learning is not only about books” (Fig. 3). When describing students’ typical attitude toward five years of university life he said:

Students already left family homes, some came from other towns, others are local and can afford more, they are not under parental supervision any more. This is five years during which students have to party, cause later they will have to pull themselves together and find a job, or God forbid, a wife, partner. I think most students think that apart from exams, we think only how to have fun, and this collage shows it.

1Throughout this article texts in italics and single inverted commas refer to collages, while texts only in italics are direct quotations from students’ interpretation of collages.
This kind of approach was clearly visible across other collages and groups. One group viewed their student life as a cycle of binge drinking with studying and exams at the end of the semester. A student, presenting their collage entitled “a semester from a student life” (Fig. 2), justified the fact that half of its space was covered with images of wine and beer bottles by saying that in students’ life there is a lot of alcohol (…) I think that half of the time dedicated for studying is filled by alcohol, and only about a month during exams their alcohol consumption was curbed.

**Risk Taking Behaviour**

Earlier studies identified the link between binge drinking and a number of risky sexual behaviours (Wechsler and Nelson 2008). Many of the images presented in the collages referred to the perception of the relationship between alcohol and sex in students’ life. Alcohol was often treated as an introduction to sexual activities, which was presented by students as an important motivator to binge drink, especially in a company of people they found sexually attractive. This was illustrated by a female student who described her group’s collage containing a picture of four young women and a slogan “hunting for occasion” (Fig. 1), by saying that after alcohol the barriers collapse, even girls feel more confident then. This was mirrored in another female student’s comment referring to an image of a man and a woman, with a text saying “guys for sale” (Fig. 6):
Alcohol makes socialising easier, maybe people get more courage after alcohol, they become more open and more approachable.

Further, students also emphasised that excessive alcohol consumption may lead to risky behaviours such as unplanned sexual activity or unprotected sex. However, no references were made to criminal sexual behaviours such as sexual assaults (Cismaru et al. 2008 and 2009; Hill et al. 2005). Instead, students were more concerned with being unfaithful. For example, one collage showed an image of a couple and a text saying "with another person," and representing a sexual affair (Fig. 4). One student justified the inclusion of it in this way: often one cheats on his partner, we just lose our heads.

Experiences like that showed how difficult it was for students to classify various consequences of excessive alcohol consumption. For them, alcohol was seen as a positive enabler and facilitator of social and sexual relations. On the other hand, their consumption could easily spiral out of control leading to negative consequences of their sexual behaviours. Students’ interpretations revealed that they saw it as a chain of causes and effects, including both positive and negative consequences, often inseparable from each other due to students’ limited ability for self-control. What they appeared to be afraid of most were the consequences of their sexual behaviours that were at the end of this chain, and their aim was to participate in it without losing self-control.

You know, young people often cross the borders when it comes to alcohol. Often it is connected with sex, casual sex with very serious consequences.

The most important of the negative consequences of binge drinking was pregnancy. While other authors talked about failure to use protection during sex (Wechsler and Nelson 2008; Park 2004; Park and Grant 2005), it became clear that pregnancy was what students were mostly concerned about. For example, one collage prepared by a male group used a quarter of its space to present images representing students’ perception of the relation between alcohol consumption and pregnancy. Its authors emphasised that pregnancy is one of the most negative effects, as a result we may not be able to finish our studies. If we have to go to work, then that’s it. Showing images of pregnant woman and a man with a child, and accompanied by texts such as “shock” and “forbidden fruit left a bitter taste for the whole life,” clearly indicated that the fear of pregnancy was for them the most real and likely negative consequence. Several groups stated that it happens relatively often: a high percentage of children were born because of stupid drunken behaviours.

Many of the images presented in the collages clearly referred to another negative consequence identified in the literature—the risk of injury and death in car accidents (Cismaru et al. 2008; 2009; Wechsler and Nelson 2008). Students’ interpretations of the problem showed that they treated those risks very seriously, especially when
it came to driving under the influence of alcohol. This phenomenon was presented by different groups in various contexts. For example, Figure 5 focused on its negative consequences such as injury or death of a binge drinker, their imprisonment, injury and harm caused to other people, and material damage. A female student explained it, focusing on the feeling of guilt:

One of the negative consequences of alcohol consumption are car accidents caused often by drunk drivers, young people coming back from nightclubs. Sometimes even after one attempt [at drink driving] we can end up on a tree, like on this picture, or hit somebody, and we can become murderers. It can lead to imprisonment. It can lead to disability or long stay in a hospital.

In a different way the same problem was presented on a collage prepared by a male group. It contained two overlapping texts: “end of drink driving” and “manly decision” (Fig. 3). Students described it as a type of resolution refraining from drink driving. When questioned about the manly character of that resolution, one student explained that it required courage and persistence. Last but not least, some collages (e.g. Fig. 1 and 4) had more didactic and moralising character, warning others of drink driving.

Social Relationships
Several of earlier studies identified negative consequences of binge drinking related to social relationships (Wechsler and Nelson 2008). This particular category was not featured as prominently in collages as the previous two. Only a few collages focused on issues such as aggressive behaviour or family problems, and even then the problems were rather marginalised in comparison to the rest of the content. It may indicate a lack of importance of those issues in students’ life, but also potentially their unwillingness to discuss them openly. For example, one collage presented an image of an aggressive-looking man holding a beer in one hand and a meat tenderiser in another (Fig. 6). One student reported:

Here we have a man, who is busy drinking his beer and watching telly, sitting with some kind of a meat tenderiser. Some people become aggressive after alcohol... it may also be a symbol of excessive consumption leading to a pathology.

Two of the collages showed images representing instrumental treatment of women as sexual objects, associated with excessive alcohol consumption. One of the male groups decided not to present their collage, because, as they declared, they were ashamed of its content and did not want to discuss it in front of other students. More than half of their collage was taken by a slogan saying “there are no ugly women, only not enough alcohol,” and it was showing an
image of a man with a bottle of wine, covering his eyes, and images of two women: one described as attractive, and the other as ugly. The second collage, prepared by a mixed-gender group, confirmed the perception of the negative behaviour of men towards women after alcohol consumption—an image of a couple in an intimate situation was accompanied by a text apparently describing the man’s behaviour: “he used to intoxicate lonely women.” The scene was interpreted by a male student as a situation showing a man, who gets women drunk and abuses them.

For some groups problems with the police were examples of antisocial behaviour associated with excessive drinking. However, they were not identified as primary consequences, but rather having a causal link, similar to pregnancy in the previous category. On the other hand, symbolic uses of police and their role as an external force curbing and controlling excessive alcohol consumption were common, like for example on Figure 6 with an image of a policeman on the top of the bottle-shaped collage. Externalisation of control was supposed to take the pressure for self-control off students, as explained by a female student:

> We associate police with a control over alcohol abuse, with safety and peace. In regard to those car accidents, aggression in everyday life, in the family... everybody should be able to control themselves, but the policeman is a symbol of this kind of control.

**Health**

Overwhelming majority of earlier research into negative consequences of alcohol consumption emphasised a variety of health-related problems (see for example Cismaru et al. 2008; 2009; Chrostek Maj et al. 2005; Wechsler and Nelson 2008). Rundle-Thiele et al. (2008), using relevant medical studies, came up with a list of long- and short-term health risks associated with binge drinking (see Table 1). However, the analysis of collages showed that students perceived them as unimportant. They saw their excessive alcohol consumption as something temporary, a part of student lifestyle, which would stop once they left the university. While the short-term risks were a source of entertainment, long-term health risks were dismissed as irrelevant. Several collages used images representing serious health problems caused by alcohol abuse, but students’ attitude was best captured by a student who claimed his group was just trying to present a wider social issue rather than something important to them as individuals. However, students were far from not being aware of the impact of potential negative consequences on their life—Figure 6 showed an image of an unhealthy liver on the margin of the negative consequences of alcohol consumption. When questioned about that, a student replied emphasising hedonistic approach to alcohol:

> It’s because when people drink alcohol they don’t think about negative impact it has on their health, but simply count on fun and pleasures associated with consumption.

Images showing short-term health risks, such as vomiting, hangover, smoking accompanying alcohol consumption and reductions in cognitive and psychomotor performance, were common. However, their interpretations always focused on their desirability and funny character, presenting them as something students should be proud of. The only short-term consequence of binge drinking perceived as negative was depression and other mood changes (Rundle-Thiele et al. 2008). For example, two groups showed it as a vicious circle—a cause and effect of binge drinking (Fig. 6):

> Nowadays a lot of young people have problem with stress... and they look for solutions in alcohol.

**DISCUSSION**

Research into students’ binge drinking so far has been quantitative in nature and focused on the list of factors identified by Wechsler et al. (1994). Our data collection was carried out using qualitative method of inquiry: consumer collages proved to be a very useful method for exploring students’ perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking. Although prepared by students collages imposed certain limitations on the number and variety of issues which could be explored, their interpretations created an opportunity to explore the topic from students’ point of view, without the constraints of researcher-generated categories. Furthermore, due to the collegial character of collages students felt that the responsibility for their interpretations became diluted, what in turn encouraged them to express opinions which might have not been delivered in focus groups or interviews. Another very important advantage of collages appeared to be the opportunity to identify the intensity, importance and relation between various perceptions, using the structure of the collages and their interpretations (Vaughan 2005).

Our findings indicated that the importance of social life for students was the key driving force behind their excessive alcohol consumption (see also Banister and Piacentini 2006). Certain collage characteristics appeared to contradict the negative character of relationship between alcohol consumption and academic performance assumed in earlier research (Hill et al. 2005; Park and Grant 2005; Wechsler and Nelson 2008). A simple division of consequences into negative and positive using categories generated by researchers was not sufficient to fully capture the influence of alcohol consumption on students’ academic performance. However, what we also observed was that alcohol consumption, perceived by students as a form of reward, motivated their frequent studies in groups. One question remained unanswered, though, whether without alcohol students would still be interested in getting together to study as often as with alcohol, and what would be the implications for their academic performance.

As far as risk taking behaviours are concerned, while unplanned sexual activity, unprotected sex and pregnancy were among the main concerns, students talked also about their perceptions of alcohol consumption and unfaithfulness. Contrary to earlier research (Cismaru et al. 2008 and 2009; Hill et al. 2005), no criminal sexual behaviours were identified by students. All three aspects of risk taking behaviours—sexual activities, injuries and car accidents, and doing regretful things—were strongly perceived through the prism of guilt they caused, and presented using strong moralising tone. Similar tone was observed when discussing antisocial behaviours. Students focused on issues such as aggressive behaviour, family problems and sex decentralization of women. Interestingly, the police was showed only in context of the externalization of self-control. Finally, the so-called short-term health risks (Rundle-Thiele et al. 2008), described in the literature as negative (Wechsler and Nelson 2008), were perceived by students as rather positive and desirable, and associated with student lifestyle, which confirms that binge drinking is socially appreciated amongst students.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Perceptions of various negative consequences of binge drinking emerging in our research pointed out to a much more complex and ambiguous picture of negative consequences of students’ binge drinking than it was indicated in earlier studies. Here, we have observed that often what the literature portrayed as negative consequences of binge drinking, was perceived among students as its positive and desirable consequence (for example some sexual behaviours, short-term health risks). Another aspect that was insufficiently explored by earlier quantitative studies was the level of
intensity and importance of various consequences—which we could observe using collages and their interpretations.

Several negative consequences (for example long-term health risks, aggressive behaviours, family problems) were treated as irrelevant or unimportant for students’ life, while among the most important negative consequences were pregnancy and the risk of injury and death in a car accident. Our collages offered an insight into students’ perceptions of binge drinking and its consequences—they showed them as a chain of causes and effects, where positive and negative consequences often intermingle and overlap with each other. For example, for several of the consequences (e.g. academic performance, some sexual behaviours) the line between their negative and positive character was very thin and their presentation indicated a lack of any fixed borders between them. As such, several of the collages illustrated that it was often not clear to students when positive consequences started and negative ended.

In terms of research implications, it became evident that more careful attention needs to be paid to the context within which negative consequences of binge drinking are studied. For example, the differences in perceptions of negative consequences of binge drinking between our respondents and earlier literature may indicate that similar divergences in opinions could be found among other social groups. Therefore, future research should focus not only on the frequencies of those consequences, but above all attempt to understand their meaning, relevance and importance to a particular group. The consumer collages discussed in this paper offered some indication as to the potential level of diversity of perceptions. Finally, from social marketing perspective, our better understanding of students’ perceptions of negative consequences of their binge drinking may allow us to develop more effective policies and marketing programs preventing excessive alcohol consumption among young people.

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