Drunk and (Dis) Orderly: the Role of Alcohol in Supporting Liminality

Emma N. Banister, Lancaster University, UK
Maria G. Piacentini, Lancaster University, UK

This paper examines the use of alcohol consumption to provide support for students during transitions at a key liminal stage. We explore some of the positive experiences and rituals surrounding alcohol consumption via student-led focus groups. Our findings suggest that this extended period of liminality is often experienced positively, lending students ‘permission’ to behave in ways they might otherwise consider unacceptable. Liminality helps us to understand this context of students ‘betwixt and between’ different important life stages, whereby alcohol assumes an important facilitating role enabling them to play with their identity.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13347/volumes/v35/NA-35

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Drunk and (Dis) Orderly: The Role of Alcohol in Supporting Liminality
Emma N. Banister, Lancaster University, UK
Maria G. Piacentini, Lancaster University, UK

ABSTRACT
This paper examines the use of alcohol consumption to provide support for students during transitions at a key liminal stage. We explore some of the positive experiences and rituals surrounding alcohol consumption via student-led focus groups. Our findings suggest that this extended period of liminality is often experienced positively, lending students ‘permission’ to behave in ways they might otherwise consider unacceptable. Liminality helps us to understand this context of students ‘betwixt and between’ different important life stages, whereby alcohol assumes an important facilitating role enabling them to play with their identity.

INTRODUCTION
This paper examines the use of alcohol consumption by young people to provide support during transitions at a key liminal stage. We explore some of the positive experiences and outcomes that young people associate with alcohol, seeking to understand why many younger consumers continue to drink heavily, despite widespread publicity regarding the detrimental effects of alcohol consumption. Specifically, we examine the rituals that surround the consumption of alcohol, to help forge an understanding of young peoples’ relationship with alcohol. After some initial background and a review of the literature, we develop our conceptualization, which focuses on alcohol’s role in supporting the liminal transition experienced by higher education students.

BACKGROUND
Excessive alcohol consumption, or ‘binge drinking’ is identified as a worrying trend in Britain (Plant and Plant, 2006), and the tendency to drink excessively is an accepted (and even expected) norm within student culture in some parts of the world (see for example Webb et al. 1996 and Piacentini and Banister, 2006; [UK]; Wechsler et al. 1994 and Treise et al, 1999 [US]). A plethora of studies have considered the circumstances around, and motivations for, excessive alcohol consumption. These studies tend to focus on two distinct sets of motivations driving alcohol consumption. Firstly, the extent to which alcohol facilitates socialization and enjoyment, particularly for young people (Darian, 1993; Lui and Kaplan, 1996; Pavis et al., 1997) and the contribution of rituals to these social effects (Beccaria and Sande 2003). Secondly, studies focus on the personal benefits associated with drinking, such as asserting gender identity, mood alteration, coping with personal problems, dealing with stress and relieving boredom (Darian, 1993; Lui and Kaplan, 1996; Pavis et al., 1997; Thom and Francombe, 2001). A recent focus has been the attempt to more successfully ‘enter’ the social worlds of young people and students and identify the role that alcohol plays in constructing these social worlds (see for example Treise et al., 1999; Measham, 2004a; Banister and Piacentini, 2006).

Our study focuses on the alcohol consumption of Higher Education students. As part of our effort to identify why alcohol consumption is so high within this group, and is perceived as playing such a significant role in the student experience, we seek to identify what it is about the Higher Education experience (in the UK) that makes it a different, even unique, life stage. Taking our starting point from Noble and Walker (1997) who explored the liminal experience of the transition from high school to college, and the facilitating role of symbolic consumption, we argue that university undergraduate students occupy an ambiguous transitional position. This paper focuses on the role that alcohol (and its surrounding rituals) plays in supporting this position/transition and experience.

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS
Transitions to early adulthood
According to George (1993: 360), entry to early adulthood is characterized by the three key transitions of: leaving school, first full-time job and first marriage/establishing a family. For students, the exit transition represented by ‘leaving school’ often accompanies the entry role of ‘becoming a student’, the corollary of which, for many, is leaving the parental or family home. ‘Becoming a student’ is therefore a point at which many assume the responsibilities associated with setting up their own home. In addition, most arrive at university aged 18, and are legally adults, with rights to vote, drink alcohol, have sex and smoke cigarettes.

Although many young people experience a similar transitional period of being neither viewed by society as a child nor regarded as a fully-fledged adult (Arnett, 2007), it can be argued that the Higher Education system elongates this transitional period. Students experience the ‘freedoms’ of adulthood yet within a protected environment, receiving guidance from more experienced adults as authority figures (such as university housing and administrative staff). Societal and cultural expectations about student life compound this effect, where students play to expectations about typical student behavior (Banister and Piacentini, 2006). The position of students is ambiguous, they occupy a space ‘betwixt and between’ childhood and adulthood. Although transitions are by definition discrete and bounded in duration (George 1993, p.358), this paper will develop the point that many students see this time as an elongated liminal period of ‘delayed adulthood’, and alcohol assumes a key role.

Alcohol consumption as ritualistic behavior
Past research identifies the extent to which drinking alcohol can be located as a ritualistic behavior. Rook (1985) identifies four ritual components that are normally associated with rituals and Treise et al (1999) apply these to the context of alcohol consumption, as follows: “Drinking requires an artifact (the alcohol itself), a script (rules about who can and cannot drink legally, when and where the drinking will occur, agreements about transportation to and from the places where drinking occurs), a performance role (how to drink, how many drinks to consume, how to behave while drinking), and an audience (peers, bartenders, campus personnel)” (p. 19). Breaking down rituals into their component parts can encourage a broader view of the consumption of alcohol, a view that incorporates an exploration of the behaviors and contexts that accompany its consumption.

Another approach to understanding rituals is provided by Driver (1991), who views rituals as ‘social gifts’, serving three main

1 In the UK, many UG students choose to live away from the family home, and for the vast majority this is the first time they have done so.
functions. Firstly, Driver sees reinforcement and in some cases the creation of social order as one of the more obvious functions of rituals. He suggests rituals function as a means by which to mark times and spaces, symbolizing realities, to represent a structured world. In the context of alcohol, Measham (2004a, p.319) describes "calculated hedonism" as operating within the boundaries of time (typically the weekend), space (club, bar etc.), company (supportive friends) and intensity. Banister and Piacentini (2006) argue these boundaries become temporarily blurred or alternative in the case of Higher Education students. Students have different requirements on their time (which cannot be as neatly compartmentalized as for many other sectors of the population), a range of (social) spaces specifically targeting their leisure time (mostly involving alcohol), and are surrounded by other young people.

The other aspect to the provision of order is in a more utilitarian or factive way, whereby the product (in this case alcohol) can cause things to happen, representing "leisure time out" (Measham and Brain 2005, p.267) from the busy lives of modern day consumers, essentially a "controlled loss of control" (Measham 2004b, p.338). In contrast to any potential ordering functions of rituals, Driver (1991) argues that rituals can also have an opposite effect in that they can disorder and refashion the way in which life is lived. For university students, a significant proportion of their time is very structured and ordered around academic and, increasingly, part time paid work. In contrast, their ‘own’ time perhaps allows them the opportunity to lead more disordered lives, representing a break from the norm, and this is where alcohol could play an important role.

The second social gift Driver suggests draws on Turner’s (1969) work on communitas and liminality. He develops the theme that rituals are important for the experience of community. In the student context, liminality is characterized by destructuring in relation to what Turner calls the social structure. So, while ritualized liminality structures are employed, they are different from the usual structures of society and ‘are often utilized to emphasize homogeneity, equality, anonymity and foolishness’ providing an alternative sense of social order, resulting in ‘disordered order’. The third social gift identified by Driver is that of transformation which assists in the dynamic of social change through the ritual processes of transformation. Alcohol clearly has an innate transformative power (you may get drunk) but it also offers a mechanism or opportunity for change. The transformative power of rituals, Driver (1991) argues that rituals can also have an opposite effect in that they can disorder and refashion the way in which life is lived. For university students, a significant proportion of their time is very structured and ordered around academic and, increasingly, part time paid work. In contrast, their ‘own’ time perhaps allows them the opportunity to lead more disordered lives, representing a break from the norm, and this is where alcohol could play an important role.

The concept of liminal transitions has already been successfully applied to an alcohol consumption setting. Research in social anthropology focuses on the role of alcohol (and intoxication) in the Norwegian Russefeiring celebration, a 17-day transition ritual marking the passage from high school student to adulthood (Sande 2002). Developing this further, Beccaria and Sande (2003) suggest that alcohol and intoxication can reflect a separation from previous identity, social structures and categories: “An intoxicated person is a liminal person in the process of transformation and transition outside the normal order of the society” (p.102). Building on these Norwegian studies it can be argued that alcohol can be relevant throughout what is a fairly long and drawn out period as young people take on a new, yet temporary, position (studenthood) on their path to ‘adulthood proper’. We can call this period of transition ‘delayed adulthood’, with liminality marking separation from the old role (school student) and the assumption of a new temporary role (studenthood), which exists outside the ‘normal order of society’ (see Figure 1). We therefore argue that during this prolonged period of liminality (cf. Sande 2002), many university students use alcohol as a principle means by which to detach from their old role (as school pupil). Studenthood itself represents a period of liminality, with students occupying an ambiguous phase—‘betwixt and between’ childhood and adulthood. For many students, their final year of study marks the onset of preparations for aggregation (reflecting ‘adulthood proper’) as their lives become increasingly focused on academic and career goals.

**RESEARCH DESIGN**

Our research was based in a campus university in the North West of England. We employed researchers from the students’ immediate peer group in order to get closer to their culture, and to minimize the effect of academic researchers being experienced as authority figures, a particular issue for this research given the central issue of ‘delayed adulthood’. Five undergraduate second year student researchers were recruited on the basis of their competence on a marketing research module. Second year student researchers were recruited, specifically, as they themselves are in the midst of the liminal period (in contrast with first years who are perhaps still experiencing separation and final year students moving towards aggregation).
The student researchers were invited to a training session, where an iterative approach (initiated by the authors but involving the students) was employed to design the focus group guide. 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. Selection was solely on the basis of friendship groups, irrespective of gender, age or alcohol behavior. The discussions lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. The researchers received a payment for their part in the research (including transcription costs). Consent forms were issued and retained by our researchers in order to grant anonymity to participants. Participants’ names were changed within the transcripts.

Table 1 provides key participant information.

All participants were second year undergraduates except where indicated (i.e. 1 student).

The student researchers were invited to a training session, where an iterative approach (initiated by the authors but involving the students) was employed to design the focus group guide. 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. Selection was solely on the basis of friendship groups, irrespective of gender, age or alcohol behavior. The discussions lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. The researchers received a payment for their part in the research (including transcription costs). Consent forms were issued and retained by our researchers in order to grant anonymity to participants. Participants’ names were changed within the transcripts. Table 1 provides key participant information.

Our student-led focus groups undoubtedly broadened the scope of our findings—i.e. with discussion of subject matter that might otherwise be considered illicit and unwise to discuss with academic staff. The student researchers received a payment for their part in the research (including transcription costs). Consent forms were issued and retained by our researchers in order to grant anonymity to participants. Participants’ names were changed within the transcripts. Table 1 provides key participant information.

Our student-led focus groups undoubtedly broadened the scope of our findings—i.e. with discussion of subject matter that might otherwise be considered illicit and unwise to discuss with academic staff. The student researchers received a payment for their part in the research (including transcription costs). Consent forms were issued and retained by our researchers in order to grant anonymity to participants. Participants’ names were changed within the transcripts. Table 1 provides key participant information.

Table 1. Focus group participants [age & course of study]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Carl)</th>
<th>Group 2 (Des)</th>
<th>Group 3 (Leanne)</th>
<th>Group 4 (Mark)</th>
<th>Group 5 (Hayley)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ryan 19, Sociology</td>
<td>Harry 19, History</td>
<td>Claire 19, Geography</td>
<td>Jake 19, Management</td>
<td>Joe 19, History</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sarah 19, Sociology</td>
<td>Rhys 20, Mkting</td>
<td>&amp; Biology</td>
<td>Jason 19, Bus Studies</td>
<td>Rick 20, Culture Media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justin 19, Management</td>
<td>Brian 20, Politics</td>
<td>Dennis 21, Biology</td>
<td>Vicky 19, Bus Stud/ Maths</td>
<td>&amp; Communications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dennis 19, Management</td>
<td>Luke 21 [3rd yr]</td>
<td>Anna 20, Psychology</td>
<td>Chris 19, Management</td>
<td>Penny 19, Geography,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tina 19, History</td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Alison 20, Music</td>
<td>Peter 20, Computer Science</td>
<td>Suzy 20, Geography,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laura 19, English Lit</td>
<td>Systems and</td>
<td>Lisa 19, Criminology</td>
<td>John 20, History/ Politics</td>
<td>Melanie 20, Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Communications</td>
<td></td>
<td>Des 20, Environmental Science &amp; Chemistry</td>
<td>Studies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
identified the key themes and patterns, which emerged from the
data. Insights were then compared and alternative explanations
sought, and these informed the development of our conceptualization,
as well as the more detailed discussion that follows.

FINDINGS

The concept of liminality as an overall (dis)organizing struc-
ture, as presented in Figure 1, provides the starting point for
the presentation of our findings. Our empirical data highlights the
extent to which alcohol consumption and the associated intoxica-
tion can provide a means for students to assume and cement their
new student role and attain the social and psychological benefits
that alcohol consumption can bring (as described in Darian 1993;
Pavis et al 1997; Webb et al 1996). Alcohol consumption provides
many of our participants with a means to accept and revel in the
ambiguity associated with their position as students or ‘delayed
adults’. Central to this is the implicit understanding that engaging
in excessive alcohol consumption is a temporary state, which will
necessarily end on reaching ‘adulthood proper’ with the assump-
tion of additional responsibilities this entails. Our overall finding is
therefore in keeping with previous research that alcohol functions
as a tool of social facilitation for young people (e.g. Pavis et al 1997;
Webb et al 1996). However, through gaining a more refined
understanding of the unique context in which young people find
themselves, we develop analysis themes that facilitate understand-
ing of why this is so, and in turn explain why it has been so difficult
for parents, teachers, government, health and support workers to
suggest alternative means of social facilitation to discourage the
excessive consumption of alcohol.

Liminality—betwixt and between…. delayed adulthood

Our first theme focuses on the concept of liminality itself.
Students occupy a unique position as ‘betwixt and between’ child-
hood and adulthood, reflecting a status which we suggest represents
a form of delayed adulthood. While being allowed a degree of
autonomy, students still exist within a context where considerable
authority is exerted by ‘adults’ (lecturers, university support staff,
porters, landlords etc). Students are expected to conform to certain
ideals—attending lectures, submitting coursework, performing at
an ‘acceptable’ level in their studies—and behave in a manner that
fits with the organizing structure. The two sides to university life are
identified by Vicky: “I think uni is split into two, you have your
friends and stuff and you have your academic stuff.” This immedi-
ately suggests a dual purpose of university that is widely held, this
sense that you go to university to be educated and to achieve a
degree but that it also serves a very important social function: “your
friends and stuff”.

Participants recognize their unique ‘not yet adult’ status and
there is very much a feeling of the need to make the most of it—to
enjoy what is left of their youth. Much discussion suggests that
heavy drinking will cease once students graduate and leave univer-
sity (aggregation), with one participant even referring to his liminal
status.

Dennis: When I grow up I know I won’t be [drinking heavily],
uni is the time now for me to be drinking
Suzy: I think it’s an important part of uni
Melanie: And I’m sure we’ll slow down when we are older
Penny: I don’t know, to me drinking is an important part of uni
but I think when I’m older it will be just as important.
Rick: Yeah! I think too…
Penny: I can’t see myself going out and getting drunk.
Suzy: It’s expected of you almost at uni. You are expected to be
drunk!

Here Penny and Rick disagree with the original suggestion that
alcohol consumption will slow down with age. (Penny: “…when I’m older it will be just as important”). However, she then back-
tracks slightly suggesting that although she will drink, the role of
alcohol will have changed considerably. Many of our participants
in other discussions suggest that on leaving university they will be
more likely to drink alcohol in the manner of their parents—for
example with meals and in lesser quantities. This suggests that they
consider the responsibilities of university (e.g. developing their
academic knowledge and perhaps a part time job) can be more
easily combined with alcohol consumption than the demands of a
full time career job, which they hope for post-university.

We find that alcohol provides a means for students to ‘let off
steam’ and demonstrate the autonomy they enjoy once they leave
the confines of the lecture theatre, i.e. with alcohol effectively
marking time and (social) space (Driver 1991). At its most obvious,
this is demonstrated by a wish to get as drunk as possible. On the
occasions our participants drink alcohol, it is usually with the sole
intention of getting drunk.

Justin: I don’t see the point personally of going out and [only]
having a couple of drinks
Ryan: Yeah, see all or nothing
Justin: Yeah I wouldn’t go out and have two or three pints and
come home and go to bed

This “all or nothing” type attitude is common amongst our partici-
pants. The sense is given that having just a few drinks is a ‘waste’
you wouldn’t have achieved anything (i.e. got drunk or achieved
liminality in the sense discussed by Beccaria and Sande 2003) so
why would you bother to drink at all. This could partly be explained
by the extent to which cost is clearly a consideration for our
participants. Limited financial resources is not a characteristic
unique to students in Higher Education but it marks them out from
many other young people living away from home. Participants
continuously discuss the cost of drinks, and the challenge seems to
be that of maximizing expenditure in order to achieve the ‘best’
result. This represents a kind of cost-benefit analysis, where limited
funds are used to achieve the best tangible results (drunkenness).
The units per bottle are used not to moderate drinking but to help our
participants achieve their ‘purpose’ of getting drunk. Some partici-
pants went as far as to remark that if intoxication is not the aim, there
is little point in drinking anything.

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…..

Our participants use (excessive) alcohol consumption to build
ties within their own particular communitas, which consist of other
undergraduate students. This contrasts with Noble and Walker’s
(1996) findings whereby symbolic possessions fill the void of
communitas as opposed to helping create and develop them. At
the same time, excessive alcohol consumption serves to build, main-
tain and accentuate students’ separateness from other populations,
for example older people or other young non-student adults.

Alcohol rituals to support liminality

It is our intention to locate our participants’ drinking behavior
within their own shared-culture. It might be more accurate to speak
of shared cultures as it became evident that each (focus) group of
friends has their own key ritual scripts and performances that
involve alcohol. For some, these provide rites of passage, marking entrance (initiation) into particular friendship groups. These ritualistic activities were sometimes explained ‘to the tape’, recognition of the need to offer explanations of their behavior and rituals to outsiders of the group. This demonstrates the extent to which our participants (including the student researchers) see themselves as a somewhat exclusive group, utilizing unique practices and rituals, which could be unfamiliar to ‘outsiders’ of their sub-group within the student culture.

For many of these rituals, alcohol provides the key ritual artifact as Treise et al., (1999) suggest—particularly in the case of drinking games and initiation rituals. However, in other cases alcohol provides an organizing ritual in the sense that without alcohol there would be no ritual, but it is certainly not an end in itself, a point that we shall return to. Ritualistic drinking games are discussed whereby the forfeit typically involves drinking copious amounts of alcohol. Sometimes this would revolve around a particular drink, such as absinthe (because of its very high alcohol content), or a mixture of spirits:

Rhys: ... 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.

Other participants discuss ‘initiation’ practices that are specific to their social group.

Brian: We were playing a drinking game of darts and it involved pretty much everyone 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.

The discussions suggest these practices to be a fairly masculine activity. While the female members of the groups seem to be knowledgeable about the particulars of these practices, they do not acknowledge participating. It seems these rituals are something to participate in and endure, but not necessarily something to enjoy. One of our groups revealed they had built a piece of equipment (the Beer Bong) and written a song, which were key artifacts for their ritual practices, adding to the mystique associated with the ritual (and also perhaps the separateness it helped achieve). These particular rituals not only set friendship groups apart from non-students but also apart from other students who are not part of the group and therefore not party to these particular rituals. For these activities, alcohol is clearly an essential element—without the alcohol there would be no ritual.

Carl: What kind of part does alcohol usually play in these types of situations?
Ryan: Erm every part really
Justin: Yeah
Dennis: It is the part (laughs)

However, in addition to these ritualistic activities where alcohol is clearly the essential artifact, there are also stories of activities that surround alcohol consumption. Here the focus is less on the consumption of alcohol but on ritualistic activities which initially appear to be peripheral but emerge as central. These activities often revolve around pre-and post night out activities, which—particularly for female participants—seem to be an important aspect of the drinking occasion and also function as a bonding activity, providing key aspects of group membership. Female participants talk about preparing to go out as a very structured and organized activity in order to allow sufficient time for everyone to use the bathroom. Some female students mention what they term the ‘fashion parade’ as key preparation for the night-indicating their wish to involve friends in decisions about dress and appearance.

Penny: [laughing] 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! 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, it kind of prolongs the evening…

Hayley: I like getting ready, especially when you are with your friends and you are doing your make up or something.

Penny: Get your music on and you might have a drink before hand!
Rick: It’s an operation!

However, this ‘operation’ is not a key ritual for the males.

Joe: Err yeah, usually takes about two minutes to decide what I want to wear! Ten minutes to have a shower and five minutes to do my hair and that’s about it! Listen to some music beforehand to get me in the mood.

Rick: The nights that we go out, we tend to just go with the flow.

Related to this are the post-night out rituals, which involve discussing the previous night’s proceedings (and eating ‘hangover’ foods). These rituals are a key theme in all the groups and involve both male and female participants.

Claire: We have one [discussion of the previous night] 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.

Similar to the pre-night rituals, these post-night out discussions provide a key marker of friendship groups, and function as a key bonding activity for the students involved. These are partly facilitated by the fact that second year students (our focus here) tend to live out of campus in shared accommodation within their friendship groups. This is a clear element of socializing that might differ significantly with other young people of a similar age—they might be deprived of the opportunity to develop these post-night out rituals in the same manner.

For all of the cases discussed above—whether pre, post or during nights out—alcohol represents an important aspect of the activities yet it is not always the central ritual artifact, in fact it sometimes took on a more peripheral role. These rituals can
illustrate the application of Rook’s (1985) ritual components, but it is perhaps simplistic and even counter-productive to view alcohol as always the central ritual artifact (see Treise et al., 1999). Alcohol could more usefully be viewed as a facilitator for many of these rituals in the sense that while many of these rituals would not take place if alcohol is not involved, the performance roles and the manner in which these roles interact with the audience (students, peers) are perhaps more important. We would not go as far as to say that alcohol could be easily substituted with something else, but an alternative focus could possibly be found in some situations. Students’ limited resources and their liminal state (and perhaps young peoples’ generally) could mean alcohol provides the easiest or most accessible focus.

Studenthood as a permission to binge?

During this liminal state, the very nature of ‘being a student’ is seen as providing support for excessive alcohol consumption. For our students there is a strong sense that they are fulfilling society’s expectations of them as students. This reinforces their sense of being between and between (childhood and adulthood), living away from adult authority yet without the expectations (responsibilities) that usually accompany adulthood. Many of our participants talk about the “uni experience”, with student life seen as the time in your life to have fun and to party and, for many, drinking alcohol is viewed as a vital ingredient of this mix. Participants discuss ‘making the most’ of university, necessitating a full social life and the freedom which accompanies this period of liminality.

Lisa: ….. I don’t think you would have the proper uni life if you didn’t drink
Vicky: When you subscribe to uni, part of the course is going out and getting pissed with your mates
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. I mean I wouldn’t want to like to like look back and say at university I had a proper flat time like and it was shit

The other side of this general expectation regarding the role of alcohol in students’ lives is evident in the generally negative experiences reported when students choose not to drink on social nights out. These negative experiences are primarily associated with the fact that as the majority of students do drink, those students abstaining are perceived to be different to their drinking peers. The following extract summarizes many of the issues: not enjoying the night because everyone else is drunk; a heightened (self) awareness that accompanies being sober; having to assume responsibility for drunken others’ safety/well-being.

Ryan: I actually went in a nightclub when I hadn’t drunk before it was really crap [everyone signals agreement]
Justin: ….. Because you notice how… you notice how dodgy all the clubs are and how minging everything is [everyone nodding in agreement]
Tina: And the sleazy sorts of people that are there
Justin: Yeah you just notice more and things you don’t normally see basically when you’re sober
Laura: 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
Tina: Also when you have to, you have more responsibility then ‘cause you’re not drinking, ‘cause when I went out it was someone’s birthday and he got absolutely wrecked and everyone looked to me to look after him and it was just like hang on this is not my fucking problem and he was trashed and, yeah, anyway not something you want to do anyway

As well as this sense that students have general permission—or are expected—to drink more than the general public, there also seems to be an assumption that certain segments within the student group will drink in excess of the general student group. A clear example of this is the ‘hard drinking’ that is associated with sports teams.

Melanie: When you [Hayley] and I went on hockey tour, they introduced us to a whole new culture of ‘Drink freshers drink now and once you’ve finished that get another one and down that too!’ Down it, down it, down it and then you got into the swing of drink down, drink down. And now ‘cause we enjoy going out and dancing and now its like down it quickly ‘cause you can’t take the bottles onto the dance floor and then once you’ve had enough of that its get another drink and down that one and go dancing again.

The very nature of ‘being a student’, relating to the structures (or perceived lack of structures) surrounding studenthood and the expectations of others, serves to create the opportunity and accompanying expectations for students to drink excessively.

Having a good story to tell… the student narrative

Linked with the ‘need’ to have a good social life at university was the importance of having a good story to tell. These stories demonstrate that the ‘fun’ associated with being a student does not solely concern the social scene but also the accompanying narratives, which have the function of communicating that ‘fun’. During the discussion groups, a number of stories emerge which revolve around piecing together elements from a night out, usually culminating in something slightly shocking or embarrassing, an incident which is invariably linked with excessive alcohol consumption. Often these stories are known by other members of the group, who contribute additional details as the stories unfold, suggesting the stories have been relayed several times before.

Carl: What happened was we like went to Toast and then erm you two were there then I went off from you two and I had no money, so I bummed a taxi with some girls I didn’t know and then like went back to theirs and carried on drinking, and at about three I thought ahhhh man I’m gonna be sick I don’t wanna be sick in front of strangers so I left and then…
Laura: Or on strangers
Carl: Yeah yeah I left and walked for like ten meters and I didn’t know where I was so I just thought I know what I’ll do I’ll nap [Sarah laughs] and when I wake up I’ll be more focused, so I went asleep two hours later
Sarah: On the floor?
Carl: Yeah
Laura: On the floor on the path
Carl: Just in a T-shirt and jeans, bloke comes up to me[and] goes ‘you alright mate you’ve been asleep on the path for two hours’ …. 

In the examples we encountered, stories were shared as part of the post-night-out discussions ritual with the ‘good story’ enhancing the consumption experience itself. The stories provide an inclusive and exclusive function in the sense that they include
others who perhaps had not been present in the night’s proceedings, but could also serve to alienate students without similar experiences to relate. They also function as shared histories, evidence of the good times that groups of friends have had together—demonstrating that they have ‘made the most of’ their time while at University.

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In post-industrial societies the transition to adulthood has become increasingly long and drawn out, often lasting from the late teens to mid-twenties and beyond (Arnett 2007), and this study has focused on one group of people in this transitional phase. Consumption activities play a key role in addressing ambiguous, incongruous and unsatisfactory aspects of the self concept and in helping to achieve greater coherence in emergent identities as people undergo a liminal phase of transition (Schouten 1991). During emerging adulthood young people engage in consumption activities that permit them to test their own boundaries and sense of control and mastery over their situation (Gentry and Baker, 1995). As they start to take on adult roles and begin to explore possible adult identities, they are subject to critical experiences from which they learn about the potential for self-direction and control within specific environments. In this period of ‘emerging adulthood’ (Arnett; 2000; Cote, 2002), young people have the opportunity to explore potential identities without having to make permanent adult commitments (Erikson, 1968). Noble and Walker (1997) note that this period of liminality is characterized by a state of instability, of not knowing what lies ahead, and that at these transient points in their lives, people seek out (symbolic) activities and possessions to help them feel more grounded and stable (before assuming a new role, via aggregation). In contrast, our study demonstrates how alcohol can help students to make the most of their liminal phase, allowing them the possibility of reveling in the ambiguity of their transitional phase (cf. Beccaria and Sande 2003). Essentially our participants purposefully sought out the instability that comes with intoxication, reflecting “calculated hedonism” (Measham 2004b, p.343). Our study therefore suggests that in this context, an extended period of liminality, and the accompanying instability, could be experienced positively, in effect lending students ‘permission’ to behave in a way that might otherwise (paradoxically) be considered unacceptable or rebellious. For these students, the transition to adulthood is even more protracted, and alcohol is used as a marker of the delayed assumption of adult roles and responsibilities. However, it should be recognized that alcohol could be counter productive once students reconfigure their identity and begin preparations for the stability of aggregation (life and responsibilities post-university), where the emphasis is less on the fulfillment of the social expectations of university but rather on securing academic potential and identifying a future role/place in society.

Our findings suggest that alcohol effectively reflects and marks a separation between students’ two very different lives whilst at university; the more serious, structured, academic life and the hedonistic, unstructured, social life, which is expected to accompany this, what Measham and Brain (2005, p.267) term ‘leisure time out’. There is a sense that our participants are doing ‘what [most] students do’ (see Banister and Piacentini 2006), with the rituals associated with alcohol helping them to live their lives to the full and enjoy the chaos associated with liminality before knocking down to the responsibilities that life after university will entail. As discussed by Tucker (2005), large drinks companies are playing to these kinds of (hedonistic) ritualistic roles of alcohol in the form of the provision of establishments that support the type of drinking which is being indulged in (encouraging consumers to ‘go for it’ and ‘let loose’), whereby the establishment itself (open spaces, limited seating) reflects the disorder associated with unrestrained drinking.

The key challenge for policy makers seeking to encourage a change in behavior is to seek to identify other means by which students (and young people more generally) can fulfill their wish to let off steam and fulfill their social expectations. When Treise et al (1999) apply Rook’s framework to alcohol consumption, they state that alcohol is “obviously the essential artifact in our context” (p. 21). There is, however, a danger of simplifying the broader picture and downplaying the importance of associated behaviors that surround alcohol consumption. In our study, alcohol clearly provides the focal point of the rituals associated with alcohol, yet it provides the facilitator for a range of rituals, experiences and behaviors, rather than necessarily being the central ritual artifact, and this could provide hope for policy advances and social marketing activities in this area. This is particularly pertinent following the concern about the rising drinking levels of young women. We suggest that it is not always alcohol itself that attracts women, and not even the experience of being intoxicated, but often the (pre) grooming and social rituals that surround alcohol consumption. This suggests that organizations attempting to seek out ways to help young women to resist excessive consumption need to investigate other means of facilitating these key rituals—ways that do not rely on the (excessive) consumption of alcohol.

From this exploratory research we hope to have made some progress towards understanding the context in which young people (students) consume alcohol and the role it plays for them. The concept of liminality can perhaps help us to understand this sense of students as ‘betwixt and between’ different important life stages whereby alcohol assumes an important facilitating role enabling them to indulge in ‘identity play’, and most importantly fit in with their peer group at what can be a challenging time. This concept of ‘disordered order’ is very fitting as for the majority of students their approach is very ordered, in the sense that they can talk about when it is appropriate—and not appropriate—to be drinking and they also have clear ideas about when they will stop drinking, or stop their excessive style of drinking (moving towards aggregation). Our participants are able to separate their excessive approach to alcohol consumption from those of problem drinkers as they rationalize their excessive consumption as ‘time off’ from otherwise ordered lives. In sociological terms, the students are behaving as would be expected, in that they are having what George (1993) describes as “less predictable transitions in their early adulthood” (p. 359). They, themselves, view their lives as becoming more predictable as they get older, with alcohol playing a less dominant role as they ‘settle down’ into the next stage in their lives. The extent to which they manage to achieve this would provide an interesting topic for future investigation. Research should also focus on different groups of consumers—particularly other consumers experiencing liminal stages (either short or prolonged)—and the extent to which this affects alcohol consumption. It would be particularly interesting to compare and contrast the experiences of university students with those young people who go straight from school/college into paid employment, and question whether this represents aggregation and ‘adulthood proper’ or whether they also exhibit a liminal stage and whether alcohol plays a role in this.

**REFERENCES**


Cote, James E. (2000),...

Driver, Tom (1991)...

Erikson, Erik H. (1968), Identity: Youth and crisis, New York, Norton


Measham, F. and Brain, K (2005) “‘Binge’ drinking, British alcohol policy and the new culture of intoxication” Crime, Media, Culture, 1, 262-283


