REFERENCES

ACTIVITIES AND ACHIEVEMENTS QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Non-Technical Summary

A 1000 word (maximum) summary of the main research results, in non-technical language, should be provided below. The summary might be used by ESRC to publicise the research. It should cover the aims and objectives of the project, main research results and significant academic achievements, dissemination activities and potential or actual impacts on policy and practice.

Young people’s alcohol consumption is now central to the night-time economy in most British towns and cities, the focus of extensive advertising and marketing campaigns, and the contemporary media are full of stories about young people drinking to excess. The Young People and Alcohol project aimed to examine the role of drinking in young adults’ social lives from their perspective, and in relation to the diverse ways in which alcohol is now marketed and advertised to young people.

The project aimed to investigate the role of alcohol advertising and drinking in shaping young adults’ social identities; whether specific alcohol products and brands are differentiated by gender, class and/or ethnicity; and whether young people’s drinking reflects their experience of contemporary ‘late modern’ society. The study also explored whether young adults’ alcohol consumption differed in major metropolitan conurbations compared to smaller towns in semi-rural and seaside locations; the role of drinking stories and other collective drinking practices (eg. drinking games) in young adults’ social lives; and the implications of the findings for current policy and practice in this area, especially the government’s alcohol strategy?

The project focused on young adults in the 18 to 25 range from a range of gender, socio-economic and ethnic groups, using an innovative combination of qualitative research methods. We analysed a selected sample of 216 alcohol adverts aimed at young people shown during 2005-6 on TV, magazines and the internet, examining how particular drinks were represented. This was followed by 16 informal group discussions with 89 young adults in three geographical locations: a major city centre in the English Midlands with a diverse population (‘Rowchester’); a seaside town (‘Seatown’) and a small market town (‘Burnaston’) in the West Country with more homogenous populations and a more limited range of drinking venues. Finally, 5 in-depth observational case studies of young...
RES-148-25-0021 - Branded Consumption and Social Identification: Young People and Alcohol

In most British towns and cities, young people drinking alcohol is now a central part of the night-time economy. For young people themselves, drinking to excess has become a normal part of a ‘good night out’ for many, and they are the target of extensive advertising and marketing campaigns by drinks manufacturers. All this has led to concern about risks to young people’s health and social problems related to their drinking.

This study (the Young People and Alcohol project) aimed to present a systematic and in-depth examination of young people’s own accounts of alcohol consumption and the part it plays in their lives. Interviews, focus groups and study visits to drinking venues were carried out in three different UK locations. The researchers analysed the results to assess the views of young people aged 18–25 on alcohol. The researchers also analysed a selected sample of 216 alcohol adverts aimed at young people to assess the influence of advertising and marketing. Finally, the project considered the implications for future policy and practice.

Key Findings

Drinking alcohol is socially important in young people’s lives

- Participants’ views reflected the fact that, for many young people, drinking to excess is not only normal but also socially imperative, as it plays an important role in group identity formation. Getting drunk is seen as a group activity, in which the ‘fun’ of drinking to excess is considered compulsory.
- Similarly, telling stories about drinking helps to bind social groups together by providing a shared sense of adventure and entertainment. On a more individual level, stories about passing out through drinking appeared to offer a way of escaping the pressures and contradictions young people experience, providing a situation in which they are no longer responsible for their own actions.

Practices differ across gender, and less so across class, ethnicity and place

- There are important differences in young people’s drinking practices related to gender: both young men and women are expected to drink, but for women drinking to excess is seen as unfeminine and risky. However, ‘drinking like a girl’ (ie with restraint) was also derided, producing a dilemma for young women.
- In one location (a West Midlands city), there was effectively a class-based separation between students (as middle class) and locals (as working class) in terms of the choice of drinking venues. In a second location (a seaside town) conflicts between ‘chavs’ and ‘goths’ featured in many young people’s accounts of drinking.
Advertising reflects the idea of drinking as ‘fun’
- Analysis of alcoholic drinks advertising aimed at young people revealed resonances with their own accounts of drinking. In particular, fun and humour are central elements in advertising and marketing, with drinking also represented as an important part of socialising with friends – often as the ‘glue’ that binds friendship groups together.
- Drinks advertising also represents men and women drinkers very differently, with women often shown in fantasy settings and men in everyday environments.
- Paradoxically, advertisements often make fun of groups (based on class or ethnicity) that are simultaneously targeted as potential consumers.

Overall, government policy needs to change to reflect how young people use alcohol
- Current health education initiatives focus on ‘safe’ levels of alcohol consumption, which the study’s participants viewed as laughably low and unrealistic. This research suggests that, to be successful, such initiatives need to recognise and engage with the central importance of alcohol in young people’s lives.
- The researchers recommend approaches that tackle the issues of price, availability and marketing of increasingly strong drinks. However, they view as contradictory current policies that deregulate alcohol licensing while seeing ‘binge drinking’ as a social problem.

Future applications and research
- The results of this study have been presented to academic audiences and non-academic groups including the drinks industry in the UK, the USA, Australia and New Zealand.
- Based on this research, Professor Griffin has been invited to speak at the annual Alcohol Concern conference in December 2008.
- Several of the researchers have been awarded a further ESRC grant to study young people’s experience of indirect advertising by the drinks industry via the sponsorship of live music events (such as music festivals) and free parties.

About the Study
This research, which was part of the ESRC Identities and Social Action Research programme was led by Professor Christine Griffin in the Department of Psychology, University of Bath and Professor Isabelle Szmigin in the Birmingham Business School, University of Birmingham. The researchers held 16 group discussions with 89 young adults in 3 locations (of which the majority were in full-time education), followed by 5 observational case studies in the 3 locations, plus 8 individual interviews.

Key Words
Advertising, alcohol, binge-drinking, calculated hedonism, class, drinks industry, gender, health education, marketing, young people
people’s drinking activities were carried out in the three geographical locations, followed by 8 individual interviews.

Key findings

(A) Analysis of alcohol adverts

Advertising campaigns by the major drinks manufacturers represent young people’s drinking as a source of pleasure, camaraderie, fun and adventure that is central to their social lives.

1. Most alcohol advertising is highly gendered, with men and women represented as drinking different drinks in different ways and for different reasons. Women drinkers are often shown in fantasy worlds, whilst men are more likely to be shown drinking in ‘realistic’, even grimy, everyday environments.

2. Drinking is generally represented as facilitating heterosexual relationships and as an important part of socialising between friends.

3. Paradoxically, material aspirations and social class are linked in adverts for products which make fun of groups that are targeted as potential consumers of the products being advertised.

4. Fun and humour are central to the advertising and marketing of alcohol, and drinking was often associated with playful, even infantile activities, especially with having ‘fun’.

5. Ethnicity and culture were key themes in a minority of adverts, with non-Anglo cultures usually represented as the focus for humour.

(B) Analysis of interviews and ethnographic case studies

The representation of young people’s drinking in alcohol advertising had some important resonances with our participants’ accounts of their social lives, in particular the significance of drinking for the formation of group identity.

1. Our participants discussed various strategies for managing (or attempting to manage) the imperative to drink to excess that characterised their social lives via a form of ‘calculated hedonism’.

2. For our female participants, drinking to excess was viewed as fundamentally unfeminine (and risky), retaining its traditional association with masculinity. However, young women were expected to drink, but if they did so they risked being viewed as unfeminine, although ‘drinking like a girl’ was viewed as
3. The drinking practices of young people from working and middle class backgrounds were policed in different ways, and the night-time economy of "Rowchester" was partially segregated by class, via a separation between mainly middle class ‘students’ and predominantly working class ‘locals’. Although participants in ‘Rowchester’ had a wider choice of drinking venues, the culture of drinking to excess predominated in all three research sites.

4. Both drinking and drinking stories played an important role binding young people’s social groups together. Their drinking stories involved cautionary tales of the dangers associated with drinking, such as loss of consciousness and loss of memory; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and many ‘funny stories’ about the pleasures and perils of drinking. Our participants’ ‘passing out stories’ reflected a potential strategy for escaping the pressures and contradictions of existence in contemporary society.

5. A range of marketing practices shaped young people’s drinking patterns, including cheap offers aimed at young drinkers, especially on shots and cocktails.

The Team has presented papers at national and international academic conferences in the UK, Western Europe and Australasia, and at events involving non-academic practitioners and policy professionals, including the End of Award Seminar in September 2007. The Team are publishing papers in academic journals and for non-academic groups including the drinks industry. We produced a press release in December 2007 which generated an enormous amount of local and national coverage.

The study results indicate that there is a significant gap between government policy, health education initiatives and drinks industry messages about ‘responsible drinking’ and young people’s drinking cultures. Health education initiatives often advocate ‘safe’ levels of alcohol consumption that our participants viewed as laughably unrealistic. Participants did discuss the harms, risks and pleasures of drinking, but set firmly within a dominant culture of drinking to excess, a form of having ‘fun’ that was viewed as a vital part of young people’s social lives. We argue that government policies around alcohol-related harm need to tackle issues of price, availability and the marketing and sale of increasingly strong drinks to young people, but also to engage with the central importance alcohol plays in young people’s sense of group identity.

972 words
End of Award Report: Research Report

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Background

The recent discourse of panic and censure over young people's alcohol consumption has focussed on the increase in so-called 'binge drinking' since the mid-1990s (Alcohol Concern, 2004). The definition of the term ‘binge’ is unclear, and Measham (2004) identifies two different definitions of ‘binge drinking’ that are commonly used in academic and policy discourse. However, this lack of clarity over what constitutes a ‘binge’ scarcely impinges on the force of the term in official discourses of youthful excess (Szmigin et al., 2008). The most recent version of the UK National Alcohol Strategy (entitled ‘Safe, Sensible, Social’) cites research that defines ‘binge drinking’ as ‘feeling drunk at least once a month’, and identifies ‘binge drinkers’ aged 18 to 24 as a particular focus for concern (Cabinet Office, 2007).

Measham and Brain (2005) cite several key developments over the past 15 years as contributors to what they term the ‘new’ culture of intoxication amongst young drinkers in the UK. The emergence of rave and dance culture in the late 1980s saw a shift from the use of alcohol to dance drugs such as ecstasy by a significant proportion of young people. The alcohol industry responded by recommodifying alcohol as a psychoactive product targeted at a more diverse group of young consumers. From the early 1990s, a wider range of products emerged, designed to appeal to young adults who are treated as ‘psycho-active consumers’ (Brain, 2000). These new products include FABs (flavoured alcoholic beverages); RMDs (spirits-based ready-to-drink mixers such as Bacardi Breezer, the market leader); ‘buzz’ drinks based on legally available substances such as caffeine (eg. Red Bull); and, more recently, cheap ‘shots’ of spirits and liqueurs, usually downed in one for an instant ‘hit’ (Measham and Brain, 2005). This has coincided with an increase in the strength of traditional products such as wine and beers, and the increased availability of cheaper alcohol in promotional deals aimed at young drinkers. In addition, the retail trade has been transformed, with the emergence of café...
bars, dance bars and themed pubs in most city centres, broadening the traditional customer base well beyond the traditional pub clientele of white working class heterosexual men to include more culturally and sexually diverse groups in the 18 to 35 range. Alcohol consumption is now central to the night-time economy in British towns and cities (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). Drinking to intoxication has become normalised amongst the majority of young men – and women – as an integral part of a ‘good night out’. Public drunkenness, including urinating and vomiting in the street, are an increasingly common and socially acceptable form of behaviour - at least for young men (Hobbs et al., 2000). These changes have also resulted in a (partial) ‘regendering’ of alcohol consumption, with more young women drinking to intoxication and involved in public displays of drunkenness, which has also been reflected in a gendered discourse of moral panic over ‘ladettes’ and perceived risks to young women’s health and well-being (Jackson and Tinkler, 2007).

In addition, Hayward and Hobbs (2007) argue that changes to the British night-time economy and the licensing and sale of alcohol constitute the practice of ‘binge drinking’ as ‘a peculiarly postmodern form of subjectivity’ (p.445) that is reinforced by ‘the rampant forces of neoliberalism’ (p.439; see also Rose, 1989; Warde, 1994). However, few studies present a systematic and in-depth examination of young people’s accounts of alcohol consumption and the meanings of drinking in their everyday social lives, set in the context of the sophisticated and pervasive global marketing of alcoholic drinks to young people (see Cherrington et al., 2006; and McCreanor et al., 2005 for studies based in New Zealand).

**Aims and Objectives**

The project aimed to address the following research questions:

1) **Branding, identity and alcohol consumption**: What role do contemporary branding and marketing practices play in shaping young adults’ identity practices around alcohol? What range of subject positions are available in current alcohol advertising and how are these taken up, negotiated and transformed by young adults?

2) **The impact of gender, ethnicity and class**: Are the meanings and practices associated with specific alcohol products and brands differentiated by gender, class and/or ethnicity, and what are the implications for young adults’ identification processes? To what extent are young adults' personal and social identities shaped by 'traditional' orientations to class, region, family and gender, and/or by more 'liquid', flexible and individualised subjectivities that are assumed to characterise ‘neoliberal’ or ‘late modern’ societies?
3) **The influence of differential location and access**: Do young adults' identity practices related to drinking and the meanings associated with alcohol consumption differ in a major metropolitan conurbation (Birmingham), and in smaller towns in semi-rural and seaside locations (West Country)?

4) **The role of cultural practices**: What role do drinking stories and other collective cultural practices (eg. drinking games) play in the constitution of young adult's social and personal identities?

5) **Implications for policy and practice**: What are the implications of the research findings for current policy and practice in this area, most notably the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy?

Objectives (1) and (2) were addressed via the selection and analysis of alcohol advertisements to map the representation of alcohol consumption and of young drinkers in this material, and through qualitative visual and textual analysis of interview and observational material related to the ways in which our research participants negotiated these representations and their significance for their social lives. Objectives (2) to (4) were addressed via the qualitative analysis of interview and observational material on the meanings of alcohol consumption, especially drinking to intoxication, for young people’s social lives and their sense of group identity in the three research sites. Objective 5 was addressed in several of the Outputs mentioned in section 2 of the EOA report, especially in the End of Award Seminar, dissemination to non-academic groups; Prof Griffin’s visit to Australasia; the press release in December 2007; and the Research Team’s dialogue with Diageo UK. All of the research objectives have been met: a brief resume of key findings relevant to each objective is presented below, and fuller accounts have been disseminated as Outputs, specified in the End of Award Report (section 2).

**Methods**

(I) **Data collection**

(a) **Stage 1: Advertisements**

During April and May 2005 the Research Team gathered information about alcoholic drinks that were popular among young people. Dr Bengry-Howell visited a number of pubs and bars in the English West Country frequented by young people, and kept a record1 of the alcoholic drinks purchased by young drinkers. Prof. Szmigin devised a survey which was completed by approximately 100 students at the University of Birmingham, asking the students to identify alcoholic drinks that they consumed and were familiar with. The alcoholic drinks identified

1 Typing details into his mobile phone
from these two studies were ranked on the basis of how frequently they were mentioned. With few exceptions the alcoholic drinks mentioned most frequently by the University students corresponded with the drinks that ABH observed young people consuming in West Country pubs and bars.

Informed by this data, the Team examined how the highest ranking alcoholic drinks were advertised using the Creative Club web site ([http://www.creativeclub.co.uk](http://www.creativeclub.co.uk)), which archives advertisements and claims to have the largest archive of ads in the UK. We compiled an initial set of 216 alcohol advertisements comprising television, cinema, press and outdoor-billboard ads, Internet pop-ups and advertorials\(^2\); most of which first appeared between 2004-2005, although some dated back to 2001. From this initial ‘full-set’ of ads, a ‘sub-set’ of 71 adverts was identified on the basis of the following criteria: (i) Ads featuring young people; (ii) Ads set in locations occupied by young people/associated with youth lifestyles (nightclubs, bars, holiday settings etc.); (iii) Ads for brands that sponsored events that had a youth appeal (i.e. music festivals/live music/football etc.); (iv) Ads with a strong discursive content (i.e. they did more than simply describe the qualities of the product). This subset was analysed in greater depth, with a particular focus on the location in which the ad was set, the suggested qualities of the product, the apparent characteristics of drinkers, and the associations with drinking.

(b) **Stage 2: Interviews and ethnographic observation**

Data collection was completed by the end of March 2007. We conducted two pilot focus groups, one in the West Country and the other in the Midlands. Data from the Midlands pilot group is included in the main dataset since it involved participants with backgrounds very close to those in the main study. The participants in the West Country pilot group were from a somewhat different background (i.e. university students from a different location), so we have not included them in the main dataset.

(i) City in West Midlands: ‘Rowchester’
- 8 focus groups involving a total of 44 individuals, including 33 females and 11 males
- 6 individual interviews, including 3 females and 3 males
- One ethnographic observation/case study visit to city centre multi-bar/club, starting with 3 females and involving about 8 participants in all.

(ii) Seaside town in English West Country: ‘Seatown’

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\(^2\) Advertisements that are presented as a branded magazine article
5 focus groups involving a total of 30 individuals, including 14 females and 26 males
Two ethnographic observation/case study visits with two different groups of 3 young women to bars and clubs, expanding to include around 8 young women in each group.

(iii) Market town in West Country: ‘Burnaston’
3 focus groups involving a total of 15 individuals, including 9 females and 6 males
2 individual interviews, including 1 female and 1 male (student liaison officer)
One ethnographic observation/case study visit to rock/alternative music pub, starting with a mixed sex group of four individuals and involving about 8 participants in all.

The total dataset involved direct contact with 89 participants in all, and several young people were involved in both focus groups and individual interviews, or focus groups and ethnographic observations, or a combination of all three. In terms of (self-defined) ethnicity, all those from Burnaston and Seatown identified as white British, and from the Rowchester sample, 39 (80%) identified as white British, 7 (1.4%) as Asian, 2 as mixed heritage and 1 as Black African. In terms of employment status, 44 (90%) of the Rowchester sample were in full-time education at FE colleges or University (6 of whom were training as nurses), and 5 were in full-time employment. 10 (59%) of the Burnaston participants were full-time students at a local FE college, 5 were in full-time employment and 2 were unemployed. All of the Seatown participants were students at a local FE college, with 4 of these on vocational courses as training to be electricians.

(2) Data analysis
The bulk of the data analysis was completed during the term of the award. In qualitative projects of this kind, subsequent outputs involve a degree of further analysis as part of the writing up process. The Research Team held two half-day Data Analysis Workshops in April and August 2007, at which Team members made brief presentations on different aspects of the emerging data. This proved a successful way of developing the work of the Team and consolidating analysis of the data for future dissemination. The selected sample of alcohol adverts was subjected to an in-depth qualitative textual and visual analysis, drawing on recent work in critical marketing research (Holt, 1997; Schroeder and Bergerson, 1998). This analysis aimed to identify key discourses and identity positions through which specific alcohol products and brands, and the alcohol consumption of young drinkers, were constituted in the sample of alcohol adverts. The second stage of analysis involved a critical discourse analysis of interview transcripts and ethnographic fieldnotes to explore the resonances of such discursive
configurations in participants’ accounts of drinking and observation of their drinking practices in the three research sites. This part of the analysis drew on recent developments in ethnographic research and discourse analytic studies (Aull Davies, 1999; Griffin, 2007; Griffin and Bengry Howell, 2008; Ritson and Elliott, 1999).

Results: Key Findings

(A) Stage 1: Analysis of alcohol adverts.

Our central finding here is that alcohol advertising and marketing in contemporary British society is far more diverse, complex and sophisticated than a traditional focus on alcohol adverts would suggest. The study coincided with a key moment in government attempts to regulate the advertising of alcoholic drinks to young people (with a particular focus on 18 to 24 year olds). In October 2006, the BCA guidelines were introduced to restrict the use of ‘adolescent’ humour in alcohol adverts as part of a list of related measures. Our analysis indicates that this type of approach is extremely difficult to police i.e. what constitutes ‘adolescent’ humour?), but also that it is unlikely to have a substantial impact on young people’s alcohol consumption. One of the key findings of this project is the pervasive representation of drinking as an integral part of young adults’ regular leisure activities and social lives: indeed as the very glue that binds their friendship groups together. This is far more insidious and difficult to legislate against. The association of leisure with compulsory ‘fun’ in alcohol advertising, and the representation of alcohol as essential for the production of that ‘fun’, provides a powerful boost to the contemporary culture of intoxication that dominates young people’s relationship to drinking (Hackley et al., under review).

Key findings here are:

(a) The central importance of the social friendship group as a locus of young people’s identities, and the central role of drinking (to excess) in the everyday practices of friendship and having ‘fun’.

(b) The highly gendered and sexualised nature of most alcohol advertising

(c) The constitution of young adults as drinking subjects via self-referential and heavily ironic ‘knowing’ forms of humour that frequently represent classed and racialised subjects, mediated through consumption, as a focus for humour.

(B) Stage 2: Drinking practices and the meanings of alcohol consumption
The relationship between brand marketing and alcohol consumption has been extensively discussed (e.g. Engineer et al, 2003; Jackson et al., 2000; Workman, 2001). In the UK, many alcohol brands are in intense competition to be the essential accompaniment to young peoples' social lives. Our analysis of interviews and ethnographic observations indicates that drinking to intoxication plays an important role in the constitution of group identity for young adults.

Key findings here are:

6. The concept of ‘calculated hedonism’ (or ‘controlled loss of control’) pervades the research literature, and policy and practice debates around young people’s drinking (Maycock, 2004; Measham, 2004). This concept was reflected in our participants’ talk about drinking, and our ethnographic observations of young people’s drinking practices. ‘Calculated hedonism’ was mobilised as an important element in the culture of intoxication that dominates young people’s relationship to alcohol consumption, and as a significant counterpoint to the overwhelmingly negative discourses around young people’s ‘binge drinking’ in contemporary British government, health education and social policy in alcohol. Young people’s talk about drinking relating to ‘calculated hedonism’ operated as series of strategies for managing (or attempting to manage/representing oneself as managing) the imperative to drink to excess that characterises the night-time economy in most British towns and cities (Szmigin et al., 2008).

7. Gender and sexuality were central and related dimensions around which young people’s talk about drinking was organised, and also appeared as significant elements of their drinking practices. Drinking to excess is (still) associated with traditional masculinity, mediated by class and sexuality (Gough and Edwards, 1998; Mullen et al., 2007; Nayak, 2006). For many of our male participants this formed the basis of all-male friendship groups and was a key element in male social bonding. Young men in particular made a distinction between going out drinking “to get wasted” and going out “on the pull”. Each form of drinking practice involved a different pattern of alcohol consumption, visiting a different set of venues with different intended outcomes. “Getting wasted” was usually represented as an all-male practice. When going out ”on the pull”, young men referred to using alcohol (as did young women) to give them “confidence” in order to facilitate the formation of heterosexual contact. The relationship between alcohol consumption and femininity was more contradictory and a more recent phenomenon, as discussed below.

8. In the neoliberal social order, femininity is increasingly constituted as an impossible space for young women to occupy, given the imperative to be ‘sassy’, independent (but not feminist) and conventionally attractive (Gonick, 2004). This was especially clear with respect to our female participants’ relationship to alcohol consumption. Drinking to excess was (still) constructed as fundamentally unfeminine (and risky), retaining its traditional association with hegemonic masculinity. However, alcohol consumption also forms a central (and compulsory) part of young people’s social lives, such that a refusal to drink to

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excess for many young women and young men, was constituted as remarkable and as requiring justification. This produced a highly dilemmatic situation for our female participants: they were expected to drink (to excess), but if they did so, they risked being viewed as ‘unfeminine’: ‘drinking like a girl’ was universally derided as a disavowed practice. We argue that the difficulty our female participants faced in finding an identity position from which to drink also reflects the difficulty they faced finding a position in and from which to produce themselves as consuming female subjects (Griffin, 2008).

9. We interviewed university students from predominantly middle class backgrounds and FE college students and others in employment from predominantly working class backgrounds. Social class was a key formation through which our participants negotiated their social lives, friendship groups and drinking practices. For example, young people’s talk about conflicts between self-identified ‘chavs’ and ‘goths’ was a common feature of young people’s accounts of drinking in ‘Seatown’. The drinking practices of different groups of young people were policed in different ways and the night-time economy in ‘Rowchester’ was segregated informally to some degree by class, via a separation between ‘students’ (coded as middle class) and ‘locals’ (coded as working class).

10. Drinking stories played an important role in our participants’ social lives and in the formation and consolidation of their friendship groups (cf. Workman, 2001). Their stories involved cautionary tales of risk and the dangers associated with drinking; narratives involving loss of (self-)consciousness and loss of memory linked to excessive drinking; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and a wealth of ‘funny stories’ about the pleasures and perils of drinking, socialising and ‘going out’ in the night-time economy. We argue that our participants’ ‘passing out stories’, in particular, represent a potential strategy for escaping the pressures and contradictions of existence in the neoliberal social order. Such stories offer a sort of ‘death of the self’, in which the drinking subject leaves the plot, abnegating responsibility for their actions, only to reappear later, often in an unfamiliar and surprising or dangerous location, in need of rescue by their friends (Griffin et al., 2007).

11. As part of the Identities and Social Action programme, this study also has a number of implications for the theorisation of identity. Our research highlights the importance of the social group for young adults, and the central role of alcohol consumption in constituting and (re)producing young people’s friendships in mixed and single sex groups. This discourse pervades the advertising and marketing of alcohol via references to drinking groups. Drinking to intoxication is constituted as a group activity, and as a practice through which young people’s social groups are brought into being, which has a particular significance in the context of the neoliberal social order. That is, neoliberalism is frequently argued to revolve around the ‘biographical project of the self’, requiring individual subjects to constitute their identities through a continual practice of transformation and self-improvement that demands compulsive self-surveillance and an obsessive focus on the self (Rose, 1989). The centrality of friendship groups in our participants’ social lives operates as a potential counterpoint to this tendency and a strategy of survival and/or resistance. Alcohol ties young people’s friendship groups, and the identities to which they adhere, into the dominant social order via their close association with the drinks...
industry, the licensing trade, and the advertising and marketing industry. The practice of drinking appears as a form of spectacular performance, for the group and for others outside the group, that carries it’s own pleasures, excitement, risks and anxieties, and in which a range of possible selves can be acted out (Griffin et al., in prep).

Key Activities and Outputs

The Team has presented papers at national and international academic conferences in the UK, Western Europe and Australasia, and at events involving non-academic practitioners and policy professionals, including the End of Award Seminar in September 2007. The Team are publishing papers in academic journals and for non-academic groups including the drinks industry. We produced a press release in December 2007 which generated an enormous amount of local and national coverage. Professor Griffin’s research visit to Australia and New Zealand in September 2007 enabled the project to make contact with key figures in the youth and alcohol field in Australasia. Areas of commonality and differences in research findings emerging from projects in the UK, Australia and New Zealand were discussed, and several future collaborations emerged, including an exchange of student placements (University of Bath with SHORE/Whariki at the University of Auckland, and Massey University, Wellington campus, New Zealand), as well as future research collaborations with Prof Sally Casswell at SHORE/Whariki. A full list of Outputs and Activities is provided in the End of Award Report.

Impacts

The Young People and Alcohol project has a number of implications for government policy on young people’s alcohol consumption, health education initiatives and drinks industry messages about ‘responsible drinking’. Contradictory government policies have deregulated the licensing of alcohol whilst simultaneously constructing young people’s ‘binge drinking’ as a social problem. Our participants were engaged in complex discussions about the harms, risks and pleasures associated with drinking, the allure of ‘cheap deals’ and sophisticated marketing techniques, but set firmly within a dominant culture of intoxication that normalises drinking to excess, linked to a discourse constituting ‘fun’ as compulsory. Official discourses of panic over young people’s ‘binge drinking’ that emphasise recommended ‘safe’ levels of drinking in terms of restricted units of alcohol consumed, are unlikely to have any substantial purchase on young people’s drinking practices. The British government’s recent policy document advocates a shift towards a ‘culture of sensible drinking’ as one means of combating the rise of ‘binge drinking’
amongst young people, which is a valuable development in contrast to the previous focus on individual ‘problem’ drinkers’. However, the main onus remains on young drinkers, rather than the alcohol industry or the retail trade, to change their drinking practices and reduce their alcohol consumption (Cabinet Office, 2007; Szmigin et al., 2008). We would argue that government policies around alcohol-related harm need to tackle issues of price, availability and the marketing and sale of increasingly strong drinks to young people, whilst recognising the important role drinking plays in young people’s social lives and the formation of their social group identities. The project has had an impact beyond the academic domain through the considerable response to the Team’s press release in December 2007, which was timed to coincide with Diageo’s campaign to encourage ‘socially responsible drinking’:

www.thechoiceisyours.com . This has lead to ongoing dialogue with members of Diageo UK’s Social Responsibility team. Other key outputs with an influence beyond the academic domain include the End of Award Seminar at the University of Bath in September 2007, which had a focus on ‘disorders of consumption’ concerning alcohol and illegal drugs. This is due to form the basis for a book proposal being developed by Prof Griffin as part of the Identities and Social Action series for Palgrave, edited by Prof Wetherell.

**Future Research Priorities**

The Young People and Alcohol project has highlighted the potential significance of more sophisticated indirect and ‘experiential’ marketing and branding strategies that aim to associate particular products (including alcohol) with key experiences in young people’s social lives. The sponsorship of live music events, music venues and music festivals by the drinks industry is a case in point, and part of a major reorganisation of the way in which young people’s social lives and leisure activities are increasingly subject to a ‘branding’ process. One direct outcome of the present study is the award of an ESRC First Grants Scheme project on young people’s experiences of Music Festivals and Free Parties to several members of the Research Team. Dr Bengry-Howell (with Prof. Griffin, Prof. Szmigin, Dr Sarah Riley as Mentors and Dr Yvette Morey as RA) is now PI on a 3-year study based at the University of Bath, that commenced in October 2007. This project, entitled ‘Negotiating managed consumption: Young people, branding and social identification processes’, aims to investigate how young people position themselves in relation to branded leisure spaces such as Music Festivals, that entail substantial commercial involvement by the drinks industry amongst other groups. The study will consider how young people negotiate commercially constituted spaces that are designed
to offer them the opportunity to be ‘free’ and authentically ‘themselves’, comparing two types of music-related leisure event: Music Festivals and Free Parties, both of which play a significant role in young adults’ lives, but have different levels of commercial involvement.

The inter-disciplinary collaboration between social psychology and critical marketing was a distinctive element of the ‘Young People and Alcohol’ project. This has proved extremely successful, and mirrors recent research developments at international level (see Arnould and Thompson, 2006). As a direct consequence of her involvement on this project, Prof Griffin has recently been invited to join the organising committee for the next International Conference on Child and Teen Consumption to be held in the UK in 2010.

**Ethical and methodological issues**

The Research Team took considerable care in ensuring the anonymity of participants at all stages of the project. We also developed a Safety strategy for the Research Team to use during fieldwork, especially in the evenings. This involved the use of mobile phones to check ‘in’ and ‘out’ at the start and end of fieldwork, and also the strategic use of mixed-sex research teams. A set of consent forms, debriefing forms and interview schedules are available in the Annex. Our decision not to use disposable cameras as specified in the original proposal is discussed in the End of Award Report Form (section 7).

The original proposal specified the use of more ‘overt’ forms of ethnographic observation of young people’s drinking practices, in which participants would be able to give informed consent to take part in the research. The applicants felt that this was preferable to more ‘covert’ ethnographic observation which would involve ethical difficulties (i.e. no informed consent by participants), and would not be able to offer the insiders’ perspective that the project was intended to examine. In practice however, negotiating access to accompany young people on their nights out proved to be a considerable challenge (Bengry Howell et al., 2008). This was partly because of an age difference between our participants and the researcher, but also because young people were engaged in a potentially risky and excessive activity and were wary of allowing a relative stranger to witness their drinking activities. These are also highly mobile groups
that occasionally ‘lost’ the researcher during their nights out. Paradoxically, although young people’s drinking occurs in public places, they tend to treat it as a relatively private affair that takes place within the ‘safe’ confines of close friendship groups. The possibility of a stranger entering these friendship groups was the other area of difficulty associated with the ethnographic observation aspect of the study. In future projects of this kind, the Team would advocate the involvement of participant researchers, since when undergraduate placement students accompanied Dr Bengry Howell on ethnographic case study visits, some of these difficulties were overcome.

4,658 words
End of Award Report: Annexes

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<tr>
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   (d) Debriefing compliments slip
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3. Information on dissemination of findings:
   (a) End of Award conference: Programme and List of Participants

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End of Award Report: Annexes

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1. References listed in End of Award Report


2. **Research materials: (a) Letter to FE college principal**

Mr X  
**XX College**  

11th March 2006  

Dear Mr X,

**Young people’s social life project**

I am writing to ask for your help with a research project that I am directing with a team of researchers based at the University of Bath and the University of Birmingham. The project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and is investigating young people’s social lives and leisure activities in different areas of the country. The study is based in the West Midlands and the West Country, focusing on a major city, a market town and seaside resort, and is investigating what ‘going out’ involves for young people who live in each of these areas. Many young people’s social lives are likely to revolve around alcohol consumption, and this has been the focus of considerable media interest and concern amongst government policy makers and health educators in recent months. Despite this intense media interest, relatively little is known about how young people themselves view the role of drinking in the context of their social lives, and in relation to the advertising and marketing of alcohol to young people.

We have selected XX as one of the locations for the study, and are in the process of contacting key people in the area to discuss their possible involvement in the study. Along with the researcher working on the project at the University of Bath, Andrew Bengry-Howell, I would like to meet with you if possible to discuss the possibility of inviting some students from the XX campus to participate in this project. In the first instance, we are hoping to run a series of discussion groups, which Dr Bengry-Howell would facilitate. All personal details of participants would be kept entirely confidential and all participants would be fully informed of the nature of the project before being asked to take part. If any student decided that they would like to withdraw from the project, they would be free to do so at any time. To ensure the anonymity of those who take part in the project, we will not be disclosing the location for the study, including the identity of any participating institutions.

We would be most grateful if you felt able to give your permission for students from XX College to participate in this study. We look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Prof Christine Griffin

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**Project Directors:**  
Prof Christine Griffin (University of Bath)  
Prof Isabelle Szmigin (University of Birmingham)

**Research Officer (Bath):**  
Dr Andrew Bengry-Howell
2. Research materials: (b) Focus group consent form

Young People’s Social Life project

About this focus group

This focus group is part of a project about young people’s social lives. We are interested in finding out about the kinds of places young people like to go to and what they drink when they go out. We are interviewing young people from a city, seaside town and market town and will be comparing what young people do in each of these places.

This sheet is for you to keep and tells you more about the study and what it involves.

- We are going to interview around 70 young people from a range of different backgrounds.

- The researchers who will conduct this study are based at the University of Bath and the University of Birmingham.
  All the interviews will be group discussions and will last about 60 minutes

- All the interviews will be digitally-recorded, and then written out so that we have a record of what people have said in the group discussions.

- When we write up the interviews we will change people’s names to protect the identities of everyone who has taken part.

- The national research council who has funded this study want to keep a permanent record of all the information that we generate for future research, so protecting the identities of everyone who has taken part is very important to us.

- Nothing you say in these interviews will be heard by anyone else in the college/university.

- If you agree to take part in this interview, but feel at any stage that you would like to stop, you are free to do so at any time.

If you (or anyone else) have any questions about this study, then feel free to contact us:

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University of Bath  
Claverton Down  
Bath BA2 7AY  
Email: C.Griffin@bath.ac.uk  
Telephone: (0)1225 38 5293

Andrew Bengry-Howell  
Department of Psychology  
University of Bath  
Claverton Down  
Bath BA2 7AY  
Email: abh20@bath.ac.uk  
Telephone: (0)1225 38 3167

(Participant keeps this section)
(Researcher keeps this section)

I agree to take part in the focus group under the conditions described above:

Signed:…………………………………  Date: …………………

Are you:    Male? …………..  Age: …………………

(Please tick one) Female? ………...

How would you describe your ethnic identity?
(Please state)

------------------------------------------------------

Would you be happy for us to interview/contact you again  Yes ☐ No ☐

Contact details:

Mobile ________________________________

Email______________________________
2. Research materials: (c ) Focus group interview schedule

**Young People’s Social Life Project**

**Focus Group Schedule**

**Intro to project**
I’m a researcher based at the University of Bath/Birmingham and I’m working on a project that is interested in the meaning of leisure and going out for young people. We are interviewing young people from the West Country and the West Midlands and will be talking to young women and young men from a range of different backgrounds.

Today we’d like to hear about what going-out and mixing with friends means to you, where you go on a typical night out and who with, and how going out fits in with the rest of your life. If you drink, we are interested in where you tend to go.

You should all have signed a consent form (check) and I will be asking you to sign it again at the end of the group discussion. We will be recording the discussion and then transcribing everything that is said into written notes. All the names of people and places will be removed from these final notes, so everything that you say will be completely anonymous. If at any stage during the discussion you feel that you would like to stop, you are free to do so at any time. If you decide to stop, we will not use anything that you have said during the discussion.

Before I start, I just want to check that everyone is happy for the discussion to be recorded. [Test recorder – get them to say something and then play it back]

**First half of session**

**Socialising – where**
Who do you spend time with mostly when you go out?
How often do you tend to go out? [Describe a typical week’s socialising]
What sort of places do you go to? [Tell me about them/What are they like/Where etc.]
Have you got a favourite place that you go to? [Why is it your favourite]
Are there any places/venues that you wouldn’t go to? [Why is that?]

**Socialising – what**
Describe a typical night out [Where do you go/What do you do/Who do you go with]
How do you decide where to go? [What you’ll do/Who’ll you go with etc.]
Do you ever go out on your own? [If so, what is it like]

**Socialising - drinking**
*Do you tend to drink when you go out? [They might have raised this already]*
Have you got a favourite drink(s)? [If so, what and why do you like it/them]
Is there anything you wouldn’t drink? [Why is that]
Do you drink anything that you drink in a particular way? [e.g. Tequila/ Sambuca]
Have you ever played drinking games? [What do they involve]
Can you tell me about a good night out that you’ve had recently?
Can you tell me about a bad night out?
Would you say that drinking is an important part of going out/your social life?
How does drinking fit in with the rest of your life? [e.g. work, college, family]
Getting Drunk/Drinking too much
What happens when you get drunk? [what does it feel like]
How often do you tend to get drunk?
Have you ever had too much to drink? What happened?
How did you know you’d had too much to drink?
Have you ever been sick after drinking? What happened?
Have you ever passed out? What happened?
Do you know any people who don’t drink?

Questions for ‘non drinkers’ [are they non-drinkers?]
How long have you been a non-drinker
Have you ever drunk alcohol
Are there any particular reasons why you don’t drink
How, if at all, does not drinking affect your social life
What do you think about people who do drink

General Demographic questions [ask – go round the group]
Employment/Occupation
Education-student? Ever been to college?
Area of residence

Thanks for taking part in this focus group
2. Research materials: (d) Debriefing compliments slip

Young People’s Social Life Project

Thank you for participating in the focus group. In appreciation of your contribution, which is very important to our research, we enclose a £10 gift voucher.

Although this project is not focused on ‘problems’ related to drinking, we are aware that some of the people who take part in this project may find information about safe drinking and where to get advice on alcohol-related matters useful. Below is a list of relevant web sites and organisations:

Radio 1 – Onelife (Lots of information on drugs and alcohol)
http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onelife/health/index.shtml?drugs#topics

Drinkaware.co.uk (Work out how many units and calories you're drinking)
http://www.drinksdiary.co.uk/

If you are interested, here are some links to web sites that give ‘potted’ guides to Weston/Trowbridge/Birmingham [amend to suit location before printing]

Trowbridge

http://www.whatsonwiltshire.co.uk/


http://www.knowhere.co.uk/26_goingout.html
2. Research materials: (e) Gift voucher acceptance form

Young People’s Social Life Project
I confirm that I have received a £10 HMV gift voucher for participating in this study

Signed__________________________________

Date____________________________________

Young People’s Social Life Project
I confirm that I have received a £10 HMV gift voucher for participating in this study

Signed__________________________________

Date____________________________________

Young People’s Social Life Project
I confirm that I have received a £10 HMV gift voucher for participating in this study

Signed__________________________________

Date____________________________________
3. Information on dissemination of findings: (a) End of Award conference

**ESRC RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES**

**ON**

Identities and Consumption

**Disorders of consumption:**

*Health, identities and social policies on consumption*

3rd – 4th September 2007

Two-day mini-conference, University of Bath, UK

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<th>Monday 3rd September</th>
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<tr>
<td>12.00 – 12.45</td>
<td>Registration, lunch and refreshments in 6 West 1.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.45 – 1.00</td>
<td>Introductions: Christine Griffin (University of Bath) in 6 West 1.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>1.00 – 1.40</td>
<td>‘From a public health perspective: Alcohol harms, players and policies’</td>
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<td>Sally Casswell (Massey University, Auckland, New Zealand)</td>
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<td>1.40 – 2.20</td>
<td>‘Putting binge drinking into context: Alcohol consumption, corporatisation and the night-time economy’</td>
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<td>Robert Hollands (University of Newcastle, UK)</td>
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<td>2.20 – 3.15</td>
<td>‘Re-framing ‘Binge drinking’ as a culture of intoxication’: Presentation on ESRC ‘Young people and alcohol’ study: Christine Griffin, Willm Mistral and Andrew Bengry-Howell (University of Bath); Isabelle Szmigin (University of Birmingham); Chris Hackley (Royal Holloway College, London)</td>
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<tr>
<td>3.30 – 4.15</td>
<td>Panel on implications for policy/practice (focus on UK government National Alcohol Strategy: ‘Safe, Sensible, Social’) Iain Armstrong (Alcohol Strategy Unit, Dept of Health, UK) Don Shenker (Alcohol Concern, UK)</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.15 – 4.45</td>
<td>‘L’equilibrio desiderata: Women and alcohol in Southern Italy’ Giuseppina Cersosimo, University of Salerno, Southern Italy</td>
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<td>4.45 – 5.15</td>
<td>‘Talking in ‘addiction-speak’ in calls to an alcohol helpline’ Mandi Hodges (De Montfort University, UK)</td>
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5.15 – 5.45 ‘Policing pleasure: Official and user constructions of ‘pleasure’ in illicit alcohol and drug use’
Fiona Measham and Karenza Moore
(University of Lancaster, UK)

7.30pm Conference Dinner in Bath city centre (Travel in minibus from West car park at 7.30pm to Woods restaurant, 9-12 Alfred street, Bath)

**Tuesday 4th September** (All conference sessions will be in 6 West 1.2)

9.30 – 10.15 ‘Defined by disorder: Drug treatment clients and the search for normal consumption’
Martin Holt (University of New South Wales, Australia)

10.15 – 11.00 ‘Liquid leisure: Drinking cultures and public space’
Gill Valentine/Mark Jayne (Cancelled due to speaker illness)

11.15 – 12.15 Presentation on ESRC ‘Reverberating rhythms’ study: Social Identity and Political Participation in Clubland
Sarah Riley, Christine Griffin and Yvette Morey (University of Bath)

See ‘Tribal Gatherings’ exhibition on this project in room 6 west 1.26 on 4th Sept

1.00 – 1.40 “Where are we gonna go?”: Cotching, respectability and teenage girls’ drinking identities.
Fin Cullen (Goldsmith’s College, London)

1.40 – 2.20 “I don’t care how I feel tomorrow because it’s worth it. Everybody’s just in a party mood and having a good time with each other, and I don’t see how you could do that sober”: The place of alcohol in producing social spaces at Glastonbury Music Festival.
Peter Thomas (University of Newcastle)

2.40 – 3.20 ‘Abstinence on the offensive?’ critical reflections on drug normalisation, youth subcultural identities and the new forms of drug prevention, desistance, normative education and the ‘Blueprint.’
Shane Blackman (Christ’s College, Canterbury, UK)

3.20 – 3.40 ‘A model of contemporary drug use at dance events’
Ciaran O’Hagan (Hackney Drug Action Team, London, UK)

3.45 – 4.30 Panel discussion and closing remarks
Chair: Christine Griffin, University of Bath
ESRC RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES ON
Identities and Consumption
Conference: Monday 3rd – Tuesday 4th September 2007

‘Disorders of consumption’: Health, identities and social policies on consumption

List of participants (* = speaker)

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<th>Name</th>
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3. Information on dissemination of findings: (b) Press release

Press release 23rd November 2007

Extreme Alcohol Consumption Is Key to Identity and Social Bonding for Young People

Embargo until December 1st 2007

Findings from a major UK research study into young people and alcohol suggest that some of the Christmas anti-drinking advertising campaigns may be catastrophically misconceived.

The study has found that extreme consumption of heavily marketed alcohol brands plays a key part in identity formation and social bonding for young people. Research interviews and focus groups were conducted over three years in three UK regions by academics from the University of Bath, the University of Birmingham and Royal Holloway University of London, as part of an Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) funded study. The research revealed that tales of alcohol-related mishaps and escapades were key markers of young peoples’ social identity. These ‘drinking stories’ deepen bonds of friendship and cement group membership. Not only does being in a friendship group legitimize being very drunk- being the subject of an extreme drinking story can raise esteem within the group. Inebriation within the friendship group is often part of a social bonding ritual that is viewed positively and linked with fun, friendship and good times, although some young people can be the target of humiliating or risky activities.

One implication of this finding is that some anti-drinking campaigns, such as the current Diageo ‘thechoiceisyours’ TV campaign, may be misconceived. Advertisements which portray drunken incidents such as being thrown out of a club, being carried home by a friend, passing out in a doorway or vomiting in public can be seen in terms of a typical story of a ‘fun’ night out rather than as a cautionary tale. These advertisements imply that being very drunk with friends carries a penalty of social disapproval, when in fact, for many young people, the opposite is often the case. Extreme inebriation is seen as a source of personal esteem and social affirmation within the friendship group when it results in becoming the subject of a story of a fun night out.

The study suggests a radical re-thinking of national alcohol policy is required which takes into account the social character of alcohol consumption and the identity implications for young people. Whilst many young people recognize the damage that ‘drinking too much’ can do to their health, and the associated risks of physical and sexual assault, few view these as more than short term problems.

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Branded consumption and social identification: Young people and alcohol

Context

Young people’s alcohol consumption is central to the night-time economy in most British towns and cities, the focus of extensive marketing campaigns as well as health education and government policy initiatives. Our project examined the role of drinking in young people’s social lives from their perspective, in relation to the marketing of alcohol to young people. The study explored whether consumption differed in major cities compared to smaller towns; the role of drinking stories and other drinking practices (e.g. drinking games) in young people’s social lives; and the implications for current policy and practice, especially the government’s Alcohol Strategy.

Key Findings

- Fun and humour are key themes in the marketing of alcohol to young people. Drinking was often associated with playful, even infantile activities. Ads now involve younger actors, cartoon imagery and (primarily male) ‘adolescent’ humour.
- Most ads represent men and women as drinking different drinks, in different ways, for different reasons: women are shown in fantasy worlds and men placed in ‘realistic’, even grimy, everyday environments.
- Ethnicity and culture are key themes in specific ads. Non-Anglo cultures are frequently ‘othered’ and represented as humorous.
- Many young people regarded drinking to extreme intoxication as normal, an important, but temporary, part of their social lives which they will later abandon.
- Young people were aware of the risks of drinking to excess, but viewed these as short term harms. The potential risks are represented and strategically managed via a form of ‘calculated hedonism’.
- Both drinking and the sharing of drinking stories played an important role in binding young people’s friendship groups together.
- Young women faced a dilemma. They were expected to drink to excess, but if they did so, risked being viewed as unfeminine. ‘Drinking like a girl’ was undesirable.
- The night-time economy of the city studied was partially segregated by class, separating mainly middle class ‘students’ and predominantly working class ‘locals’. Young urban drinkers had a wider choice of venues, but the culture of drinking to excess predominated in all three research sites.
Alcohol advertising and marketing in contemporary British society is far more diverse, complex and sophisticated than a traditional focus on alcohol adverts as providing brand information would suggest. Advertising campaigns by the major drinks manufacturers represent young people’s drinking as a source of pleasure, camaraderie, fun and adventure that is central to their social lives. The representation of young people’s drinking in alcohol advertising had some important resonances with our participants’ accounts of their social lives, in particular the significance of drinking for the formation of group identity.

Drinking Practices and the Meanings of Alcohol Consumption
The concept of ‘calculated hedonism’ (or ‘controlled loss of control’) pervades the research literature, and policy and practice debates about young people’s drinking. This concept was reflected in our participants’ talk about drinking, and our observations of young people’s drinking practices. ‘Calculated hedonism’ was an important part of the culture of intoxication that dominates young people’s relationship to alcohol consumption, and is a significant counterpoint to the overwhelmingly negative view of young people’s ‘binge drinking’ in contemporary British society, health education and social policy on alcohol. Our participants discussed a series of strategies for managing (or attempting to manage) the imperative to drink to excess that characterises the night-time economy in most British towns and cities.

Not all of our participants drank to excess, and every focus group involved a discussion of different views on the subject, but this did not shake the dominant place of the culture of intoxication in young people’s social lives. Getting (very) drunk was viewed as an important source of entertainment and fun. Problematic alcohol consumption was associated with drinking alone, so in most cases the group-based nature of our participants’ drinking insulated them against the possibility that they (or their friends) might be ‘an alcy’.

Gender and Sexuality
In contemporary society, femininity is an increasingly difficult identity for young women, given the imperative to be ‘sassy’, independent (but not feminist) and conventionally attractive. This is especially clear with respect to our female participants’ relationship to alcohol consumption. Drinking to excess is (still) constructed as fundamentally unfeminine (and risky), retaining its association with traditional masculinity. However, alcohol consumption also forms a central (and compulsory) part of young people’s social lives, such that a refusal to drink to excess for many young women and young men, was viewed as remarkable and required justification. This produced a dilemma for young women: they were expected to drink (to excess), but if they did so, they risked being viewed as ‘unfeminine’. However, ‘drinking like a girl’ was derided as undesirable. The difficulty our female participants faced in finding an acceptable way of drinking; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and a wealth of ‘funny stories’ about the pleasures and perils of drinking, socialising and ‘going out’ in the night-time economy. Our participants’ ‘passing out stories’, in particular, represent a potential strategy for escaping the pressures and contradictions of existence in contemporary society. The repeated recounting of drinking stories also formed an important means of binding young people’s social groups together.

Social Class
Our participants included university students from predominantly middle class backgrounds and FE college students and others in employment from predominantly working class backgrounds. The drinking practices of middle and working class young people were policed in different ways and the night-time economy of the urban location in the study was segregated informally to some degree by class, via a separation between ‘students’ (predominantly middle class) and ‘locals’ (predominantly working class). Although young drinkers in the urban area had a wider choice of drinking venues, the culture of drinking to excess predominated in all three geographical locations.

The Role of Drinking Stories
Drinking stories played an important role in our participants’ social lives and in the formation and consolidation of friendship groups. These stories involved cautionary tales of risk and the dangers associated with drinking to intoxication; narratives involving loss of (self-)consciousness and loss of memory linked to excessive drinking; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and a wealth of ‘funny stories’ about the pleasures and perils of drinking, socialising and ‘going out’ in the night-time economy. Our participants’ ‘passing out stories’, in particular, represent a potential strategy for escaping the pressures and contradictions of existence in contemporary society. The repeated recounting of drinking stories also formed an important means of binding young people’s social groups together.

The Roles of Branding and Marketing
An important aspect of the project involved an investigation of the role of branding and marketing in shaping young people’s alcohol consumption. Branding and marketing practices that were especially pervasive include...
cheap offers aimed at young drinkers, especially on shots and cocktails, and the use of the internet in marketing specific drinks (e.g. ‘Aftershock’). Some brands were represented as particularly unpleasant, especially when consumed in combination with other drinks, as part of group-based drinking games. Whilst young people’s involvement in drinking games, and the consumption of ‘dirty pints’ is not new (especially amongst young men), the increased involvement of young women in such drinking practices is more recent, although they did not approach the level of some young men’s consumption. Another novel development is the growing representation of young drinkers as ‘psychoactive’ consumers in alcohol advertising and marketing, drawing on the images, language and practices of illicit drug use (e.g. ‘bottle bongs’ to enable the rapid consumption of fizzy drinks such as lager).

Material aspirations and social class were important themes in the representation of particular alcohol products and brands, sometimes in ways that appeared to make fun of those groups of people that specific ads appear to be targeting as potential consumers of the product being advertised. The representation of relationships, sexual attraction and sexuality (especially heterosexuality) were also key elements in the advertising of alcoholic drinks, and drinking was represented as smoothing the path of heterosexual relationships and as a central aspect of socialising between friends.

Understanding Identity
This study also has a number of implications for the theorisation of identity, in particular the relation between representations of young people’s leisure and drinking as reflected in alcohol advertising and young people’s drinking practices as popular cultural practices. Our research has highlighted the importance of the social group for our participants and the central role of alcohol consumption in constituting and (re)producing young people’s friendship groups. This theme pervades the advertising and marketing of alcohol since drinking to intoxication is represented as a group activity, and as a practice through which young people’s social groups are brought into being.

Young people’s friendship groups have a particular significance in the context of contemporary society. With the decline of large-scale manufacturing industries and changes to traditional family forms, the long-standing bases for social and personal identities such as occupation, family and neighbourhood appear to be eroded. Many social scientists now argue that consumption has come to play an increasingly important role in shaping our sense of ourselves and our place in the world, requiring individuals to construct their identities through a continual practice of transformation and an obsessive focus on the self. The centrality of friendship groups in our participants’ social lives operates as a potential counterpoint to this tendency and a strategy of survival and/or resistance. Young people’s friendship groups are not tied into the social institutions of the family, the labour market or the education system in any formal sense. However, alcohol consumption is an important element in the construction of young people’s social lives and their friendship groups, tying their identities into the dominant social order, via the close association with the drinks industry, the licensing trade, and the advertising and marketing industry. The friendship group appeared as a central theme in our participants’ talk about their drinking as they moved through different spaces in the night-time economy together. The practice of drinking was a form of spectacular performance, for the group and for others outside the group, that carried its own pleasures, excitement, risks and anxieties, and in which a range of possible selves could be acted out.

Policy Implications
The study found that high levels of alcohol consumption were viewed as normal and unremarkable amongst many young people. With some exceptions, extreme drunkenness held relatively little risk of peer disapproval. Being thrown out of a club, ending up in hospital, loss of memory or consciousness were seen as a source of drinking stories that

“This place is just about getting mullered…as mullered as you can… people just wanna get wasted… people don’t come out just to have like a good time or anything they come out to just get absolutely wasted”

Male FE college student

“at some point we will all do a round of shots of sambuca…you’ve got to do them at the same time and everything, but like you do it after every pint after a while… and that makes you puke, it really does… you just do it at the bar together… it’s like a group activity isn’t it”

Male FE college student

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would enhance the status of the individual within the social group. When health education initiatives or socially responsible drinking campaigns play on the supposed threat of peer disapproval as a result of getting very drunk, our findings indicate that such messages might not have the desired deterrent effect. The Research Team produced a press release to this effect in December 2007, which received substantial coverage in national daily newspapers, national and regional TV, and internationally on the internet.

In October 2006, the Broadcast Committee on Advertising Practice (BCAP) introduced guidelines to restrict the use of ‘adolescent’ humour in alcohol adverts, as part of a set of related measures. Our analysis indicates that this type of approach is extremely difficult to police (e.g. what constitutes ‘adolescent’ humour?), but also that it is unlikely to have a substantial impact on young people’s alcohol consumption. Far more insidious and difficult to legislate against is the pervasive representation of drinking as an integral part of young adults’ regular leisure activities and social lives: indeed as the very glue that binds their friendship groups together. The association of leisure with compulsory ‘fun’ in alcohol advertising, and the representation of alcoholic drink as the substance that is essential for the production of that ‘fun’, results in a powerful boost to the contemporary culture of intoxication that dominates young people’s relationship to alcohol consumption.

Finally, the team has produced a paper which presents a critique of the government’s most recent National Alcohol Strategy document (entitled ‘Safe, Sensible, Social’: 2007). This paper highlights the way in which ‘Safe, Sensible, Social’ minimises the role of alcohol advertising and marketing, the retail trade and the alcohol industry in young people’s alcohol consumption. The main onus is on young drinkers, rather than the alcohol industry or the retail trade, to change their drinking practices and reduce their alcohol consumption, and considerable responsibility is placed on local agencies, the police and caring services. The paper suggests a wider approach to the normalised culture of intoxication amongst young people.

We are working with Alcohol Concern and with Social Responsibility Marketing teams in the drinks industry to discuss the implications for their activities. On a positive note, the range of perspectives and the complexity of the debates found in our focus groups indicate that young people are already engaged in discussions on the benefits and risks of alcohol consumption. However, health education initiatives need to engage more fully with the widespread culture of intoxication amongst young drinkers, and National Alcohol policy urgently needs to pay greater attention to role of alcohol advertising and marketing, the retail trade and the alcohol industry in young people’s alcohol consumption.

**Background to the Study**

The study involved young adults in the 18 to 25 range from a range of gender, socio-economic and ethnic groups, and used an innovative combination of qualitative research methods. We analysed 216 alcohol adverts aimed at young people shown during 2005-6 on TV, magazines and the internet, examining how particular drinks and young drinkers were represented. This was followed by 16 informal group discussions with 89 young adults in three geographical locations: a major city centre in the English Midlands with a diverse population; a seaside town and a small market town in the West Country with more homogenous populations and a more limited range of drinking venues. Finally, 5 in-depth observational case studies of young people’s drinking activities were carried out in the three geographical locations, followed by 8 individual interviews.

**Publications Include**
