

**Re-framing ‘Binge Drinking’ as Calculated Hedonism- empirical evidence from  
the UK**

Published in *International Journal of Drugs Policy*, special issue on ‘Pleasure and  
Drugs’, (eds.), M. Holt and C. Treanor, (2008), 19(5), 359-366.

Isabelle Szmigin  
University of Birmingham  
Birmingham  
B15 2TT  
United Kingdom  
Tel: + 44 121 414 7357  
Fax: +44 121414 7791  
Email: [i.t.szmigin@bham.ac.uk](mailto:i.t.szmigin@bham.ac.uk)

Christine Griffin, Willm Mistral, Andrew Bengry-Howell, Louise Weale  
University of Bath  
Bath,  
BA2 7AY  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 1225 385293  
Fax: +44 1225 386752  
Email: [C.Griffin@bath.ac.uk](mailto:C.Griffin@bath.ac.uk)

Chris Hackley  
Royal Holloway  
University of London  
Egham  
Surrey  
TW20 0EX  
United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 1784 443855  
Fax: (+44) 1784 276100  
Email: [ChrisHackley@rhul.ac.uk](mailto:ChrisHackley@rhul.ac.uk)

## **Acknowledgement**

The research study was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council, 'Branded consumption and social identification: Young people and alcohol' (ESRC Ref: RES-148-25-0021), Principal Investigator: Prof Christine Griffin, Psychology, University of Bath; and: Prof Isabelle Szmigin, The Business School, University of Birmingham; Dr Willm Mistral, Mental Health Research & Development Unit, University of Bath; Professor Chris Hackley, Management, Royal Holloway College, University of London; Research Assistants: Dr Andrew Bengry-Howell, Psychology, University of Bath; Dr David Clarke, The Business School, University of Birmingham. Placement Students, Louise Weale and Danielle Tynan, University of Bath.

## **Re-framing 'Binge Drinking' as Calculated Hedonism- empirical evidence from the UK**

### **Abstract**

#### **Background**

Recent debates on 'binge drinking' in the UK have represented the activities of young drinkers in urban areas as a particular source of concern, as constituting a threat to law and order, a drain on public health and welfare services and as a source of risk to their own future health and well-being. The discourse of moral panic around young people's 'binge drinking' has pervaded popular media, public policy and academic research, often differentiating the excesses of 'binge drinking' from 'normal' patterns of alcohol consumption, although in practice definitions of 'binge drinking' vary considerably. However, recent research in this area has drawn on the notion of 'calculated hedonism' to refer to a way of 'managing' alcohol consumption that might be viewed as excessive.

#### **Methods**

The paper presents a critical analysis of contemporary discourses around 'binge drinking' in the British context, highlighting contradictory messages about responsibility and self control in relation to the recent liberalisation of licensing laws and the extensive marketing of alcohol to young people. The paper analyses marketing communications which present drinking as a crucial element in 'having fun', and as an important aspect of young people's social lives. The empirical study involves analysis of focus group discussions and individual interviews with young people aged 18 to 25 in three areas of Britain: a major city in the West Midlands, a seaside town in the South-West of England and a small market town also in the South-West.

## **Results**

The initial findings present the varied forms and meanings that socialising and drinking took in these young people's social lives. In particular the results illustrate the ways in which drinking is constituted and managed as a potential source of pleasure.

## **Conclusion**

The paper concludes that the term 'calculated hedonism' better describes the behaviour of the young people in this study and in particular the way they manage their pleasure around alcohol, than the emotive term 'binge drinking'.

Key Words: binge drinking, pleasure, calculated hedonism

## **Introduction: the media panic**

Alcohol is a deep-seated part of everyday life in Britain - around 78,000 public houses, 25,000 restaurants, 4,000 nightclubs, 23,000 other clubs, and 45,000 other premises, shops and supermarkets are licensed to sell alcohol (Mistral, et al, 2006). This has created a market worth about £25 billion a year (DCMS, 2001). Over a 20 year period, alcohol consumption in the UK has risen by 31% (Commission for Distilled Spirits, 2004). While alcohol consumption is a common part of the social lives of people of all ages there is increased concern regarding the amount that young people drink and how they behave in public places when intoxicated. This has led to what could be characterised as a media panic regarding not only the health of young people but also risk to others. Headlines in the popular press such as ‘Teenage binge drinking out of control’ (Daily Mail, 2005) are now frequent, a substantial proportion of the UK population regards excessive alcohol consumption as a problem (MORI, 2001), and city centres at night are frequently referred to as ‘battlefields’ (McNeill, 2004).

While this discourse of panic and censure has focused on the apparent increase in so-called ‘binge drinking’, there are well-documented historical continuities associated with British drinking culture which demonstrate an uneasy relationship between alcohol and the normative social discourse of the time (Measham and Brain, 2005; O’Malley and Valverde, 2004). The history of social problems associated with alcohol and subsequent waves of ‘moral panic’ (Cohen, 2002) can be traced from Hogarth’s 18<sup>th</sup> Century Gin Lane, through the ‘lager louts’ of the 1980s, and the ‘binge drinkers’ currently occupying much media space. This paper will explore the

current debates surrounding young people's alcohol consumption through the lens of the potential pleasures derived from alcohol and the contexts in which it is consumed.

### **Binge Drinking versus Normal Drinking**

Although the term 'binge drinking' is in common usage, there is no consensus as to its definition (McAlaney & McMahon, 2006). In the past, it was often used to refer to an extended period of time, during which a person repeatedly drank to intoxication (BMA, 2005). Currently it is more commonly used to refer to a high alcohol intake in a single drinking session, although there is some contention as to the amount needed to be consumed. Some researchers have defined binge drinking as consuming over half the government's recommended maximum number of units for a week in one session (meaning at least 11 units for men and over 7 for women). Others have defined it as consuming more than five drinks on a single occasion (Alcohol Concern, 2004; BMA, 2003). The Office for National Statistics' (ONS) definition of 'heavy' drinking is eight or more units for men and six or more units for women on at least one day in the week. The UK Department of Health's recent publication 'Safe. Sensible. Social. The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy' (2007, p.21) uses Matthews, Brasnett and Smith's (2006) definition of 'feeling very drunk at least once a month in the last 12 months'. What is clear is the absence of a unified definition and an understanding of how such objectified definitions of binge drinking correspond to young people's experiences of social drinking.

The Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England describes binge drinkers as individuals who drink to get drunk. They are more likely to be male and aged under 25, although women's drinking has been rising fast over the past decade (Prime

Minister's Strategy Unit, 2004). The British Prime Minister Tony Blair (Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, 2004) has polarised binge drinking and moderate drinking through an implied health continuum between benefit and harm:

'Millions of us enjoy drinking alcohol with few, if any, ill effects. Indeed moderate drinking can bring some health benefits.... But, increasingly, alcohol misuse by a small minority is causing two major and largely distinct problems: on the one hand crime and anti social behaviour in towns and city centres, and on the other harm to health as a result of binge and chronic drinking'

The framing of this message is similar to much rhetoric in government reports, many research studies and marketing communications, implying that there is a normal way to drink alcohol, and that not conforming to this leads to illness and crime. People are presented as either consuming appropriately or not, and problem drinking is located as an individual issue as opposed to 'engendered through socially re-produced conditions, responses or relationships' (Cherrington, Chamberlain & Grixti, 2006, p. 214). Despite this individualisation of responsibility, there is pressure to refigure responsibility, and identify the social context of alcohol consumption (McCreanor, Moewaka Barnes, Gregory, Kaiwai & Borell, 2005; Cherrington et al., 2006). Murgraff, Parrott and Bennett (1998) point out that while heavy drinkers may contribute disproportionately to harm it is those who drink 'normally' that are responsible for the majority of damage. This undermines the concept of the 'normal' drinker as one that is both rational and safe (Cherrington, Chamberlain & Grixti, 2006), would imply benefit from a per capita reduction in alcohol consumption, and questions any kind of support for economic deregulation (Hall, 2005; Room, 2004,

2006). The political aspects of the debate around alcohol are important, especially as some argue that contradictory messages are emerging from the current UK government (Moriarty and Gilmore, 2007). Effectively the environment is one of self-responsibility under a market-friendly ideology (Sulkunen & Warpenius, 2000). The environment encourages alcohol consumption through a huge range of marketing communication techniques, growth in clubs and pubs targeted at young people and liberalisation of licensing laws to potentially allow up to 24 hour drinking, while at the same time requiring restraint in terms of how much alcohol is consumed. Measham and Brain (2005, p. 278) refer to this as the ‘simultaneous processes of economic deregulation and social regulation’ which they see as emblematic of a consumer society which both seduces and represses.

### **Marketing Alcohol to Young People: The Wider Context**

The context of alcohol consumption in the UK is market driven through the proliferation of new products and brands, intensive television advertising and point of sale promotions and sponsorship of national music events; most social spaces in the twenty-first century are dominated by point of sale promotions for branded alcohol products. Criminalisation of unlicensed dance events and the decline of the male dominated pub have culminated in a range of café, club, fun, themed and nostalgia pubs (Measham, 2004b). It may be argued that these are spaces more appealing to the young, and in particular to young women, for whom the pub was not welcoming, historically, as an appropriate leisure space. Large numbers of young people now gravitate towards town and city centres, particularly at weekends, and move between licensed premises, attracted by “happy hours” and special offers. Measham (2004b, p.



337) refers to this as ‘socially sanctioned and commercially exploited’ development that has been shaped by the alcohol industry and its marketing practices.

The relationship between brand marketing and alcohol consumption has been extensively discussed (e.g. Measham & Brain, 2005; Brain, 2000; Casswell, Pledger & Pratap, 2002; Engineer et al, 2003; Jackson, Hastings, Wheeler, Eadie & Mackintosh, 2000; Workman, 2001). In the UK, many alcohol brands are in intense competition to be the essential accompaniment to young peoples’ social life. The visibility and style of advertising for these brands has attracted much critical attention at the same time as UK media were running frequent stories about the excesses of young people’s ‘binge drinking’<sup>1</sup>. Criticism of marketing practices has implied they have orchestrated or exploited an apparent linkage between alcohol consumption, youth, fun, sex, and social success. Alcohol advertisements often feature narratives built around unsophisticated practical jokes, incongruous races, bizarre games of street football, comic impersonations and other ‘high jinks’ arguably encouraging social liberation, extrovert fun or even misbehaviour. One example of a brand that consistently presented such a picture is *WKD*<sup>2</sup> which used juvenile humour in its ads to stimulate interest from young males. In the ads, adult males acted out scenes of juvenile humour connected to consumption of the brand, with a recurring strapline of ‘Have you got a WKD side?’ The characters have a sense of fun, but in an off-the-wall way that seems to confer superior social competence on the WKD character even though he is usually an unkempt existential character, not integrated into a lifestyle grouping. Similarly playful ads have been produced showing women having fun together, the most notorious of which are for the sparkling wine brand Lambrini. The

---

<sup>1</sup> <http://society.guardian.co.uk/drugsandalcohol/story/0,,1930221,00.html>

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.beverage-brands.co.uk/brands/wkd\\_ads.asp](http://www.beverage-brands.co.uk/brands/wkd_ads.asp)

theme of the ads revolves around the line ‘ Lambrini girls just wanna have fun’ and shows a group of young women going out enjoying themselves generally at the expense of men and usually with a cheeky twist.

In 2005 the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) introduced a stricter code for the advertising of alcohol, and ruled against a Lambrini campaign showing three young women winning an attractive male model at a fairground. The ASA decision was based on the linkage between alcohol and sexual success and it suggested replacing the model with one who was unattractive, overweight, middle-aged and balding, which the company duly did with the inevitable humorous consequences picked up by the media (BBC, 2005). The context of marketing described above presents young peoples’ engagement and enjoyment of alcohol as a site of play, sexualisation and juvenile humour where experimentation and fooling around are intricately linked with alcohol consumption. While regulatory authorities have attempted to restrain marketing’s more extreme manifestations, current ads do little to undermine this general impression.

### **Pleasure and Alcohol Consumption**

While excessive alcohol consumption can be harmful, and ‘anti-social’, it is also associated with pleasure, escape from daily pressures, and represents a key ingredient in celebratory occasions as ‘a symbol of togetherness’ (Pettigrew, Ryan & Ogilvie, 2000, p. 71). Alcohol plays a role in facilitating social bonding between people; a key feature of the Lambrini ads described above is social orientation in the sense that the Lambrini girls are always integrated into a group of like-minded friends who share a similar sense of fun. The fact that the consumption of alcohol is an important element

in engendering a mutual feeling of pleasure and excitement raises the broader issue of how we examine the interrelation of alcohol consumption, pleasure and harm to oneself or others. While the macro issues of personal health, physical and social damage on one side and the economic context of extensive alcohol marketing and de-regulation on the other, cannot be ignored, a better understanding of how young people are 'doing consumption' (Warde, 1994, p. 894) within the context of a 'culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005) is needed to go beyond the simplistic and problematic notion of binge drinking. O'Malley and Valverde (2004) argue that pleasure presents governing bodies with a dilemma when it clashes with other expectations of subjects including such notions as responsibility and reasonableness.

While there is recognition that the term binge drinking is unclear, emotive and politically charged, it continues to be commonly used both in the popular press, government documents and research papers. Increasingly, research studies are using other terms to describe young people's modes of alcohol consumption, including 'bounded hedonistic consumption' and 'rational hedonism' (Brain, 2000, p.7), 'heavy sessional consumption', 'controlled loss of control', 'determined drunkenness' (Measham, 2004b, pp. 316; 338, 344); 'calculated hedonism' (Brain, 2000, p.8). Parker (2003, p.142) describes young people from a range of socio-economic backgrounds trying to manage a 'work hard-play hard equilibrium'. Although they consume alcohol (and drugs), this is largely a weekend activity where the function of their consumption is to 'chill out, de-stress, forget worries, feel self-confident and sociable and experience and enjoy the effects of substances in a social setting', much of which might be considered reasonable for most 'normal' consumers of alcohol.

Such drinking behaviour is a form of planned letting go which balances out the constrained behaviour they are subject to in the formal structures of everyday life in school, work and family. Discussions around the concept of 'calculated hedonism' (Featherstone, 1991; Brain, 2000) are particularly useful in terms of understanding how young people can both indulge in what may appear as excessive alcohol consumption but contain such behaviour by time, space and social situation (Measham, 2004b). There is a dimension to their consumption of control; this may not be apparent to onlookers at the times when the young people are drinking excessively but they are choosing when, where and who to drink with and even when they can drink to excess implying that they are equally choosing when not to do so.

The calculating aspect of such hedonistic behaviour is exemplified in Harnett et al's (2000) modelling of young men's drinking styles as a form of safe drinking, where the participants developed a number of strategies to ensure their personal and social safety, such as drinking in groups, staying away from certain venues and avoiding being 'out of control'. The bounded nature of such hedonism is also informed by young people's relationship with the inner and outer body (Featherstone, 1991); the inner being about health and physical well being and the outer concerned with appearance and control in social space. So not only are young people assessing the physical risk of drinking but also the impact on their social and cultural credibility of losing control in a drunken state. This may be seen as more than just a functional process of personal management, it also represents a sense of personal control and self actualization (Hayward, 2004). The experiences of participants in this current research study will add to our understanding of this interplay between hedonism and personal control.

### **The Young People and Alcohol Study: Methodology**

The empirical part of this paper builds on our understanding of the differences in perspective between binge drinking and bounded hedonistic consumption and seeks to present a fuller picture of the nature and lived experience of pleasure amongst 'ordinary' young people (aged 18-25) when engaged in social activities involving the consumption of alcohol. Ten semi-structured focus groups and four in-depth individual interviews were carried out together with ethnographic fieldwork in three locations in the UK; a seaside town in the west of England (Seatown), a small market town in the same location (Bolston) and a large metropolitan city in the midlands (Rowchester). All names of towns and people have been changed to ensure anonymity. The findings form part of a larger project concerned with young people's social identity within the context of branded consumption and alcohol. The young people in this study were recruited through local colleges; the aim was to have a mix of participants in terms of gender, socio-economic representation and ethnic affiliation; in most cases they were friendship groups. The research was carried out by two 'younger' researchers with a view to putting participants at their ease when talking about their drinking behaviour. Participants were informed that they were to be involved in a project looking at their socializing activities and were encouraged to talk about what they liked to do on a night out. Not all of them drank alcohol. Interviews lasted between one and two hours and were digitally recorded. The verbatim transcripts were interpreted using a translation of text approach (Hirschman and Holbrook, 1992) where the interpretive account is developed through key phrases, metaphors and patterns of meaning (Thompson 1996). The interview dialogue is developed in relation to the characteristics of the young peoples' experiences and then

discussed as texts and stories (Thompson, 1997). In particular we were interested in what Thompson refers to as the ‘personal manifestations’ (1997, p. 447) of these experiences. Our analysis identifies recurring discourses relating to the ways in which alcohol was consumed, its role in young peoples’ social lives, and how they perceived their alcohol consumption practices in relation to notions of pleasure and fun.

### **Analysis:**

#### **‘Chilling’ and ‘getting ‘mullered’: ‘Completely different’ pleasures**

Socialising and drinking amongst the participants took many forms but ‘binge drinking’ was not a term often used to refer to their own alcohol consumption. Participants described excessive drinking as getting mullered, totally blasted or pissed, wasted and annihilated. Excessive drinking was, however, frequently discussed and expressed as an activity quite different to the moderate drinking involved when ‘chilling’ with friends. When heavy drinking took place it was often with the express purpose of getting completely drunk.

Brian            See I’m from C....., so a lot of people drink cider. So if, if I’m at a pub I’d drink cider, but if I’m outside I’d drink, I’d drink rocket fuel. So I’d drink like Red Bull and vodka and go for doubles, coz I’m there to have a good time, just to get absolutely annihilated. If I’m in a pub, I’m just like relaxing, just drinking with all my mates, girls, and whoever.

Interviewer    So it’s a different sort of drinking then, yeah?

Brian            Yeah, completely different. Seatown is just about getting mullered. As mullered as you can, you know

Carl             It’s one of those towns

Mike            Yeah, coz when you're like standing round the bar you get a load of people going "Oh, what's the cheapest and most strongest drink you've got" and that. It's like that, when you're standing at the bar

Interviewer    OK. So you think that is a big thing then, it's just about getting, getting as pissed as you can?

Mike            Yeah, 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

In this discussion the young men describe how the seaside town of Seatown is a place where you go with the purpose of drinking to excess to get 'absolutely annihilated'. The Oxford English dictionary definition of annihilation is to 'destroy utterly' from the Latin root 'nihil' i.e. until there is nothing left. They choose the cheapest and strongest drinks which takes them to an extreme point of intoxication variously described as wasted, mullered or annihilated but implying a desired loss of self. This form of drinking is 'completely different' to the more socially inclusive (of men and women) relaxing pub drinking described by Brian and Mike at the beginning and end of this excerpt. The notion of chilling or relaxing with friends as one form of drinking for pleasure was often expressed by participants.

Dan            Coz when you go out with your mates like it is about like having a drink but it's also about like just chilling out a bit.....'

Getting wasted is positioned by Mike in a different space to going out to have 'a good time', implying a control over the times and places where they choose to get drunk; drinking in Seatown is a means to a particular end, suggesting an illustration of

calculated hedonism. This juxtaposition was highlighted by other members of this group when asked how often they got drunk.

Interviewer: You've also talked about going out and getting mullered and stuff like that. So how often would you do that?

Marko: We're talking really really drunk as opposed to just being happy?

Interviewer: Well yeah. I mean, well, when you say just being happy when would that be?

Marko That's like four or five pints

ABH: OK

Marko Ten pints

Voices (laughter)

Mike Ecstatic

Drinking to 'be happy' is presented in the number of drinks consumed here (and could still be considered as in the range officially defined as a 'binge'); drinking beyond being happy produces the annihilated state described above. The implication is that there is also pleasure to be gained from drinking beyond a state of happiness.

### **Controlled Loss of Control – Managing Pleasure**

While drinking to excess was a common theme in the focus groups, young people have their own ways of managing their drink over the course of an evening.

Interviewer ... what would you define as being the point at which you start to get drunk...?

Dale Um, a good, a good few pints before I start getting tipsy. Like if I was in a pub then I'd drink it slower as well, so it'd take longer but if I was in a club or something then it would, it would take faster. So three,



four before I'd start feeling it, or something like that. Just start feeling happy

Interviewer And then if you start going beyond four would you start getting into...

Dale Yeah, kind of like five or six, if I drink it quite fast, then you start like having to slow down a bit. If that happens and I still want to have a good time I might go onto the alcopops just coz you can drink them and it doesn't really affect you. So it's just something to drink while you're slowing down

Here Dale reflects on how he feels after different amounts of alcohol consumed in different locations. He categorises his physical and psychological state in terms of being 'tipsy' and feeling 'happy', and recognises a point where he changes his consumption in order to maintain the feeling of having a 'good time', this in turn has a functional dimension to it in his choice of product when he is 'slowing down'. Alcopops, however, with a typical alcohol by volume of 5% are actually stronger than many beers. Others talked about changing to water when drunk and while control was invoked by some it was a contested area in discussion.

Josh When I start to feel like I'm wasted, when I can hardly walk properly and that I'll, I'll change straight away to water. I won't carry on drinking, I'll go straight onto ...

Alan If you're pissed then you aren't gonna change to water

Joe I start falling asleep if I'm really drunk, if I have like three drinks

Interviewer Yeah

Joe Yeah I fall asleep

Dale No but you know you're going to get terrible.....

Interviewer So you would keep going, would you?

Alan            Yeah

Josh            Do the whole binge, drink through to your feet

Alan            Keep going til you can't. You know what I mean? (laughs)

Interviewer    Til you've got no money left (laughs)

Dale            Til you puke up, puke up

Alan            Aagh. I hate that

While Josh's behaviour may not correspond to received notions of 'normal' drinking he introduces a form of control while the others suggest that while they might continue drinking alcohol they are not comfortable with the aftermath. Others talked about how they felt if they drank too much and raised issues of restraint and in a mixed gender focus group from Rowchester there was some discussion about how much one needed to drink to feel good and also some concern over the after effects.

Becky            It depends, it depends how, if I'm drinking, like mixing my drinks then I ...

Amy            Yeah

Becky            I don't like how I feel the next day coz I feel really ill but if I drink the same kind of stuff, then I like it

Interviewer    Yeah. Yeah

Matt            I mean for me you can be drunk but in moderation

Interviewer    You can be moderate, right

Matt            Mod-yeah

Interviewer    So there, does that mean there's there's a point you can be ...

Matt            You can have two or three but not have twenty seven

Interviewer    No right okay, so, so, okay, so you can there's a point where you you

Matt            You have to stop

Amy            I love it, I love the feeling of being drunk

Matt suggests that it is possible to be drunk in moderation, but Amy underlines how positive she feels about being drunk. While there were some gender differences between the groups in the study, stories of drunkenness and control cut across genders. There was little reflection on the damage that drink might inflict on physical health, with their main concerns being about the short term effects such as sickness and loss of memory. Concerns over personal safety and control were sometimes mentioned in relation to drinkers being in a group, while a few participants referred to someone being designated or choosing to remain relatively sober on a given night out, either to drive the others home or to ensure the safety and welfare of the other group members.

### **Having fun: going out**

‘Going out’ is a world of heightened experiences of fun and friendship, and also of risk and danger. It holds the promise of fulfilment (sexual and social) and is defined by the attendance or avoidance of, different bars and clubs. In this group from Rowchester there is a discussion centred around clubs in the High Street, the busiest night time area for clubs in Rowchester and one where violent incidents have occurred.

Abi            I don’t drink that much, especially when you go up the High Street coz there’s loads of pervs about (laughter)

Interviewer    Loads pervs?

Abi            (more laughter) No it’s probably cos everyone’s drunk and whatever, and you’ve just gotta gotta be careful ain’t ya

Going out offers an opportunity to be amongst friends away from the pressures of work or college in an environment that is designed for pleasure. Here the talk is about managing pleasure through planning a night out. While the objective is to have fun and 'let your hair down' there is an awareness that this requires working out what might go wrong and being with trustworthy friends.

Caz           Umm I think a good night out is just going out and being able to enjoy yourself with the people that you're around and not having to feel self conscious and, worried about like, like how you're getting home and all the rest of it. If everything's planned out, umm, like you know the people that you're with really well, then you've got trust in them as well so, like you can be able to relax and enjoy yourself and let your hair down without like worrying about things

Interviewer   That's cool. You?

Ann           Yeah it's about the same area just going out as long as you know everyone that you're going out with and you all get on. You're having a laugh and stuff and as long as there's no like incidents or anything yeah a good night ...

Interviewer   So have there been incidents when you've been out?

Ann           Yeah

Caz           Yeah a couple of 'em yeah

Ann           Yeah, one of the last major ones was we got chucked out of bowling cos of fighting and stuff and, dunno it just depends on...

Andrew       So was that you guys? (overlapping talk)

Ann           No

Talking about going out itself appeared to bring pleasure to female participants, and some interviews were pitted with exaggerated laughter, in-jokes, funny stories and overlapping chatter when recounting ‘going out’ routines of texting and checking what everyone would be wearing. Going out requires planning whether it is to chill or get very drunk and is, for the young women in particular, an integral part of the pleasure of the night out.

### **Tequila makes me happy – stories of inebriation**

Participants also recounted stories of what happened when they were drunk. While some were ‘war stories’ of spiked drinks, losing friends and violent events, most involved incidents of fun and undermining authority. Molly tells a story of a ‘typical’ night out where after a few drinks she switches to Tequila to ensure she gets drunk.

The result is a form of annihilation in that she neither knows what she is doing or who she is with. The main action of the story starts once she is drunk, and is cheerfully recounted with laughter interspersed throughout. Molly tells of how in her drunken state she accuses her boyfriend of attacking her and attracts the attention of an off-duty policeman. Her boyfriend had to show photos of them together to convince the policeman that he was just taking her home.

Molly            Yeah, I was well hammered

Dawn            She was wasted

Molly            I just had Tequila that’s what I blame it on, none of the other drinks, it was the Tequila

Interviewer    The Tequila

Molly            Yep, it makes me happy (laughter)

Kirsty           Yeah very happy obviously, forget her own boyfriend

The risk of the situation is understated as Molly concludes her story with a reference based on the song 'Tequila' by Terrorvision (1999) which includes the line 'Tequila...it makes me happy'. Molly's desire to be drunk and to have fun when drunk is clearly calculated. The pleasure she seeks from being out requires a level of drunkenness that is calculated and the mischief making enhances the story and memories of a night when she was both 'well hammered' and happy. It is worth noting, however, that the incident took place while she was still under the care and protection of her boyfriend, and therefore she may have felt able to take risks that she might not have done if she had been on her own.

**Concluding remarks: Alcohol, Pleasure and Calculated Hedonism.**

This paper contributes empirical support for a more nuanced consideration of the notion of 'binge drinking'. The impact of alcohol on the inner and outer body is significant in why people drink. In participants' accounts motives for drinking and getting drunk were constituted almost entirely positively. They include, having fun, conforming to peer group norms, letting yourself go, forgetting the frustrations of the day and helping self-confidence in a social situation (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2006), also reducing tension, enhancing sexuality and aiding social interaction (Wright, 1999) and 'for fun, enjoyment and to feel good' (Sheehan & Ridge, 2001, p.254).

Brain and Parker (1997) refer to the economic rationalisation or 'equation' young people make, that to drink and not get drunk would be a waste of money; alcohol is consumed specifically for its psychoactive properties which is particularly evident in the 'getting wasted' scenario described by participants. 'Buzzing' is the search for an

excited state of mind and hedonistic experiences. The utility of drinking is increasingly centred on its hit value, where buzzing converges with 'time out', relaxing after the week's work (Maycock, 2004). These dimensions of alcohol consumption are clearly present in the accounts of the participants in this study. Drinking to get drunk also allows self discovery and experimentation with one's own physical possibilities (Workman, 2001) but this does not mean that the pharmacological benefits are not balanced with the perceived risks (Measham, 2004a), including social expectations of norms of drunkenness in a social setting where others' loss of control can be used as a comparison to one's own drinking. Many participants went out in mixed groups and expressed some unease when drunk young women acted the same way as drunk young men (Mullen et al., 2007), as can be seen in the sarcastic comments of some of Molly's friend.

Contrary to professional discourse, however, 'harm' is rarely considered an outcome of drinking, either in this study or previous others (Sheehan and Ridge, 2001; Maycock, 2004), and in some cases positive and negative outcomes combine to create a 'good whole' as in Molly's story. We suggest that their alcohol consumption is a form of calculated hedonism allowing a type of pleasure which is contained by time, space and social situation (Measham, 2004). There are different ways in which drinking is described ranging from quiet social drinking to disruptive drunken behaviour. In line with Parker's findings (2003) the participants' alcohol consumption occurred largely at weekends and acted as a release from their weekday lives and allowed them not only to chill-out and de-stress but also to have fun within a group of like-minded friends, much of which might be considered reasonable for most 'normal' consumers of alcohol. The liberalisation of alcohol regulation, the

availability of alcohol in most social settings that are attractive and available to young people, bolstered by a marketing ideology of 'having a good time', support what is for most a pleasurable activity.

In addressing the problem of excessive alcohol consumption, understanding young people's behaviour is part of the discussion, but there are other issues to consider. In particular the environment in which young people socialise is one saturated with promotions where strong alcohol is being sold at often very cheap prices. From a public health perspective we should also consider the different nature of the key discourses drawn on by young people and those who are concerned to change their behaviour. While social bodies concerned with health and education often present one type of behaviour as leading to particular outcomes, in contrast, a discourse of compatibility presents a range of different and apparently contradictory possibilities of life which have to be managed; 'Discipline and hedonism are no longer seen as incompatible' (Featherstone, 1991, p.171). This is an important area for better understanding young people's alcohol consumption given that they do not necessarily look at the longer term effects of their drinking in relation to their health. Participants balanced the physical risk of drinking and the impact on their social and cultural credibility of losing control in a drunken state with the desire to have fun and a good time with their friends. This perceived compatibility needs to be better understood for the debate around young people and alcohol to move on. It is an important component in the decision making of these young people, and a better understanding of how they experience pleasure through drinking should help shape social policy communication and inform potential regulatory consideration in the liberalised alcohol market. In particular it may deflect the problematic implications of a term that does not reflect



the reality of young people's experiences in social settings involving the consumption of alcohol.

## References

Alcohol Concern (2004) *Young people's drinking. Factsheet 1: Summary*. London:

Alcohol Concern.

BBC (2005) Retrieved January 16, 2007, from

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/merseyside/4722147.stm>

BMA (2003) *Adolescent health*. London: BMA.

BMA (2005) Retrieved July 9, 2007, from

<http://www.bma.org.uk/ap.nsf/Content/Hubhotpbingedrinking>

Brain, K. (2000). Youth, Alcohol, and the Emergence of the Post-Modern Alcohol

Order. *Institute of Alcohol Studies*. Retrieved June 2, 2006 from

[www.isa.org.uk/iaspapers/branpaper.pdf](http://www.isa.org.uk/iaspapers/branpaper.pdf)

Brain, K., & Parker, K. (1997). *Drinking with Design: Alcopops, Alcohol and Youth*

*Culture*. London: Portman Group

Casswell, S., Pledger, M., & Pratap, S. (2002). Trajectories of drinking from 18 to 26

years: identification and prediction. *Addiction*, 97, (11), 1427-1437

Cherrington, J., Chamberlain, K., & Grixti, J. (2006). Relocating Alcohol Advertising

Research: Examining Socially Mediated Relationships with Alcohol. *Journal of*

*Health Psychology*, 11, (2), 209-222

Cohen, S. (2002). *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.) London: Routledge.

Commission for Distilled Spirits (2004). *World drink trends, 2004*. Oxford: World

Advertising Research Centre.

Daily Mail August (2005) *Teenage Binge Drinking out of Control*. Retrieved

November 11, 2006 from

[http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/health/healthmain.html?in\\_article\\_id=357802&in\\_page\\_id=1774](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/pages/live/articles/health/healthmain.html?in_article_id=357802&in_page_id=1774)

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2001) *Time for reform: proposals for the modernisation of our licensing Laws*. London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office

Department of Health (2007) *Safe. Sensible. Social. The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy*. Retrieved August 12<sup>th</sup>, 2007 from

[http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_077470](http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_077470)

Engineer, R., Phillips, A., Thompson, J & Nichols, J. (2003). *Drunk and disorderly: A qualitative study of binge drinking among 18 to 24 year olds. Home Office Research Study No 262* London: Home Office.

Facy, F., & Rabaud, M. (2006). Towards the prevention of alcohol abuse. *Drugs: Education, Prevention & Policy*, 13, 2, 139-149

Featherstone, M. (1991). The Body in Consumer Culture. In M. Featherstone, M. Hepworth. & B. S. Turner (Eds), *The Body: Social Process and Cultural Theory*, 170-196. London: Sage Publications

Hall, W. (2005). British drinking: A suitable case for treatment? *British Medical Journal*, 331, 527-528.

Harnett, R., Thom, B., Herring, R., & Kelly, M. (2000). Alcohol in transition: towards a model of young men's drinking styles. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 3, (1) 61-77

Hayward, K. (2004). *City Limits: Crime, Consumer Culture and the Urban Experience*. London: Glasshouse

Institute of Alcohol Studies (2006). Binge Drinking, Nature Prevalence and Causes.

Retrieved November 16, 2006 from

<http://www.ias.org.uk/resources/factsheets/factsheets.html>

Jackson, M., Hastings, G., Wheeler, C., Eadie, D., & Mackintosh, A. (2000).

Marketing alcohol to young people: implications for industry regulation and research policy. *Addiction*, 95, 597-608

Maycock, P. (2004). Binge Drinking and Consumption of Pleasure. In M.

MacLachlan and C. Smyth, C. (Eds), *Drinking and Youth Culture: Alternative Perspectives* Dublin: The Liffey Press

Matthews, S., Brasnett, L., & Smith, J. (2006) Underage drinking: findings from the 2004 Offending Crime and Justice Survey. *Home Office Research Findings*, No. 277

Measham, F. (2004a). The decline of ecstasy, the rise of 'binge' drinking and the persistence of pleasure. *Probation Journal*, 5, (4), 309-326

Measham, F. (2004b). Play space: historical and socio-cultural reflections on drugs, licensed leisure locations, commercialisation and control. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 15, 337-345

Measham, F., & Brain, K. (2005). 'Binge' drinking, British alcohol policy and the new culture of intoxication. *Crime, Media Culture*, 1, 3, 262-283.

McAlaney, J. & McMahon, J. (2006) Establishing rates of binge drinking in the UK: anomalies in the data. *Alcohol & Alcoholism*, 41, 4, 355-357

McCreanor, T., Moewaka Barnes, H., Gregory, M., Kaiwai, H., & Borell, S. (2005) Consuming Identities: Alcohol marketing and the commodification of youth experience. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 13, (6) 579-590

McNeill, A. (2004). Institute of Alcohol Studies Press Release, 17, December

- Midanik, L. (1999). Drunkenness, Feeling the effects and 5 + measures. *Addiction*, 94 (6), 887-897
- Mistral, W., Velleman, R., Templeton, L., & Mastache, C. (2006). Local Action to Prevent Alcohol Problems: Is the UK Community Alcohol Prevention Programme (UKCAPP) the Best Solution? *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 17, 4, 278-284
- MORI (2001). *Alcohol and Society*, London: Portman Group
- Moriarty, K.J. & Gilmore, I. T. (2007) Licensing Britain's alcohol epidemic, *Journal of Epidemial Community Health*, 2006, 60, 94
- Mullen, K., Watson, J., Swift, J. & Black, D. (2007) Young men, masculinity and alcohol. *Drugs: education, prevention and policy*, 14, 2, 151-165
- Murgraff, V., Parrott, A., & Bennett P. (1998). Risky Single-Occasion Drinking amongst young adults – definition, correlates, policy and intervention: a broad overview of research findings. *Alcohol and Alcoholism*, 34, (1), 3-14
- O'Malley, P., & Valverde, M. (2004). Pleasure, Freedom and Drugs: The Uses of 'Pleasure' in Liberal Governance of Drug and Alcohol Consumption. *Sociology*, 38, 1, 25-42.
- Parker, H. (2003). Pathology or Modernity? Rethinking Risk Factor Analysis of Young Drug Users. *Addiction Research and Theory*, 11, (3) 141-144
- Pettigrew, S., Ryan, M. M., & Ogilvie, M. (2000). New Year's Eve Consumption Plans: Consumers' Consumption Priorities on the Eve of 2000. *Australian Marketing Journal*, 9, (2), 66-75
- Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, Cabinet Office (2004). Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England. Retrieved September 24<sup>th</sup>, 2006  
[http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work\\_areas/alcohol\\_misuse/](http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/strategy/work_areas/alcohol_misuse/)
- Room, R. (2004). Disabling the public interest: Alcohol strategies and policies for

- England. *Addiction*, 99, 1083-1089.
- Room, R. (2006). British livers and British alcohol policy. *Lancet*, 367, 10-11.
- Sheehan, M., & Ridge, D. (2001). You Become Really Close... You talk about the silly things you did and we laugh: the role of binge drinking in female secondary student's lives. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 36, 3, 347-372.
- Sulkunen, P., & Warpenius, K. (2000). Reforming the self and the other: the temperance movement and the duality of modern subjectivity. *Critical Public Health*, 10, 4, 423-438
- Terrorvision (1999). *Tequila, Shaving Peaches*. Total Vegas.
- Thompson, C. J. (1996). Caring consumers: gendered consumption meanings and the juggling lifestyle. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 22 (4), 79-96
- Thompson, C.J. (1997). Interpreting Consumers: A Hermeneutical Framework for Deriving Marketing Insights from the Texts of Consumers' Consumption Stories. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 14, 438-455
- Warde, A. (1994). Consumption, Identity Formation and Uncertainty. *Sociology*, 28, 4, 877-898
- Workman, T. (2001). Finding the Meanings of College Drinking: An Analysis of Fraternity Drinking Stories. *Health Communication*, 13(4), 427-447
- Wright, L. (1999). Young People and Alcohol: What 11 to 24 year-olds know, think and do: A Literature Review. *Health Education Authority*: London