

Young people, alcohol and the news: preliminary findings

Report for the
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KEY FINDINGS

1. News reporting of alcohol-related stories focuses predominantly on negative outcomes. These include drink driving, violence, antisocial behaviour and negative health impacts. Newspaper reporting also concentrates heavily on celebrity news. Here most reports concern female celebrities not involved in antisocial behaviour, but who are apparently drunk.
2. Long-term health impacts have become a key frame for news reporting of alcohol. Health professionals, especially liver specialists, have become established as key sources for journalists reporting on alcohol issues. Meanwhile, addiction and alcoholism play a relatively minor role in the framing of news stories.
3. Cheap alcohol and supermarket sales are most commonly blamed for heavy drinking in news coverage, and supermarkets provide the visual cue for much television news reporting of alcohol issues. Supermarket sales outnumber references to 24-hour licensing as a cause of heavy drinking. Cheap alcohol is also seen as a more significant cause of binge drinking than 24-hour licensing by survey respondents.
4. Alcohol advertising features regularly in newspapers, with many adverts promoting cheap supermarket discounts. There is, in some cases, a tension between the perspective of news reports on the issue of pricing and the prominence of such adverts.
5. While news reporting foregrounds cheap alcohol as contributing to antisocial behaviour and negative health impacts, there is little consensus on policy approaches. Opinion columns and editorials tend to reject public health policies which target pricing, while television news depicts pricing policies as unpopular with the public at large.
6. Non-problematic, social drinking features in news reporting but is heavily outweighed by negative stories. There is evidence of a gender divide in the visual representation of drunkenness, especially in newspapers.
7. There are high levels of news consumption among undergraduates, but also high levels of scepticism towards reporting of alcohol-related stories. Survey and focus group respondents indicate a perception that news reporting exaggerates negative outcomes and displays widespread gender bias.
8. Audiences interpret both news reports and social marketing campaigns unpredictably. There is a lack of identification with the subjects of news stories, and a tendency to find some sensible drinking campaigns amusing.

9. Many news articles point to a national 'drinking problem'. This assumption is reflected in social norms expectations among undergraduates. Combined with expectations about heavy drinking among young people, this contributes to a potentially significant normative standard of behaviour.
10. Around half of survey respondents said that they regularly binge drink. Many had been involved in violent incidents, but these were seen as rare occurrences.
11. Behaviours presented in the news media and sensible drinking campaigns as harmful are often experienced as simply embarrassing. Eventfulness (which may imply embarrassment) is widely seen as a positive outcome where the aim is to get drunk. Participants reserved moral condemnation for behaviours that demonstrably harmed others.
12. Social networking sites have become an important element of drinking culture among many young people. In particular, the uploading and 'tagging' of photographs taken during drinking sessions is commonplace.

INTRODUCTION

This report contains findings from preliminary research into the relationship between news reporting of alcohol and attitudes to drinking among young people. The aim was to explore methodological approaches which might inform future research into the impact of news reporting on public attitudes to alcohol. The project involved a literature review, news content analysis, survey and focus groups. As a pilot study, the scope of the project was modest – involving students from a single UK university. However, the survey achieved a fairly high response rate (n=231) and the focus groups produced a number of unexpected insights. The content analysis covered seven newspapers and four television news broadcasts over a period of twenty-two days and it revealed clear patterns in terms of both news coverage and alcohol advertising. Consequently, while the research identified some methodological and thematic principles for future research, it also yielded a body of data on both news reporting of alcohol and attitudes to drinking among undergraduates.

SAMPLES AND METHODS

Focus groups

Four focus groups were convened in January 2009, with a total of thirty-two participants. Numbers in individual focus groups ranged from six to ten. Participants were recruited from a range of courses within a single University. Participation was voluntary and participants were given details of the project and an assurance that anonymity would be protected. Sessions lasted between fifty and ninety minutes. Photocopies of news stories were used to trigger discussion. Images from a recently released Know Your Limits (KYL) sensible drinking campaign were also distributed.

Survey

A self-completion questionnaire was distributed across the University between April and May 2009. The survey was handed out at the end of teaching sessions, and participants were invited to return the completed questionnaires to tutors before leaving the classroom. Focus group participants were excluded from completing the questionnaire. Because not all participating tutors were able to note numbers leaving classrooms the final response rate could not be calculated; however, it was reported that very few students chose not to complete the questionnaire. Of those submitted only two were incomplete. 231 valid questionnaires were returned.

Content analysis

The news content analysis took place over two periods: 20th Dec 2008 – 2nd Jan 2009 and 15th – 22nd March 2009. The sample consisted of the following newspapers:

- *The Daily Mail*
- *The Guardian*
- *The Daily Telegraph*
- *The Independent*
- *The Times*
- *The Sun*
- *The Mirror*

Newspapers were selected on the basis of format (to ensure a selection of tabloids and broadsheets) and popularity (based on ABC circulation figures). The *Guardian* and *Independent* were included on the grounds of their popularity among students as compared to national averages.

Only national news, editorials and opinion columns (hereafter referred to as ‘op-eds’) were included in the news sample. Adverts for alcohol were also counted. Sports news, international news and all supplementary sections were excluded from the sample on the grounds of practicality. The criteria for inclusion were that alcohol played a central role in either the main story, or in one key aspect of the story.

186 alcohol-related articles were identified and coded for:

- Length and page number
- Main subject
- Sources (defined as anyone quoted or paraphrased in the article); length and position of quotes
- Accompanying photographs – location; drinks depicted; gender of drinkers; apparent behaviour of subjects
- Consequences of drinking suggested by article
- How responsibility for binge drinking was allocated

The coding frame was designed to capture both the thematic focus of news reports and the key sources used in those articles – an approach advocated by Hansen and Gunter (2007).

Thirty-four adverts were identified. These were coded for whether they advertised supermarket offers, on-licence offers or specific brands. Type of drink was also counted.

The television sample consisted of the following broadcasts:

- *BBC1 News* (10 – 10.30pm)
- *Channel 4 News* (7 – 7.50pm)
- *ITN News* (10 – 10.30pm)
- *Sky News* (7pm – first 15 minutes)

The times and lengths of the broadcasts varied in the first sample period due to Christmas scheduling. Only the first fifteen minutes of Sky News was selected as this represented the first complete loop of a rolling news broadcast.

The same criteria for inclusion were applied to television broadcasts as to newspaper articles. However, a separate count of news items containing passing references to alcohol was also made. This was to facilitate a comparison between current TV news content and that discussed in Hansen (2003), where the majority of visual and verbal references to alcohol were incidental and served to reinforce associations between alcohol and sociable pleasure.

Twenty alcohol-related news items were identified, representing 43 minutes of programming in total. Twelve further news items contained passing references to alcohol. Alcohol-related television news items were coded for:

- Length and position in broadcast
- Main subject
- Sources (defined as anyone interviewed as part of the news item): length of interviews; whether interview footage formed part of headline and / or main report
- Accompanying footage: location; drinks depicted; gender of drinkers; apparent behaviour of subjects

CONTENT ANALYSIS RESULTS

Newspapers

Main subjects

There were 186 alcohol-related news articles over the whole sample period (see Table 1). Of these, twenty-eight were either editorials or op-eds' and forty-five covered celebrities. Coverage of non-celebrity alcohol stories was significantly weighted towards negative outcomes such as antisocial behaviour, drink driving or negative health impacts. Non-celebrity articles which focussed on negative impacts of alcohol accounted for just under a third of the total sample.

The second period of content analysis coincided with the publication of proposals for minimum alcohol unit pricing by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO). Following research into the impact of pricing on consumption and harms (Booth et al, 2008), the CMO, Sir Liam Donaldson, prepared a set of proposals for alcohol retail prices to be regulated on the basis of a minimum price per unit of alcohol. Fortuitously, the advanced leaking of these proposals, and the swift rejection of them by the Prime Minister, generated extensive media coverage. Of the twenty-nine articles on the CMO's proposals, fifteen

were news items and fourteen op-eds or editorials. These will be discussed in more detail below.

Table 1: newspapers – key content

	<i>Dec / Jan</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>Total</i>
All articles	98	88	186
Op-ed	6	22	28
Celebrity	28	17	45
Other	64	49	113
Main subject			
(non-celebrity stories)			
CMO proposals	-	29	29
Antisocial behaviour	23	3	26
Drink driving	7	8	15
Negative health effects	10	3	13
New Year	7	-	7
Sensible drinking campaigns	6	-	6
Positive health effects	3	3	6
Women drinking	1	4	5
Underage drinking	2	2	4
Pleasure of drinking	2	-	2

Celebrity-related stories accounted for a quarter of the sample. Of these eighteen covered the arrest of the footballer Steven Gerrard following a violent incident in a bar near Liverpool. Sixteen referred to other male celebrities and eleven to female celebrities. Of the eleven reports on female celebrities, eight referred to either Kate Moss or Lily Allen. None of these stories involved antisocial behaviour, but all were accompanied by photos of the celebrities looking drunk.

The only front-page alcohol-related story not involving either a celebrity or the CMO's proposals was a report in the *Daily Mail* under the banner headline 'Insurers target middle-class drinkers'.

Where possible, the reported consequences of drinking were counted (see Table 2). This tally overlapped with, but differed from, the main subject count. All reported consequences were looked at (e.g. if a story about the CMO referred to both health consequences and antisocial behaviour, both were counted). Even excluding the Steven Gerrard arrest, the highest number of articles (n=41) depicted violence as a consequence of drinking. However, this was only one more than identified negative health impacts as a consequence of alcohol consumption. This reinforces the evidence that health concerns have become central to the framing of alcohol stories in the press. However, only nine specified addiction as a consequence of drinking, suggesting that population-based approaches which seek to weaken popular distinctions between safe and problematic drinking – especially the notion that problem drinking equates to alcoholism – have made important inroads into the news framing of alcohol stories.

Table 2: consequences of drinking

<i>Consequence</i>	<i>Count in all articles</i>
Violence / antisocial behaviour	59
Negative health impacts	40
Non-antisocial behaviour	21
Costs to NHS	15
Drunk driving	13
Looking drunk	10
Addiction	9
Positive health impacts	5

Imagery

Most photographs were of women and men looking drunk, but not apparently involved in any antisocial behaviour (see Table 3). Of these, all but five photographs were of celebrities. Most of the male celebrities were footballers and most of the female celebrities (except Kate Moss) were singers. These figures exclude photographs related to the arrest of Steven Gerrard.

Table 3: newspaper photographs

Subject	<i>Semi-conscious</i>	<i>Drunk - antisocial</i>	<i>Drunk – not antisocial</i>	<i>Not drunk</i>	<i>Victim of violence</i>	<i>Underage</i>
Celebrity (F)			36			
Celebrity (M)	2	1	15			
Anonymous (F)	17	2		4	3	
Anonymous (M)	2	2	5	5	8	1
Anonymous (mixed)				5		

Leaving aside stock photographs of alcoholic drinks (n=19), the two most common images in the sample were drunk-looking female celebrities (just under half of which were of Kate Moss) and anonymous women who were apparently semiconscious. Only four photos showed men who appeared unconscious or semiconscious. The next most common image was of anonymous male victims of violence. Non-problematic, social drinking remains a feature of news imagery – but one that is heavily outweighed by depictions of drunken behaviour in one form or another.

Sources

In order to understand how news stories are framed, it is important to go beyond simply identifying subject matter and imagery. Hansen and Gunter (2007) argue that two areas merit particular attention: thematic analysis and the use of sources. Thematically, the

evidence presented here suggests that while historically commonplace concerns such as drink driving remain at the forefront of news reporting, these have been augmented by a substantial interest in celebrity. Perhaps most notably, long-term health impacts (specifically liver damage, rather than alcoholism) have emerged as a primary theme for news stories.

The degree to which public health approaches have become established as a frame for the reporting of alcohol issues can be assessed by looking at the role health professionals and alcohol health campaigners play as sources for alcohol-related stories (see Table 4). In the coverage of the CMO’s minimum pricing proposals, health professionals and alcohol health campaigners accounted for the largest number of sources after politicians. Alcohol industry spokespeople were quoted on eight occasions.

Table 4: newspaper sources

Source	<i>All articles</i>	<i>Articles relating to CMO proposals</i>
Politician	34	15
Health professional	21	9
Alcohol industry	16	8
Academic	15	0
Police	11	0
CMO	9	6
Alcohol campaign group	9	3
Government report	3	0
Celebrity	5	0
Member of the public	46	0

Over the sample as a whole, health professionals and alcohol health lobbyists provided sources on thirty occasions: four less than politicians, but almost twice as many as both the alcohol industry and academics. If the CMO is added to that number, then those adopting broadly public health-oriented positions on alcohol provided just under a quarter of all quotes on alcohol-related stories. Members of the public provided the largest single number of quotes (n=46), but many of these were repeat quotes from eyewitnesses. The relatively low number of police quotes suggests that crime and disorder concerns are not currently at the forefront of the news agenda, though this is offset by the high number of violent images in photographs of young men’s binge drinking.

Opinions and commentaries

There were twenty-three alcohol-related op-eds and five editorials over the entire sample: most dealt with the CMO’s minimum pricing proposals, and a further three were written in response to a speech given in the same week by the then Health Secretary Alan Johnson describing teetotallers as ‘social pariahs’. Of the remaining op-eds, three were light-hearted celebrations of drink, one condemned drunks who called out ambulances unnecessarily, and one was a discussion of historical trends in English drinking.

Table 5: op-eds and editorials on minimum pricing

Type	<i>Pro CMO</i>	<i>Anti CMO</i>	<i>“Majority / minority”</i>	<i>“National drinking problem”</i>
Op-ed	5	8	2	4
Editorial	-	1	3	1

Almost twice as many opinion columns opposed minimum pricing as supported it. Five of the op-eds opposing minimum pricing deployed a version of the argument that the State should not punish the ‘sensible majority’ for the behaviour of a ‘troublesome minority’, while two used versions of the phrase ‘nanny state’. Five of the op-eds – both for and against the CMO’s proposals – refer, in one form or another, to Britain as having national ‘alcohol problem’.

Responsibility for excessive drinking

Twenty-five articles identified cheap alcohol or supermarkets as contributing to binge drinking. Eighteen blamed national drinking cultures, but only eight blamed 24-hour licensing. This suggests that pricing has acquired prominent role in policy debates on alcohol in newspapers, whereas previously widespread concerns over the impact of 24-hour licensing appear to have receded. National drinking culture – the idea that the British have an inherent tendency towards drunkenness – was commonly identified as a primary cause of heavy drinking, though one op-ed sought to subject this assumption to historical analysis.

Adverts

All newspapers carried adverts for alcohol, two-thirds of which were for cheap supermarket deals – though this proportion differed by publication (see Table 6). The majority of the supermarket adverts were full-page spreads, some with eye-catching straplines such as ‘Party on Down’ above offers for cut-price beer and wine. Most of the alcohol adverts appeared in the Christmas period, though not all.

Table 6: newspaper advertising

Newspaper	<i>Total</i>	<i>Cheap supermarket deals</i>
<i>Daily Mail</i>	13	13
<i>Times</i>	10	6
<i>Daily Telegraph</i>	10	4
<i>Sun</i>	9	8
<i>Mirror</i>	7	5
<i>Independent</i>	6	5
<i>Guardian</i>	1	0

While alcohol promotions by no means dominated newspaper advertising, their frequency in some titles reveals a tension between concerns expressed in news reports and editorials, and the demands of income generation through the sale of advertising space.

Television news

The following news broadcasts were recorded over the same time period as the newspaper sample:

- *BBC1 News at Ten*
- *Channel 4 News*
- *ITN News at Ten*
- *Sky News (7pm)*: first 15 minutes

Due to variations in scheduling over the Christmas period, this meant that seventy-two news broadcasts were analysed in total with run times ranging from ten to fifty minutes.

Main subjects

In the first sample period, twelve news items focussed on alcohol-related stories (see Table 7) while nine contained passing references to alcohol. All the alcohol-related stories involved negative outcomes: the arrest of Steven Gerrard, the death of a pub-customer in Heywood, and the imprisonment of a British man arrested for having sex while drunk on a beach in Dubai. In the second sample period seven stories focussed on alcohol and two contained passing references. In the second period, all but one of the alcohol-focussed items covered the CMO's pricing proposals. Two broadcasts (*BBC News* and *ITN News* on March 15th) made the CMO's proposals the main headline. Most items broadcast on the 16th March framed the story in terms of the rejection of the proposals by the Prime Minister and David Cameron.

Table 7: television – key content

Subject (Sample period in brackets)	<i>No. of items</i>	<i>Top story</i>	<i>Total time (seconds)</i>
Steven Gerrard arrest (1)	8	-	940
CMO proposals (2)	6	2	1091
Arrest in Dubai (1)	3	-	174
Death in Queen Anne pub (1)	1	-	21
Paul Gascoigne recovery (2)	1	-	205

Variations in the length of broadcast idents, advert breaks and overall run-times meant that fully accurate figures for the percentage of total broadcasts dedicated to alcohol-

related stories could not be ascertained. However, using a rough calculation, the total time allocated to alcohol-related stories was found to be well below that in Hansen (2003): around 2.5% as compared to 21.3% in the earlier study. More strikingly, the number of articles containing passing references to alcohol is significantly lower than that identified in Hansen’s study: just twelve news items out of seventy-two entire news broadcasts contained passing references to alcohol. This may partly reflect the fact that news agendas over the Christmas period were dominated by two stories: an Israeli bombardment and invasion of Gaza and the closure of well-known high street stores as a consequence of the credit crunch. Neither of these stories produced a single passing reference to alcohol.

Passing references

A total of twelve items contained incidental verbal or visual references to alcohol (see Table 8). Of these, three involved champagne being sprayed in celebration, two were stories about Christmas celebrations among troops stationed in Iraq, and two were items about Irish fans preparing for the Six Nations rugby final in Cardiff. Another was included in a report about cross-border shopping between Eire and Northern Ireland.

Table 8: passing references to alcohol in television news reports

Broadcast	<i>Celebration</i>	<i>Irish rugby fans</i>	<i>Troops in Iraq</i>	<i>Rawtenstall fire</i>	<i>Other</i>
<i>BBC News</i>	2	1	1	1	-
<i>ITN News</i>	1	1	1	1	-
<i>Channel 4 News</i>	1	-	-	-	1
<i>Sky News</i>	-	-	-	-	-

Just one item contained vox pops from inside a pub: a report on a fire near Rawtenstall which had forced locals out of their homes on Christmas Eve. A second report on the Rawtenstall fire mentioned in passing that non-alcoholic beer was being provided in a rescue centre.

Overall, there were very few positive or normalising references to drinking over the two sample periods. Where alcohol was depicted in positive terms, it was in association with either extraordinary celebrations (in which champagne was, in any case, sprayed rather than consumed) or with brief festive respite for soldiers on duty in Iraq. None of the reports on the CMO’s proposals contained vox pops from drinkers inside pubs, though in one report the BBC’s Chief Political Editor, Nick Robinson gave a piece to camera from a House of Commons bar. Where drinking was associated with drunkenness, it was among Irish fans attending a potentially historical sporting occasion. This strongly suggests that the ‘normalising’ references to alcohol which were widespread at the time of Hansen’s 2003 study have almost disappeared from news reporting in 2008/9. If this

is the case, then this may mark a significant cultural shift as regards the way alcohol is depicted in television news.

Sources

Eight of the Christmas period stories covered the arrest of Steven Gerrard. Two interviewed a member of the public who had been in the bar that evening, and one interviewed the ex-Liverpool manager Kenny Dalglish. Three items covered the imprisonment of Vince Acors in Dubai, and these all contained excerpts from a press conference in which he discussed his arrest.

The coverage of the CMO's pricing proposal was extensive on both the 15th and 16th March. In terms of time allotted, the most prominent sources were health professionals (all liver specialists), followed by the Prime Minister and the CMO (see Table 9). Alcohol industry spokespeople gained just 20 seconds of coverage. However, raw timings can be misleading as prominence is also a factor of the number of occasions in which particular sources are featured. On these grounds, rejections of the proposals dominated news coverage, with Gordon Brown appearing first in three reports and James Purnell in one. James Purnell and the liver specialist Dr Roger Williams were the only sources who appeared in the headline segment of any news item over the entire period.

Table 9: sources for minimum unit pricing reports

Source	No. of items	Headline	Total time (seconds)
Health professional	3	1	67
CMO	4		53
Gordon Brown	3		57
Vox pop			
Anti CMO	8		40
Pro CMO	1		5
David Cameron	2		31
James Purnell	1	1	12
Other politician	2		35
Industry spokesperson	1		20

Vox pops (short, five-second excerpts from members of the public) were used in three items. Vox pops tend to be used to give a sense of the 'public mood' on an issue, and so usually express a clear opinion for or against a particular issue. As Lewis et al. (2005, 70-91) illustrate, vox pops can be disproportionately effective in creating the illusion of public consensus on particular issues. In the news stories on the CMO's proposals, the vox pops were overwhelmingly against the principle of minimum unit pricing. It is impossible to tell whether the proportion of 8:1 in any way reflects actual public feeling on minimum unit pricing; however, the 8:1 skew against the CMO's proposals in the vox pop segments created the powerful impression that the public was against the idea.

Imagery

The most prominent source of imagery for alcohol-related news stories was drink on supermarket shelves (see Table 10). This mirrors the shift (also identified in newspaper reporting above) in the framing of alcohol stories away from locating alcohol problems in pubs and towards identifying supermarkets as the source for cheap alcohol.

Table 10: television news footage

Footage		No. of items	Total time (seconds)
Drink in supermarket		5	77
Drink in bar		4	24
Nick Robinson		1	26
Antisocial behaviour	Men	2	33
	Women	2	29
	Mixed	1	21
Non- antisocial behaviour	Men	-	-
	Women	-	-
	Mixed	2	30

There was only slightly less footage of antisocial behaviour among women than among men. Added together, the total time showing antisocial behaviour as a consequence of drinking was almost three times as much as showed social drinking. While this reflects the fact that good behaviour is rarely newsworthy, it also suggests that television news over-represents antisocial behaviour as a consequence of drinking when compared to the actual likelihood that alcohol consumption will lead to crime or violence. Survey results from this study show that many young people believe news reporting overstates the relationship between drinking and antisocial behaviour.

Summary

- Alcohol-related news reports overwhelmingly dwell on the negative consequences of drinking – particularly drunk-driving, violence and antisocial behaviour. They also demonstrates a fascination with celebrity, where simply appearing drunk is sufficient to merit widespread media coverage.
- Health concerns have emerged as both a significant source of stories and a significant frame for the reporting of all alcohol-related stories. It is long term liver damage (rather than alcoholism as popularly conceived) which dominates this framing process.

- Newspapers consistently reported on health impacts of alcohol, but generally opposed the CMO's proposals on minimum pricing. In television news a strong impression that minimum pricing was unpopular was created through the use of vox pops.
- The role of supermarkets in encouraging heavy consumption has clearly become a key frame for news reporting. However, there is a tension between this and the continuing appearance of adverts promoting cheap supermarket deals in many newspapers.
- National drinking cultures are also commonly identified as a cause of heavy drinking.
- Images of drunken women were at least as common as images of drunken men in both newspaper and television reporting. The depicted consequences of drinking varied by gender, though this was much more pronounced in newspaper reporting.
- Newspaper and television news agendas differ, with less emphasis on non-antisocial celebrity drunkenness in television news.

Compared to Hansen (2003), there are less casual references to drinking and less depictions of drinking as a non-problematic everyday activity. While positive health stories still appear, they represent a small minority of news items (though such stories may have a disproportionate impact on public perceptions). Health professionals are established as credible and routine sources for information, ensuring that health perspectives now provide a key frame for news reporting. Compared to 2003, these developments appear to demonstrate a substantial change in both news agendas and the news framing process across both television and newspapers.

SURVEY RESULTS

There were 231 completed questionnaires. All respondents were undergraduates.

Age	
18 - 24	208
25 - 34	7
35 - 49	11
50 or above	5
Gender	
Female	160
Male	71

Seven respondents identified themselves as non-drinkers. However, this should not be taken as indicative of non-drinking rates across the institution, since non-drinkers may also have opted not to complete the questionnaire.

News consumption

Newspapers

53.7% (n=124) of respondents stated that they bought newspapers a few times a month or more. The most regularly purchased newspapers were the *Guardian* (n=65), *Times* (n=50), *Independent* (n=47), and *Daily Mail* (n=39). Many respondents identified more than one newspaper.

Television news

86.6% (n=200) reported that they watched television news, with most of those (66.3%) watching either daily or a few times a week. The BBC was by far the most popular news broadcaster, with three quarters (n=174) identifying it as the channel they watched most regularly. Channel 4 News (n=49) was more popular than ITV (n=37), conflicting with national trends and reflecting the media consumption of the age group. Only twelve respondents regularly watched Sky News (NB: respondents could identify more than one news broadcast).

News websites

62% (n=144) reported regularly using news websites with 48.5% (n=112) accessing them a few times a week or more. The most popular news website was again the BBC, accessed by 49.8% (n=115) of respondents. The *Guardian* online was the next most popular (n=25) followed by Sky News (n=12). A detailed analysis of website reporting was not included in this project for reasons of time and practicality; however, websites were checked for parity and all stories appearing in the broadcast and print bulletins also appeared on the associated websites with comparable (usually equal) prominence.

Radio

67.5% (n=156) of respondents said they sometimes listened to news on the radio, with most (n=102) listening to *Newsbeat* on Radio 1. However, focus group discussions suggested that there was some scepticism towards the reliability of *Newsbeat*, with listeners feeling that it was more akin to entertainment than news reporting.

Alcohol behaviours and attitudes

Place of purchase and consumption

46.8% (n=108) of respondents said that they most often purchased alcohol at a pub or bar. 39% (n=90) said they used supermarkets most often, and 4.3% (n=10) said they used off-licences. This bears out recent findings showing that off-sales, and particularly supermarket sales, now represent a significant proportion of all alcohol purchases (Lader, 2009: 70-80).

Location of consumption is related to place of purchase, but non-identical with it. People may only occasionally purchase alcohol in a supermarket, but may still drink more often at home than in a pub if they purchase large amounts when shopping. This survey found that most respondents drank most often in bars (see Table 11), but a significant number drank most often at home (either their own home or a friend's).

58% of respondents (n=134) reported that they 'always' or 'quite often' drank at home before going out (commonly known as 'preloading'), with just 20.3% (n=47) saying they did so 'rarely' or 'never'. This closely matches the findings of Hughes et al. (2008: 61) and Hammersley and Ditton (2005: 496), where 57.6% and 60% of respondents respectively reported drinking at home prior to going out. Unlike Hughes et al., this study found that the proportion of women who reported regularly 'preloading' was lower than for men.

Table 11: location of drinking

	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Drink most often at own or friend's home	40	40.9	40.3
Drink most often in pub, bar or nightclub	58.6	55.3	56.3
'Always' or 'quite often' preload	62.8	56.6	58
Occasionally 'preload'	12.9	18.2	16.9
'Very rarely' or 'never' preload	18.6	21.3	20.3

Perceptions of binge drinking

The term ‘binge drinking’ was intentionally left undefined and impressionistic in the survey since the aim was to ascertain perceptions of drinking behaviour, rather than actual unit levels of consumption. The results, therefore, are also impressionistic and should be seen primarily as gauging whether respondents saw themselves as drinking what they understood to be a significant amount of alcohol on fairly regular occasions.

Table 12: perception of own levels of binge drinking

	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>Total %</i>	<i>Combined total %</i>
Regularly binge drink	14.3	14.5	14.3	50.2
Occasionally binge drink	41.4	34	35.9	
Hardly ever binge drink	22.9	23.9	23.8	47.6
Never binge drink	18.6	26.4	23.8	

The results appeared to bear out suggestions that there has been a marked ‘gender convergence’ (Gill, 2002: 118) on both attitudes and behaviours around drinking among young people. The same proportion of women reported regularly binge drinking as men, although a slightly lower proportion reported occasionally binge drinking, and when asked about perceptions of gender difference, almost two-thirds of respondents said they believed young men and women drank about the same amount as each other (see Table 13). Overall, respondents were divided almost equally by those who described themselves as ‘occasionally’ or ‘regularly’ binge drinking and those who said they ‘hardly ever’ or ‘never’ binge drink.

There was a clear consensus that binge drinking was commonplace among young people in England. Three-quarters of respondents said they felt that ‘at least half’ or ‘most’ young people in England were binge drinkers (see Table 13). When asked why they felt young people in England engaged in binge drinking just under two-thirds blamed the fact that ‘the English just like to get drunk’. This compared to just over half who identified cheap alcohol and less than a quarter who blamed 24-hour licensing (NB: respondents were able to identify more than one cause). This may have important implications for social norms approaches to drinking behaviours.

Cheap alcohol was identified by over half the respondents as contributing to binge drinking. The degree of engagement with this issue (only 20.8% were neutral on this question, compared to 36.8% for 24-hour licensing), mirrors the increased level of debate in the news media. Pricing has undoubtedly emerged as an issue which forms part of public discourse around consumption, and there is evidence that it is accepted as a driver for consumption by a significant number of drinkers.

Table 13: perceptions of binge drinking

		<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Gender				
Young women drink more than young men		12.9	13.2	13
Young men drink more than young women		27.1	23.3	24.2
Young men and women drink similar amounts		57.1	62.3	60.6
National traits				
Half or more young people in England binge drink		71.5	76.7	74.9
Causes				
The English just like to get drunk	<i>Agree</i>	68.6	60.4	62.7
	<i>Disagree</i>	14.3	16.3	15.6
Cheap alcohol	<i>Agree</i>	51.4	56.6	54.6
	<i>Disagree</i>	25.7	18.3	20.8
24-hour licensing	<i>Agree</i>	21.4	25.1	23.8
	<i>Disagree</i>	44.2	19.6	34.2

The comparative lack of concern over the role of 24-hour licensing also reflects the findings of the content analysis. While a small number of columnists insisted that 24-hour licensing was the prime cause of increased consumption and antisocial behaviour, the media focus appeared to have shifted towards pricing. Focus group discussions also suggested that extended licensing was perceived as a relatively minor factor in alcohol-related problems.

Student drinking

While national drinking cultures were strongly identified as driving patterns and levels of consumption, so too were student drinking cultures. Almost two-thirds (n=142) felt that students drank more than other people while only 5.2% (n=12) disagreed with the proposition that heavy drinking was traditional among students. A quarter (n=57) said they felt pressure to drink heavily when they first arrived at University, and two-thirds (n=147) said they felt Freshers' Week encouraged heavy drinking.

Units awareness and health concerns

Previous research suggests that sensible drinking campaigns have failed to achieve a significant impact on unit awareness among undergraduate students (Gill and O'May, 2007: 14). On the basis of the evidence here, unit awareness appears to have increased. 44.2% (n=102) correctly identified the unit guidelines for men, and 47.6% (n=110) did so for women – slightly higher than the levels of awareness reported in the most recent ONS

report (Lader, 2009: 49). Only 14% didn't attempt an answer. It is also possible that, since this was a multiple choice question, many of the correct answers were good guesses – especially as no-one guessed the highest or lowest options presented for either men or women. Despite these considerations, however, the results do suggest a general drift towards greater awareness of NHS guidelines on sensible drinking. As regards behaviour, however, they suggest a more modest impact: 55.4% (n=128) said they never kept track of their unit consumption while drinking, with 20.4% (n=47) reporting that they did so either 'sometimes' or 'always'.

Violence and antisocial behaviour

A quarter of respondents said they had been involved in a violent incident after drinking; however, the higher proportion of female respondents skewed this figure. Among male respondents, just under half reported having been personally involved in a violent incident after drinking. Just under one-fifth of female respondents had been involved in a violent incident. However, this figure didn't allow for frequency and when asked how often they witnessed violent incidents after drinking, only 14% said 'often' or 'very often', with a close match between male and female respondents. By contrast, 41% said they 'rarely' or 'never' witnessed violent incidents.

Asked whether news reporting accurately reflected their own experiences while drinking, the majority disagreed, with only one in eight saying that news reporting was accurate. The results were very similar when asked if news reporting exaggerated levels of violence and antisocial behaviour. These results reflected a general sense that while antisocial behaviour was a real threat – especially when drinking in town centres – it was over-reported in the news media.

Table 14: violence and antisocial behaviour

		<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Have been involved in violent incident after drinking		44.3	17.6	26
Have witnessed violence after drinking	Often / very often	18.6	11.4	13.5
	Rarely / never	35.7	44	41.1
News reporting reflects own experiences	Agree/ strongly agree	20	9.4	12.5
	Disagree / strongly disagree	52.9	52.2	51.9
News reporting exaggerates antisocial behaviour	Agree/ strongly agree	64.3	53.5	56.3
	Disagree / strongly disagree	10	12.6	11.7

Social networking and alcohol

91% (n= 210) of respondents used Facebook, partly reflecting the general dominance of Facebook in the social networking market, but also reflecting the demographic of the sample.

Table 15: social networks and alcohol

	<i>Male %</i>	<i>Female %</i>	<i>Total %</i>
Often use Facebook to organise drinks	27.2	25.2	26
Upload photos of drinking sessions	50	57.2	55
Photos of me drunk have appeared on Facebook	81.4	66.7	71

Around a quarter regularly used Facebook (or other social networking site) to organise drinking sessions. Over half reported that they regularly upload photographs from drinking sessions onto Facebook, and just under three-quarters said that photos of them while drunk had appeared on Facebook. While further research is needed to map the extent of this, and its impact on attitudes to drunkenness, these preliminary results suggest that social networking, especially as means of recording drunken experiences, is now established as part of routine drinking practice among young people.

Summary

- Beliefs regarding the causes of heavy drinking largely reflect the framing of alcohol stories in the news media, although there is greater tendency to blame British drinking cultures than pricing. Most participants see cheap alcohol rather than 24-hour licensing as the primary cause of binge drinking..
- There is evidence of a ‘gender convergence’ in terms of perceptions around drinking behaviours, with many respondents feeling that men and women drink equal amounts.
- Half of the respondents saw themselves as binge drinking on a regular basis. This suggests that the term ‘binge drinking’ is not commonly viewed as connoting socially unacceptable behaviour.
- There is widespread mistrust of news stories about alcohol, with most participants feeling that the news media exaggerates antisocial behaviour and fails to reflect their own experiences.

- Significant levels of drinking take place in the home, and ‘preloading’ is commonplace.
- Social networking has emerged as an integral aspect of drinking culture, especially through the uploading of photographs onto Facebook.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Four focus groups were carried out. Group sizes ranged between six and twelve and included students from both first year and third year. All participants were aged between 18 and 24. There was an even gender balance overall (sixteen men and sixteen women), though this was unequally divided across the four groups. Three participants were international students and two identified themselves as no longer drinking. Where quotes are included below, Y1 / Y3 refer to the year group of the respondent (first year / third year).

Student drinking

It was clear that heavy drinking was seen as an inevitable aspect of undergraduate life, but also as a behaviour reinforced by significant levels of social pressure (see also Ruddock, 2008: 13). Participants were conscious of ‘*that whole mythology of student equals, like, mental crazy times and like loads and loads of drinking*’ (Female, Y3), but many also described the fear of social isolation that drove heavy drinking especially in the first year. Asked if she felt pressured to get drunk on arriving at university, one respondent stated simply: ‘*Yeah, well, I didn’t want to seem like a loser*’ (Female, Y3). Many felt that the University, or the Student’s Union, was complicit in encouraging heavy drinking by arranging social events which revolved around alcohol.

I remember looking around me at one point and everyone was battered. Like, everybody and all night at the SU where they always sell, like, really cheap drinks and stuff. And then they’ll take us to XL [a local nightclub] where there’s cheap drinks with vouchers as well, it’s cheap drinks. So, yeah, it’s all about alcohol. All of it.
Female Y3

I felt like I had to go there, like, every single night in order to make friends because it was in my head that after Freshers’ Week, you know, there’s no chance of making friends because they would have their own groups, their

own cliques, and, like, if you failed to go to them and drink with lots of people, then you're not going to have any friends.

Male Y3

This is not to suggest that universities actively or wilfully encourage drinking as part of the induction process, but it does reveal a perception among undergraduates that a laissez-faire approach to student-oriented leisure promotions on the part of universities and student unions has the effect of placing significant pressure to drink on new students who are, understandably, keen to socialise.

Participants reported adopting drinking patterns which match those found in other studies of young people. 'Preloading' was common. As one participant put it:

It's cheaper and, I guess, it's social as well. You'd be, like, 'let's go round to so-and-so's house and we'll do, like, some drinking games' ... Yeah, like ladle it out or something like that. Just head to town, like, really drunk.

Female Y3

While drinking was seen as goal-oriented (the goal being drunkenness) and fun, many participants also expressed a sense that this behaviour was simply routine.

I kept saying things like 'if I was at home', and someone's saying 'let's go out again tonight' and I'd be, like, 'are you having a joke?'. But because it's Freshers' Week I was, like: plough through it.

Female Y3

Engineer et al. (2003) and Coleman and Cater (2005) have both noted the extent to which the routinisation of drinking makes it difficult for young drinkers to fully identify their own motives for getting drunk. The responses of focus group participants broadly supported this view.

Attitudes towards news

A considerable degree of scepticism was expressed towards news reporting in general, and alcohol news coverage in particular. Respondents were conscious that news journalism was targeted towards the interests of readers and viewers as much as towards neutral news values. News reporting of alcohol stories was often seen as exaggerated and driven by the need for a compelling headline.

I think [news reporting of alcohol] is inaccurate ... I think it's when they are bored, they bring their own particular brand of war journalism to out home territory because there's nothing better to focus on.

Male Y3

Because one newspaper says 'oh, Binge Britain: and this happens' and another newspaper's going to do that because they want to sell newspapers. People want to buy into the stories to tell you how terrible we are. So it makes a good story.

Female Y3

Some popular news sources, especially Radio 1's *Newsbeat* were seen as compromised by their proximity to programmes which otherwise celebrated drunkenness. Discussing *Newsbeat*, one group commented on an item in the Chris Moyles show where a member of the team drank every night to see the effects of over-consumption:

But he found it quite funny though, didn't he.

Female Y3

*I was just like: what? You're encouraging alcoholism among people [...]
Yeah. It was a really weird thing to do.*

Female y3

Yeah. I just didn't know where to go with it. Like he was trying really hard to say it was really bad, but it just came out like a comedy session.

Male Y3

Daykin et al. (2009) have commented on the extent to which light-hearted discussions of drunkenness play a key role in establishing a relationship between presenter and audience in radio. Where 'serious' alcohol stories are attempted in this context, however, they risk simply appearing confused and contradictory. The combination of mixed messages and perceived sensationalism produced levels of scepticism towards news representations which echoed those demonstrated in the survey results.

A number of participants, both male and female, commented that news reporting reinforced gender stereotypes. These were widely seen as impacting unfairly on women: depicting them as incapable of drinking sensibly, and morally judging them for behaviours which would not be frowned upon if the subject were male.

I think newspapers either tend to target women as either slaggish, asking for it, or vulnerable ... It does seem strange that we're either one or the other. Not just like a drunken girl just walking around, not asking for it and not starting a fight.

Female Y3

It really annoyed me. This annoyed me so much ... it makes out, like 'oh, drunken slut walking down the street, you know, being generally uncouth'. I dunno. It's not always like that.

Female Y3

Broadly speaking, few participants appeared to take news stories at face value. At best, they adopted what has been called a ‘negotiated’ reading of news reports (Hall, 1980): that is a reading which goes against the grain of the intended meanings or value system of the story. Participants did not entirely reject the notion that binge drinking was widespread and that it created both antisocial behaviour and health harms; however, they tended to assume, at a fundamental level, that alcohol stories functioned primarily to sell copy rather than to reveal truths about the world. As far as trust in news representations went, then, even where participants felt that news representations reflected their own experiences, they also assumed such representations were exaggerated and unreliable.

Non-identification with media representations

Many participants felt the drinkers depicted in news stories simply had nothing to do with them personally. This echoes recent research from the DCSF, which found high levels of ‘audience dissociation’ from problems of youth drinking as depicted in the media (2008: 15). Commenting on news reports of drunken violence, one group observed:

It depends if you know the person in the story, because if that’s just some random person, you probably think, kind of, ‘what a loser – going out and getting drunk.

Male Y1

[Laughter]

You think it will never happen to you as well, don’t you.

Female Y1

Violence and antisocial behaviour were recognised as consequences of heavy drinking; however, most felt that news reporting either exaggerated violence, or that they simply weren’t the kind of people who behaved in the way that most news reports suggested young people behaved.

Know Your Limits

Government research states that the first KYL campaign ‘was highly effective in raising awareness and had a high level of recall among young people’ (Department of Health, 2007: 34). When shown posters and television adverts, all participants said they recognised the campaign. However, none felt the campaign had actually caused them to drink less over the Christmas period. Furthermore, many saw the posters and adverts as simply amusing. One typical response to an advert showing a young girl vomiting and tearing her clothes before going out was that ‘*it sort of shocked, but it also makes it funny*’ (Female Y3). Others felt that some posters were simply targeted at other people:

If you're the kind of person that's going to smash a glass in someone's face, that poster is not going to stop you from doing it.

Female Y3

Those adverts make me laugh ... the one where the guy does some, he's in a right state, and they say 'you wouldn't start a night off like this, so don't end one like this.' And that makes you think loads of people would just say 'Oh, I would, yeah!'

Male Y3

The unpredictable readings of KYL campaign material led, in some cases, to reports that the campaign slogan was being adopted as a positive way of describing an eventful night's drinking:

And then sometimes, like, you get a text message like 'Oh, I just had one of those nights, erm, you wouldn't start a night like this', and it kind of turns into a joke.

Female Y3

I know one of my friends, she once came up to me, and she goes 'I can see myself ending up like the girl in the adverts tonight!'

Female Y1

This does not provide any compelling evidence that sensible drinking campaigns such as KYL are ineffective. However, it does remind us that we need to be very careful when using recall as a measure of impact when evaluating such campaigns. Simply recalling a poster does not mean that the interpretation of that message at either an individual or a social level matched the intentions of the creators.

Harm and excess

One problem with both the KYL campaign and some of the, presumably, cautionary images of excess in news reporting is that such behaviour is not always read as harmful by the intended audience. Indeed, as Szmigin et al (2008) have noted, 'harm' is rarely considered an outcome of drinking' by participants in many qualitative studies (365). As one participant put it, responding to a KYL advert, 'It's not harmful, it's embarrassing' (Female Y1).

Generally speaking, the harms associated with drinking were associated with violence alone. Health impacts were considered but concerns about health tended to be seen as an issue for later life. There appeared to be a genuine tension between behaviours that were presented as harmful, and those which were experienced as merely embarrassing – with embarrassment being seen as an often unavoidable (and sometimes positive) feature of a successful night's drinking. One participant failed to see himself in news reports because:

It's not about violence or anything. I've not really experienced that much ... it's not about violence; it's about embarrassing yourself.

Male Y1

Making a fool of oneself was generally accepted as part and parcel of drinking. A correlative of this was resentment towards the suggestion that simply being drunk and stupid was somehow grounds for moral censure. Many participants drew a clear distinction between behaviour that was morally wrong and behaviour that was just stupid. This distinction drew implicitly (though it was never expressed in this way) on the classic liberal 'harm principle': the notion that so long as what one does doesn't harm anyone else, then one should be free to act as one wishes:

If it's not really affecting anyone else and it's just you, making yourself feel crap [laughter] and making yourself look like an idiot, then that's not a problem. Obviously, if you went absolutely wild and threw drinks and beat everybody up then, yeah, that's a problem.

Female Y3

Okay, I would probably class myself as a binge drinker, but is it really that bad? ... I'm not going around smashing pint glasses over people's heads, I'm just making myself look like a complete idiot.

Female Y3

While definitions of harm varied, deeply held notions about social responsibility did frame attitudes to behaviour. As far as drunken behaviour is concerned, the limited evidence provided by these focus groups suggests that behaviour has to be seen by audiences firstly as actually harmful, and secondly as something they actually do, before media messages aimed at reducing those behaviours are likely to have the desired impact.

Health issues

It has been demonstrated above that health issues are central to the way the news media frames alcohol-related stories. Among focus group participants, however, health impacts represented a far less prominent concern. One reason for this was that long-term health impacts were seen as a problem that could be addressed later in life (see also Orford et al., 2004: 414; MacAskill et al., 2001: ii). It was assumed that high levels of consumption at university would not be sustained once other responsibilities (family, full-time work and so forth) were assumed:

I think it's because we don't see it as being a long term thing, though. You see it as you're here for three years of university, it's probably the most drinking you'll ever do in your life and then after that you can just, hopefully, not do it as often. So I certainly don't consider all the units going into my body. I'm just thinking 'oh, it will affect me at some point'.

Female Y1

Another reason health concerns were sidelined was that they were simply seen as not compelling enough to defer the pleasure of having a few drinks:

Everybody knows on a night out, you know it's not good. You've got that natural thing that tells you, you know it's bad but you still do it. And you won't stop doing it.

Female Y3

This is a reiteration of what has previously been called the 'drinker's dilemma' (Edwards, 2000: 181-2): the simple fact that at the 'table level' the long-term risks of drinking heavily are simply no match for the immediate to desire to have another drink, especially after the first has been finished.

Social networking

Focus group discussions confirmed that social networking sites had acquired an integral role in drinking culture. Griffin et al. have previously noted that recounting 'stupid' drinking stories is seen as 'a route to inclusion within student social life, but also as providing material for that social life' (2009: 463). Here, it became clear that the uploading and 'tagging' of photographs on Facebook provided a new way of extending the night's drinking into the following morning:

It's like the next part. Like, you know how you get ready – everyone drinking, and then it's going out, and then usually something will happen at the house when you come home like eating stupid food, and then you go to bed. And then there's an extended part which is when someone puts up photos from the night before. And then the conversation, the sober conversation, carries on.

Female Y3

Being 'tagged' (i.e. having your name linked to a photo on Facebook) was described as 'mortifying' and 'horrible', but also as fundamentally funny and very commonplace. A fairly typical description (and response) concerned a pre-Christmas drinking session:

Well, I got really drunk before Christmas and I fell over and, like, everyone was helping me but there was somebody just taking photos [laughter] and the next day I was just on Facebook, like, tagged. [Laughter] On the floor.

Female Y1

Being tagged on Facebook was often embarrassing, but it also provided proof of an eventful night's drinking. To that extent, being tagged was a mark of social success. As one participant put it:

It becomes almost a competition in a way to see who can get as many photos tagged of you as possible.

Male Y3

At the same time, photographing each other when drunk and uploading those photographs onto Facebook provided a kind of celebritisation of everyday drinking:

It's almost like your mates are the paparazzi, 'cos they're the ones taking the picture of you ... and everyone sees it on Facebook.

Female Y1

The response to tagging among participants reinforces the impression that embarrassment, in and of itself, is perceived as a positive demonstration of eventfulness, rather than a negative indicator of a bad night out. Uploading photographs also blurs the distinction between drinking locations (by adding a digital space in which drunkenness is commented on), and the conventional division between the night before and morning after. It may also increase pressure on young people who otherwise might not wish to get drunk. To not be tagged at all, however embarrassing that photo might be, could in many cases be the least desirable outcome.

Summary

- Heavy sessional consumption was seen as part of the routine and tradition of undergraduate social life.
- The university environment itself was perceived as magnifying social pressure to drink, especially as a significant amount of Freshers' Week activity revolved around alcohol. The roles and responsibilities of the University and the Student's Union were often not distinguished in the minds of respondents, with both being seen as complicit in fostering a culture of heavy drinking.
- There was considerable scepticism towards news reporting of alcohol stories. Newspaper reporting was felt to apply unfair levels of moral censure to women drinkers, and it was felt that news reporting of alcohol-related stories was primarily driven by the need to create sensational headlines. Some saw 'serious' discussions of drinking as compromised by their proximity to celebrations of consumption.
- The KYL Christmas campaign produced very high levels of recall; however, it was clear that interpretations of the message went against the grain of the intended outcomes.
- Respondents clearly distinguished 'harm' from 'embarrassment'. They also distinguished 'stupidity' from antisocial behaviour. There was a shared belief that

behaving in ways that harmed others was morally unacceptable, but that merely making ‘an idiot’ of oneself was part and parcel of getting drunk.

- While health implications were recognised, they were seen as a distant threat which would only become a risk if heavy drinking patterns were maintained into later life. There was some evidence of unit awareness, but very few participants either attempted or intended to track their unit consumption when actually drinking.
- Social networking emerged as integral to the structure of drinking occasions, specifically through the uploading and ‘tagging’ of photographs on Facebook and other social networking sites. While such photos were often deeply embarrassing, embarrassment was not seen as a necessarily negative outcome. Drinking was geared towards eventfulness, not the avoidance of risk or the maintenance of sober comportment.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

News reporting

Understanding how news reports frame alcohol-related stories is crucial to assessing how alcohol issues are constructed in public discourse. Future research in this area should continue to concentrate on the selection of sources, the prominence given to different sources of information, and the manner in which public opinion is represented in news reporting. Evidence has emerged here that journalists and editors are making considerable use of health professionals as key sources, while industry spokespeople achieve limited access. This suggests that those seeking to establish public health perspectives as a key frame for news reporting have achieved some degree of success. Further longitudinal analysis would be needed to establish whether this is the case, and what lessons may be learned from it for future media advocacy campaigns.

Thematic analysis suggests that the news coverage of binge drinking has moved away from a focus on 24-hour licensing and towards a concern over cheap alcohol and supermarket sales. It is unclear whether this reflects a shift in public concerns, or whether it has played a role in driving public perceptions around the causes of binge drinking. News coverage commonly cites a national ‘drinking problem’ as a reason for high levels of consumption among certain social groups. This notion accords with, and, possibly, goes some way towards reinforcing a view held more generally that the English have an inherent tendency to drink heavily. In a British context, social norms research may need to take account of this in addition to employment or education-specific normative expectations.

Both content analysis and focus groups discussions identified a gender divide in representations of drinking in news media. A significant proportion of newspaper coverage dwelt on photographs of female celebrities who simply appeared drunk. Similarly, in photographs documenting public drunkenness there is a marked preponderance towards images of women who appear to be semiconscious. Focus group participants expressed annoyance that women behaving in an ‘uncouth’ manner were routinely used to signify women drinkers – and binge drinkers – more generally. Gender stereotypes clearly play a role in news representations of drinking, and should be considered in any analysis of how alcohol stories are framed.

Young people and alcohol

Extensive research has previously been carried out into the routinisation of heavy drinking among young people and into attitudes to risk and harm among young drinkers. This project suggests that the routinisation (and, to an extent, institutionalisation) of particular drinking behaviours exerts degrees of social pressure which go beyond conventional notions of peer pressure. There may be an element of blame-shifting in this, but nevertheless the extent to which young people feel that the broader cultural systems and institutions within they operate encourage heavy drinking – whether implicitly or explicitly – may be a valuable subject of future research. This applies to news reporting where messages apparently condemning drunkenness appear alongside images of drunken celebrities, in the context of programmes otherwise celebrating drunkenness, or close to adverts promoting cheap supermarket deals. Contradictions such as these may contribute to scepticism towards news reports detailing potential harms and risks.

While drinking is routine, it is also enjoyable – and that pleasure is not measured according to ‘sober’ criteria. Making a fool of oneself, getting into scrapes and behaving stupidly are not necessarily negative outcomes. The criterion for a good night out is often eventfulness, more than anything else. Consequently, ‘sensible drinking’ messages need to account for the fact that behaving sensibly is often not the goal of drinking in the first place. Nevertheless, there is a clear sense that antisocial behaviour is unacceptable. The goal of campaigns targeting drunkenness may need to concentrate on establishing consensus on acceptable public behaviour, rather than targeting behaviour seen simply as embarrassing.

One significant development emerging from this study is the extent to which social networking has become a key element of drinking culture among young people. This project only touched on the extent to which drinking sessions are documented on social network sites and elsewhere. This would benefit from future analysis – especially as regards the relationship between ‘drunk’ photographs and the images of celebrity which appear in newspapers and gossip magazines. Future research may also look at the extent to which social media more broadly provide opportunities for the drinks industry to promote itself through forms of marketing which sidestep existing regulation. Arguably, user-generated documentation of organised drinking sessions act to promote future events

without formally qualifying as advertising. There is some evidence that this is already taking place on social network sites, and further investigation would be beneficial.

Media impacts

Ascertaining precisely the impact of media representations on actual behaviours is extremely difficult (see, e.g. Martin and Mail, 1995; Baillie, 1996; Cherrington et al., 2006), though this is not to say the attempt should be abandoned. The precise nature of the relationship between news representations and public perceptions remains uncertain even where it has been analysed closely (e.g. Linsky, 1970: 579; Törrönen, 2003: 289; Yanovitsky and Stryker, 2001: 230). Research in this area needs to take account of the unpredictable nature of audience reception, and to continue to consider media representations in their broader cultural contexts (Partanen and Montonen, 1988: 56; Thorson, 1995: 167; Gunter et al. 2008: 11).

While news reporting plays a key role in both ‘the building of public and political agendas’ and in framing the ‘terms of discussion’ through which alcohol issues are understood both by the general public (Hansen and Gunter, 2007: 153), public attitudes and behaviours are also framed by the activities of policy-makers. A fruitful direction for future research in this area may be to concentrate on the relationship between news reporting and the development and progression of policy agendas. Casswell (1997), Baillie (1996) and others have suggested news reporting is likely to impact on policy, while Yanovitsky and Stryker (2001) have developed a methodology which suggested that, in the United States, a correlation can be identified between the two. While this project has noted the extent to public health perspectives frame news coverage of alcohol, it has also found that health concerns remain marginal among young drinkers. Research on the relationship between news reporting and policy developments would allow for an evaluation of how effective attempts to reframe news reporting have been in shaping those policy frameworks which can indirectly influence public perceptions and which can also have, through legislation, a direct impact on behaviours.

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