

Binge drinking: is it worse than we think?

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Research context

- Excessive alcohol consumption amongst young people becomes one of the most pressing social problems throughout the developed world.
- 40.1% of all American college students reported binge drinking (Johnston et al., 2006)
- As many as '2 in 5 Canadians aged between 18 and 19' report binge drinking, an estimate that can be deemed conservative based on recent research that suggests people underestimate and under report the amount of alcohol consumed (e.g. Health Canada, 2008)
- Poland experienced the greatest increase in alcohol consumption amongst adolescents in Europe (Supranowicz et al., 2006), increased incidence of females who binge drink (Mazur et al., 2003).
- The proportion of college students binge drinking remains largely unchanged (Wechsler et al., 2000) despite considerable efforts to reduce this behaviour.



Literature review

- > Binge drinking: ‘the rapid consumption of large quantities of alcohol, especially by young people’ (Pratten 2007) / consuming five or more drinks in one sitting in a two-week period for males (four or more drinks for females) (Wechsler *et al.* 1994) / the equivalent of consuming five or more standard drinks on any one day for males and females (see Commonwealth of Australia, 2008).
- > We propose these are rather broad definitions that do not offer a rich understanding of the binge drinking phenomenon; attitudes towards drinking alcohol differs (Kropp *et al.* 2004)



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Literature review

- > Review of the existing literature on binge drinking suggests the emphasis to date has centred on understanding the **individual, organisational, economic and political factors** that lead to increases or decreases in binge drinking (Dowdall and Wechsler, 2002; Wechsler and Nelson, 2008).
- > **Individual factors** that have been widely studied and reported in the literature include demographic (Presley *et al.*, 1996; O’Malley and Johnston, 2002) culture (Menagi *et al.*, 2008), psychographic (Camatta and Nagoshi, 1995), related behaviors (Kushner and Sher, 1993), and involvement in other activities (Weschler *et al.*, 2002; Weitzman and Kawachi, 2000).
- > For example, previous research shows that **demographic variables** such as age below 21 (Schulenberg *et al.*, 2001), male gender (Presley *et al.*, 1996), initial years in the university (Schulenberg *et al.*, 2001), white race (O’Malley and Johnston, 2002), residence on campus (Weschler *et al.*, 2002), fraternity membership (Alva, 1998; Meilman *et al.*, 1999) and lower academic performance (Weschler *et al.*, 2000) have all been associated with higher levels of binge drinking.



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Research method

- Aim in the present study is to further explore a phenomenon of binge drinking. By taking a grounded approach it is possible that we may be able to provide a richer, more detailed insight into the binge drinking phenomenon.
- Seven single-sex focus groups involving 36 participants were conducted, including:
 - two repeated focus groups in Poland, one consisting of 4 males and one of 6 females,
 - three focus groups in Canada consisting of 8 males, 11 females and 7 females.
- Respondents: college students; 20 – 24 years old.



Findings: three types of binge drinking

Initiation	Indulgence	Moderation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning about alcohol • Sporadic consumption • Reliance on others to obtain alcohol • Experimental • Shared experience • Badge of honour • Rite of passage • Forbidden fruit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent and heavy consumption • About social identity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Social enabler - Drinking to get drunk - Drinking in large group settings - Badge of honour • “18 years old” syndrome: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Expression of independence - Pleasure seeking - Instant gratification - Careless 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent consumption, but lighter than before • Not always consumed with others • Drinking in smaller social settings • Drink for taste and enjoyment of alcohol • About self-identity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No need to conform • “Can’t take it anymore” • No intention to get drunk



Findings: initiation

- **Learning about alcohol**, characterised by various degrees of parental control and supervision; early experiences were mostly driven by curiosity:

I think it was just me and my friend walking down the street just trying to figure out what drinking was like and it got me sick.

- Binge drinking for initiations was characterised by its **experimental nature**.

I did the classic steal everything from your parents and mix it into one bottle with orange juice.

- One of the key elements of that experimentation was its social character; respondents felt that it was a **shared experience**.

- Perception alcohol among respondents as a **forbidden fruit** / alcohol consumption was a form of rebellion against parents and norms:

We used to drink alcohol because it was forbidden, before we were 18, access to alcohol was restricted, it was hard to get, so when we finally got it, you know (...) forbidden fruit tastes best (...) we started drinking as much as we could.



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Findings: indulgence

- Indulgence is characterised by a sharp increase in **frequency and amount** of alcohol consumed, which often coincided with the first year university.

- **Social identity** - the need to be associated with students as a social group, and a shared understanding of its meaning, appeared to be the prime motivators for consumption.

Alcohol brings people closer together. For example, when we go out for a pint, we do it together. There is a bond between us.

- Alcohol consumption as a **social enabler** – allowed dancing, feeling more attractive; few respondents admitted their progressed to **drinking just to get drunk**:

Ah! Definitely more relaxed and loosened up. I'm not one really to go on the dance floor if I haven't had at least a couple of drinks in my system and ah! Everyone is dancing, partying. I think it really livens' you up.

- Alcohol consumption of respondents with **'18-years-old' syndrome** can be described as a **pleasure seeking behaviour** focused on **instant gratification**

- Indulgent binge drinkers give little or no thought to consequences; for these people drinking is hedonistic, escapist and **careless behaviour**.



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Findings: moderation

- Alcohol is **not always consumed with others**; it became an individual as well as a social experience, frequently focused on individual style and taste:

I don't know but ah yeah this year I haven't hardly gone out at all yet anyways so I think it's the same thing where it kinda peak and it's going down a little bit but I still like to go out every now and then.

- **Drinking in smaller social settings**, often accompanied by a meal, started to be a desirable form of consumption, and our respondents referred to relaxation, conversation and better social interaction as its main benefits.

- Alcohol is less an element of social identity, but rather one of respondents' **expression of self-concept**, who they are as individuals.

I think it's just a feeling now not all my friends are doing it thing. It is just when I feel like a drink or like to party and that's my call. Now I am not so influenced by the crowd.

- One of the key factors distinguishing Indulgence from Moderation was respondents' satisfied curiosity and that's why some declared that they **cannot take it anymore**.

There's no point anymore. It's just like I've been there, I've done that, check off the list and let's move on with life.



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Conclusions

- Binge drinking by college students is far more complex and multifaceted than its previous conceptualisations.
- Three distinctive types of binge drinking emerged: Initiation, Indulgence and Moderation.
- Future research is required to delve into how and why young people transition between these phases.
- Longitudinal studies are recommended to determine the pattern of changes in consumption and its causes after leaving university.
- Identification of factors causing people to move from Indulgent binge drinking to Moderation would be a major step towards understanding how binge drinking may be reduced.
- The consumers at different stages of their binge drinking may require different approach from policy makers, health professionals and organizations aiming to minimize binge drinking.



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