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### Drinking With and Without Fun

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# **Drinking with and without fun: Female students' accounts of pre-drinking and club-drinking**

Angus Bancroft

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## **Abstract**

Pre-drinking, also known as pre-partying, pre-gaming, and front- or pre-loading, is the intensive pair or group consumption of alcohol in a private home prior to going out for the night, with the intention of ensuring maximum levels of intoxication. It has emerged as a distinct component of heavy drinking practice among young adults approximately between the ages of 18-25. This paper examines reflective accounts of female students' pre-drinking and club-drinking. It explores the experience of pre-drinking in the context of the overall drinking sequence undertaken throughout the evening in and the night out. It finds that pre-drinking has a specific purpose for young women in managing risk, as well as ensuring a shared level of intoxication in preparation for entry into public drinking spaces. Their accounts illustrate the performative nature of intoxication. Pre-drinking is highly directed, bounded, and ritualised. It was frequently, though not always, recounted as lacking in pleasure for these reasons. It was associated with preparation for entry to a particular kind of superpub or nightclub especially, where the emphasis was on further rapid alcohol consumption. Accounts of continued drinking in the nightclubs were dualistic, emphasising pleasure and disgust, along with risk and vulnerability. Risk was experienced as individualised, and the women had shared responsibility for guarding against risk from unsafe others in the nightclub environment. This coding of risk is supported by public health messages targeted at women drinkers and by the more general societal and drinks industry promoted representation of alcohol consumption as normal and abstinence as deviant, which students were critical of. One attraction of pre-drinking for female students was as a way of protecting and supporting female agency in conditions of generalised, individualised vulnerability.

## **Introduction**

Pre-drinking, also termed pre-loading, front-loading, pre-partying or pre-gaming, has been recognised as a distinct practice in

drinking culture and a component of determined drunkenness (Wells, Graham & Purcell, 2009; Measham, 2006). It consists of ritualised, directed, intensive drinking in a pair or group preparatory to a night out. It is a popularly discussed characteristic of North American and British youth drinking cultures in particular. The practice is especially associated with drinking among further and higher education students (Pedersen & LaBrie, 2007). The pre-drinking phase is typically scheduled some hours or days in advance. It usually takes place at the home of one participant, and alcohol is laid on or brought for the occasion. It often makes use of ritualised games and other forms of competitive or force-paced drinking. Explanations based on drinkers' own accounts focus on the economic benefits of pre-drinking with cheaper alcohol than can be purchased in licensed premises and its functions in reducing anxiety prior to going out, creating group cohesion, and providing a more relaxed space to begin drinking in (Read et al., 2010). Concerns have been raised about the contribution of pre-drinking to dangerous levels of alcohol consumption (Zamboanga et al., 2009) and the long term effects on students' health, wellbeing and academic performance (Jennison, 2004). Research has noted specific concerns about heavy drinking among young women as increasing the risk of assault (Gross & Billingham, 1998), sexually transmitted infection and unwanted pregnancy.

There is a growing interest in female peer drinking rituals and peer socialisation to which this paper contributes. Research has examined drinking as bound up with socialising and friendship or relationship formation (Sheehan & Ridge, 2001), as a way of practicing and demonstrating femininity (Lyons & Willott, 2008), and as demonstrative of equality while also embodying continued class and gender distinctions which women have to manage (Rúðólfssdóttir & Morgan, 2009). Women's drinking is seen as more of a problem than that of men, with women threatened by the consequences of losing control due to excessive alcohol consumption in ways that men are not (Griffin et al., 2009). However some research notes that being female appears to have a protective effect on how alcohol and other potentially negative peer influences affect students' academic performance and other indicators, when compared to men (Kremer & Levy, 2008).

The aim of this paper is to understand pre-drinking in female peer groups with reference to the carefully constructed and managed sequence of the whole night's drinking session, beginning in the home, continuing through pubs and nightclubs, and occasionally ending at an after-party. The paper uses the accounts of female students at the University of Edinburgh to examine the structuring and gendering of pre-drinking in the context of drinking later in

the night at superpubs, club-pubs, and nightclubs,<sup>i</sup> mainly the latter. Students' accounts paid close attention to the texturing and context of pre-drinking, which was named and recognised as a component of a successful night out. Students' accounts of their experience of pre-drinking recognised its obligatory character and their reflections placed less emphasis than expected on the pleasurable nature of this form of intoxication. Pleasure was present but could be undermined by the obligatory, sometimes forced, character of the pre-drinking ritual. In that context, pre-drinking was seen more in terms of preparation for pleasure than pleasure itself. It could however also serve a more protective purpose for young women, as the group bonds created in the pre-drinking phase can help to structure interaction through the rest of the night, and manage the risks and vulnerabilities of public drinking for women. Drinking, like other leisure activities, is presented in British society as time- and space-out from everyday cares and demands. However it is inflected with gender and class understandings of risk, responsibility and normalised femininity (Hollands, 2002; Seabrook & Green, 2004).

## Methods

Data for this paper was collected from class accounts by students taking my honours course in drugs and society. Students were asked to do a range of activities outside the classroom, including:

- Find an example of a 'drug' use ritual, and describe what it does. This may be a one-off rite of passage, or a recurrent event.
- Observe and record, or write down your recollections of, intoxicant use in one of the following situations; a party, pub, nightclub, coffee house, or similar intoxication space.

These 'homework tasks' formed the basis of class discussions and part of the assessment. Students submitted their accounts in the form of online blogs that the course organiser commented on. Observations were mainly made around Scotland but students also reported from England, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Wales, Thailand, the USA, Canada, Germany, Bulgaria, Denmark, the Netherlands and other European countries. Analysis was iterative and confirmatory, using class discussions to summarise and reflect on the sociological significance of student accounts. A teaching fellow took extensive notes during discussions. A summary of the discussion was posted on the course wiki each week for students to review and comment on further.

Students were told at the start of the class that principles of confidentiality and anonymity would apply to all contributions.

Eight female students were approached individually for permission for their words to be used in this paper. All agreed. All were approached after marks had been confirmed by the external examiner, to ensure that there was no likelihood they might feel that they would be disadvantaged from asking not to be included in the study, and so that there was no longer a direct teacher-student relationship with the author. Ethical approval has been granted under the University of Edinburgh School of Social and Political Science Research Ethics procedures. Names are pseudonyms.

Female students formed a majority of the class (70%). Reflecting the intake of the University of Edinburgh College of Humanities and Social Sciences, most students were white, with black, Asian and South East Asian students making up around 5-10% of the class each year. Most students had attended state schools, however there was a higher proportion of students from independent schools than in the general population, reflecting Edinburgh's status as a relatively elite university. Around three-quarters of the class were taking Sociology as all or part of their main degree. Accounts reflected how normative alcohol consumption is among students conforming to this social-demographic profile (Wicki et al., 2010). There were no students who were teetotal for religious reasons, but some went through periods of abstinence for health reasons or due to concern about alcoholism. Intoxicant consumption among students more generally varies by age and subject of study (Engs & Van Teijlingen, 1997). Younger students and those studying natural sciences consume more alcohol. Arts, humanities and social science students are more likely to use cannabis than others (Webb et al., 1997). Similarly to these studies, female students in this group consumed less alcohol, but as frequently, as their male counterparts. There is a tendency among students to overestimate the extent and frequency of drinking among their peers (Borsari & Carey, 2001) and that may also have been a factor in these accounts.

This paper focuses on pre-drinking at home and drinking in the club environment as these emerged during class discussions as interlinked. They became a focus of student journals and class discussion in 2011, reflecting both the spreading practice and greater cultural recognition of pre-drinking as a distinct form of drinking. The eight students whose accounts are quoted from here are all female and were selected because their accounts focused on pre-drinking in the context of the whole 'drinking occasion'. Some male students accounts were examined for comparative analysis but are not quoted from directly in this paper. Most male students' accounts of drinking concerned more public drinking, though one wrote about pre-drinking in the context of a sporting event. Pre-drinking was a particularly live issue in women's accounts of their drinking

behaviour and was presented as a key part of a night out, so this paper was written to explore the significance of pre-drinking in the context of women's drinking and peer culture.

### **Boundaries, transformations and transgressions**

Networks, boundaries, and transformative experiences were key themes running through the women's accounts of pre-drinking. Drinking was understood by them as a relationship focused, group activity. Their accounts showed a blend of both trust and vulnerability, an awareness of potential risks and threats attached to public drinking, and the strategies put in place to deal with or respond to them. There was also a sense that these situations and judgements were different for men.

In the context of alcohol consumption, there was an assumption that key archetypes would be involved or would emerge during the night, such as the bossy organisers of the pre-drinking session, the supreme drinker who could hold their drink, and the vulnerable alcohol casualty. Students also knew that there would be 'things you can get away with'. This could be behaviour they would not normally engage in but found that alcohol gave them permission to involve themselves in. In Luik's words, there was 'permission for pleasure' (Luik, 1999), and also for transgression (Room, 1976). Many female students found that alcohol could be used as a handy object of 'blame' or excuse for behaviour that was regretted in the cold light of sobriety (Room, 2001). Male students in contrast did not need to use intoxication as a cover in this way, but could expect higher peer status from displays of drunken abandon. In either case, their accounts were characterised by descriptions of behaviour they would not accept or practice in conditions of sobriety, but for which there were considered explanations and rationales that would locate drinking practices in their relevant context. The difference between male and female accounts seemed to be that female accounts *had* to be structured in this way, as context specific, in a way that was not demanded of men.

Unsurprisingly, students were aware of and commented on the importance of alcohol in student life whether they were or were not drinkers. Fresher's week, the induction week for new students, involved extensive organised drinking, as in this account:

After a week of heavy partying and drinking we pass the initiation and undergo a transformation from fresh-faced, naive teenagers to dishevelled, complacent students. After a week in, I start to come to grips with my new student life. Drinking every other night of the week is a normal occurrence, chants such as 'down

it fresher' are familiar and understood. I discover my standard drink of choice is cider and blackcurrant which I confidently order as a 'cider black'. New reputations and identities are built: a boy is honoured with the title 'lad' for downing a bottle of wine in 10 seconds without throwing up; the girl from down the corridor is the 'girl who can't control her drink' after passing out in a club. ('Anya')

As Anya shows, roles and identities were constructed in these rites of passage. This kind of transition to university was common for traditional background students (those who enter higher education directly from school). It was facilitated and also problematised by the use of alcohol, as success or failure at drinking labelled students in one way or another.

### **The pre-drinking phase**

Pre-drinking was directed towards attaining a calibrated level of intoxication and group formation, as much as the experience of intoxication itself. To do this, the space needed to be familiar, and the drinker surrounded by friends and not by 'strangers off the street', in the words of one. The social space around the drinker is known, the other participants are known, and any 'unknowns' would only come into play later in the evening. Pre-drinking was in part a preparation for some of those known unknowns.

Students' accounts recognised the ritualistic character of much of their drinking practices, in the sense of being socialised practices for personal experience that activated intoxication. Pre-drinking was notable for lending itself to description as a ritual due to its bounded, rhythmic qualities, including compulsory re-fills and lining up shots of spirits. Its parameters were set by the internal logic of the ritual and the boundaries of the time allowed for it, as well as the subjective desire for and experience of intoxication. The ritualised quality is something pre-drinking has in common with many other forms of intoxication (Grund et al., 1991; Grund, 1993). Intoxication was activated and calibrated through the ritual. Rituals here were not limited to the alcohol consumption as such. The way in which students got ready on a Friday evening before going out, or the food they drunkenly consumed on the way home, was as much part of the ritual as the alcohol. The preparation, the anticipation, and the aftermath were just as ritualized and important as the drinking.

Students were often already able to 'name' pre-drinking as a recognised practice, while some came to define it in those terms

during class discussions. Lily gave an account of a well-defined, spatially structured event:

Once a week, my friends and I will partake in a drinking session as a precursor to a night of clubbing, a practice we refer to as 'pre-drinking'. After a day of building excitement in social interactions with other participating members, a meeting time and setting is selected, in the form of a participant's flat. This particular setting can vary week-to-week, but is always chosen based on which flats meet the criteria of having a large social space within which the ritual can take place, which it does in a roughly circular formation ('Lily').

Accounts emphasised the planned aspect of the pre-drinking event, which could be prepared for many days in advance.

Pre-drinking was distinct from merely consuming alcohol prior to going out for the night. It consisted of determined, directed drinking among a friendship group, often structured around drinking games, before leaving for a nightclub or a pub-club. Pre-drinking could be combined with illicit drug use, though the two tended to be separate in their accounts. Its explicit aim is to ensure the group arrives at the club in an equilibrium state of intoxication, drunk but not too drunk. Pre-drinking builds group cohesion, which may be threatened in the environment of the nightclub. Accounts were given of pre-drinking in all-female and mixed groups, however the group cohesion had particular benefits for all-female groups that are explored later.

Lily above described bonding through shared drinking practices, banter and humour. Peralla describes the role of pre-drinking in generating a transformation of the self, using body and presentation management to generate confidence for the night ahead:

Sitting in a circle around my friend's bedroom I can hear the music in the background getting drowned out as the night goes on as our chatting gets louder and louder. This I assume is the alcohol taking effect. Earlier on today I made sure I had bought drink for our pre-drinking session before heading into town. I always buy wine as there are always deals on and I can choose the desired alcohol percentage and therefore I am choosing how drunk I want to be when we are heading out to the club. After that I top up my tan, which I have previously built up for a few days before and then apply my make-up. This makes me feel more confident when I am out and makes me fit in with the other



clubbers. The location of where we are going to drink will have been decided during the week and is usually a friend's living room or bedroom ('Peralla').

Like Peralla, several students would dress-up before meeting for pre-drinking, sometimes using Skype and social networks to coordinate their outfits and arrange timing. In other cases pre-drinking was combined with personal grooming, applying makeup and fake tan and other preparatory activities for the night. In either case pre-drinking was seen as distinct from merely having a drink while getting ready. Students described how pre-drinking was an occasion when a dissolution of hierarchy allowed them to 'be themselves', free from the judgements normally applied to young women in public places, the corollary of the 'alcohol as excuse' trope drawn on elsewhere in their accounts.

A night out was planned for last Saturday around 5 days in advance. In these 5 days, small but important tasks are completed to ensure that on Saturday I am as organised as possible. These tasks could be as simple as ensuring I have something to wear, or that I have enough fake tan but these completed activities are key to my preparation, making sure the night runs smoothly. The pre-drinking ritual is a commonplace for me and my friends and I couldn't imagine a night running smoothly if these rituals weren't in place ('Leanne').

This framing implied a conflict between everyday social norms and the self, and between the pre-drinking intoxication and that of later stages of the night. The 'being yourself' element draws on norms of authenticity which are part of culturally validated discourses around drinking in British society and that is more generally societally valued as a legitimate personal goal (Turner, 1976).

Like other forms of group drinking in Anglo-Saxon cultures (Paton-Simpson, 2001), pre-drinking took on an obligatory character and was often enforced, sometimes by tactics described by students as 'bullying', with slow drinkers being chastised:

It's Monday night we are going clubbing and as usual the first stop will be the 'pre-drinks' that has been arranged for that evening which is a recurrent ritual event for students such as myself. As the door to the flat opens the sound of alcohol fuelled conversation, loud invasive music and the strong smell of the spirits and beer, which will not doubt be consumed with great speed and little care over the course of the evening, hits me ... The pressures to consume alcohol at

gatherings such as this are extreme, with phrases such as 'go hard or go home' being regularly used to pressure you into consuming more as the evening continues ('Vefa').

It was more common that 'bullying' took the form of self-forcing according to the rhythm of pre-drinking, with students engaging in a process of peer imitation to attain normative levels of intoxication, rather than unwilling subjection to peer pressure (Borsari & Carey, 2001).

For many, pre-drinking was concerned with generating a 'buzz', though the buzz did not always mean a pleasurable sense of intoxication. There was a absence of pleasure noted in some accounts, attributed to the regimented form of the occasion, requiring rapid drinking, and amounting to a 'training event' under the oversight of one of the group members. Some students noted a comparable process in a different setting, the more 'tasteful' form of wine drinking in a restaurant. This required acquiescence in the performance of taste appreciation and 'good' alcohol consumption that could be experienced as pleasurable and contemplative, or as artificial and alienating.

As we get in the taxi, armed with copious amounts of alcohol, we all understand the nature of the evening and that the alcohol we are taking is not necessarily to be enjoyed but is to serve a very specific purpose ... The idea of a social environment such as this gives the illusion of a relaxed drinking session when in actual fact there are very strict deadlines to which we must all stick, showing us the extent to which rituals such as this shape our drinking habits and control the way in which we drink. The arrival time, the time spent there and the time of departure, often dictated by the club that you are going to and the likeliness of getting in at a certain time, all show just how structured an evening like this really is. As the amount of alcohol that had been designated for that evening is consumed the empty glasses and lull in tones acts as the signal for our departure and the beginning of the next stage of the evening ('Vefa').

Students recognised pre-drinking not as undifferentiated drunkenness but as a distinct form of intoxication, and they could compare it unfavourably to more pleasurable kinds of intoxication pertaining in the club environment. There is a paradox here. Pre-drinking takes place in an individual's home, and is valued for allowing easier interactions than possible in a nightclub.

Nightclubs were often described as more challenging environments for young women. It might be expected for that reason that intoxication taking place in a more familiar environment when surrounded by friends would be more pleasurable, as referenced in many other studies of the motivations for pre-drinking, but many of these accounts suggest or explicitly state the opposite.

Connie used her account to reflect on the way in which the pleasurable abandon of alcohol intoxication and the hoped for dissolution of hierarchy was rendered null by the forced pace involved and the need to defer to someone in charge:

One of the girls takes charge, ensuring that no one has escaped without a drink and makes it clear that there is precisely one hour before taxis will arrive while mixers are passed around. Small talk ensues as each person eyes the others pace of drinking, and so the struggle to keep up begins. As time slips by the rushed atmosphere becomes more intense and shot glasses are forced on a selected few with complete disregard given to protest. A quick breath, swig and contorted faces and gasping follows as each person obliges. A quick flurry of make-up touch ups and final shots begin as it is announced that the taxis will be arriving. The person in charge chases after each girl ushering everyone out the door, pulling the plug on the blaring music while giggles of 'Shhhhh' can be heard echoing down the stairwell and the clattering of heels fade into the waiting taxis. I realise the extent to which the ritual of pre-drinking has become so normalised and is yet so un-enjoyable. A time that should be for fun seems to turn into a training exercise of sorts and is entirely time defined. ('Connie')

Connie's account goes on to dissect the lack of pleasure in pre-drinking, and emphasises how the form of the pre-drinking phase can work against its purpose of group bonding. This can be couched in contrast to a common drinking equation, 'the more drinking the more fun' (Room, 2000) and the alcohol industry's attempts to present drinking in terms of fun (Smith, Atkin & Roznowski, 2006). Fun clearly did not figure as a priority in the ready reckoning of the pre-drinkers represented by Connie and others. The most intensive phase of drinking was for them the least fun. Their accounts indicate a distinction in practice between 'fun/pleasure' and a 'desire for intoxication' (Duff, 2008).

Pre-drinking can be preparatory, demanding intoxication, and club drinking can be transgressive, a kind of intoxication which invokes

a degree of subjective pleasure not associated with pre-drinking. It was highly bounded by club opening times and calculations that had to be made of the last possible time when entry to the club can be attempted while avoiding large queues. In Connie's and other accounts the pre-drinking session was frequently punctuated by discussions and arguments about the optimum time to leave for the club. One person would appoint herself as an overseer to resolve arguments and get everyone out of the door, with the implicit agreement of the group.

Like any other drinking practice, pre-drinking can be performed well or less well. Intoxication is in part a skilled social performance, and performing alcohol fuelled intoxication well leads to higher status among the drinker's peers. A fine balance must be maintained. An individual who gives the appearance of loud, lairy drunkenness at pre-drinking, or who 'sets the pace' in terms of intensity of consumption can be recognised by their peers as the group's supreme and most successful drinker. However they must also maintain an appearance of self-control in order to gain and maintain entry to the nightclub. The door staff ('bouncers') may refuse entry to individuals who appear to be uncontrollably drunk, and in that case the individual must leave the group and return home. Being seen to pull this balancing act off by simulating sobriety for the bouncer will confirm the individual's high status.

### **Transition and transformation in the nightclub**

Pre-drinking in students' accounts presaged entry to a particular kind of nightclub. This was a type of club where customers were also consuming large amounts of alcohol rather than one where illicit drug use was more common, where heterosexual encounters were to be expected, and where there men and women tended to arrive separately and initially cluster in single-gender groups or pairs, as opposed to arriving or gathering in mixed-sex groups. The club environment was constructed around these expectations. Alcohol was available in shots, to encourage rapid consumption, and happy hours or other discount offers were common. In these clubs interaction was regulated by alcohol. Students reported that it appeared 'weird' if there was a sober member of the group. Door policy was to encourage the entry of women into the club.

The club environment had a particular, sometimes challenging effect on the hoped for transformation of self that women sought to generate in the pre-drinking phase:

The pounding of the bass sends vibrations throughout my body as I get closer to the doors from the cloakroom to the dancefloor. Thank god for the pre-drinking, my

mind buzzes with excitement as I anticipate the possibilities of the night that alcohol has opened up. When I walk through those doors, reality will unfold. The excitement builds, I can feel it in my heart beating rhythmically with the music. Music, heat from the mass of dancing, moving bodies, neon-flashing lights all blast my senses as the doors open. Groups of people go by dressed as golfers, some boasting learner badges, others with faces painted with slogans. Amongst the carnival of people, on one side of the dance-floor lies a bouncy castle, on the other a blow-up paddling pool. Men crowd the pool as women line up in their dresses to jump in and dance provocatively in the water to their male audience. I've entered the funhouse. The adult fun-house ('Tanya').

Accounts written about the mainstream nightclubs were less group focused and emphasised individual sensory experience, personal judgements that had to be made of oneself and others' safety, and transformation. These transformations however were made difficult by the gendered context as women were suddenly on display for men. Tanya's account gives a sense of transformation as a transition from childhood to adulthood, that then appeared as a 'front' for sexual objectification.

The first experience of nightclub entry is often one of surveillance. The more commodified sector of the British night-time economy has to a large extent replaced informal social controls characteristic of both more traditional pubs and underground rave scenes with more formalised surveillance systems (Hollands & Chatterton, 2003). Reflecting that, formal surveillance was a factor in students' accounts. There was a combination of at-door and in-venue surveillance of students' levels of intoxication, which was in the main applied to male students.

Students rarely commented on automatic or remote surveillance but instead saw surveillance in terms of the ever-watchful bouncers. Bouncers became central to the experience by doing two very specific yet different things. They created a sense of safety and at the same time a sense of being under control. The bouncers were perceived to act as facilitators, enablers or barriers to the experience of intoxication, for example by allowing or denying students' access to the nightclub. The gender of the person attending the club became important here. Students noted that a large group of mixed sex friends could find the female friends allowed into the club with no questions, where the men were held back by the bouncer for appearing 'too drunk'. They reflected that this was not due to differences in apparent levels of intoxication, but to the gendered drunken

comportment expected of men as being aggressive, disruptive, and potentially violent. Male students also tended to be more closely scrutinised for evidence of illicit drug use, such as heavily dilated pupils, or have their drunken comportment challenged at the door.

When in the club, the pre-drinking friendship group would often break into smaller groups, by necessity or preference. For example, some may prefer to dance and others to talk or drink more. Pre-drinking was characterised as more 'socialised' pre-drinking in contrast with the more individualised or paired drinking of the club. In the club, drinking no longer had the purposive and self-contained nature characterised by at-home pre-drinking.

There was a contrast with the kinds of interaction described in accounts written by students attending clubs that were implicitly built around illicit drug use. These clubs were often gay or mixed sexuality, they emphasised surrealism or trance styles of décor. There was low consumption of alcohol, loquacious and talkative interaction, and a more diffuse eroticism. Interactions with strangers were less fraught in these accounts, especially for women (Henderson, 1993). Conversations could begin in the queue for entry and continue throughout the night. Similarly, certain types of music will be associated with or signal certain types of intoxicant use. A mainstream pop music club might feature alcohol consumption most significantly, while a reggae club might more commonly feature the expected use of psychedelic drugs and cannabis. The clubs described in this paper were mostly of the former kind.

Heading to the club the group has already been dispersed into taxis taking with us a bottle of left over drink. Making my way towards the stern looking bouncers I try to act more sober to make sure I am allowed into the club. Steadily getting my ID out of my purse the bouncer has a double glance at me and then allows me in. I can already here the bass of the music as I enter the dimmed light club. The feeling of excitement overwhelms me while my confidence increases as I am surrounded by all my friends. I already am feeling the effects of the alcohol but that doesn't stop me from taking shots and drinking more. Hurrying to finish my drink I then make my way to the dance floor. Usually standing in a circle my friends and I proceed to dance hard and feel and hear every beat that is pumping through the speakers. However as the night goes on I just seem to dance without noticing the music. It's like I get lost within myself but I am still aware of my surroundings ('Peralla').

Accounts described intoxication as a sensory, embodied experience. They emphasised the heat, light, and sounds of parties, flats, clubs, pubs, and cafes. In the case of the accounts drawn on for this paper there was a link between a determined drinking, 'wild abandon' and intense sensory stimulation. The sensory environment was not always comfortable. Punishing noise, intense heat, sweat, and unpleasant body odour were recounted as prevalent features of many of the clubs. Intoxication was often dualistic, both exhilarating and repulsing.

### **Duality and dancing with disgust**

Students found that the physical structure of the nightclub space was dualistic. On one hand it was pleasurable and full of meaning, and on the other it appeared horrible and meaningless. Music could be either melodic or simply 'a noise'. There was at times some disgust with the environment and self-disgust in students' accounts. One student gave an account of an instance in which an unknown male touched her sexually. She accepted this instance of harassment as inevitable and her friend told her 'not to worry about it'. There was a double-excuse at work, the behaviour having apparent permission from the setting, and also being made excuses for. Another student also describes relying on alcohol as an excuse for her own out-of-form behaviour. Accounts showed a form of complicity that links into wider issues of the gendering of social space (Leyshon, 2008). This particular club was known for being a place where alcohol was consumed rapidly, in loud, crowded environment, and where unwanted and unpleasant sexual advances from men were normal, expected and excused.

Drinking in the clubs was therefore combined with vulnerability, and students were concerned with risks to themselves and others. Notably from students' accounts this risk was more perceived as coming from a generalised, threatening other than actual males encountered. The latter were mostly dismissed as 'only to be expected'. More than one student was concerned that her drink may have been spiked (adulterated) while in a nightclub. The expectation that drinks will be spiked by predatory or vindictive strangers de-socialises and de-genders risk, which becomes another environmental threat that women have to deal with by themselves (Moore & Valverde, 2000).

Students' accounts of potential vulnerability to sexual assault from males fitted with the prevailing culture discourse around women, alcohol and rape. Young women are routinely warned about the risks of date rape drugs and drink spiking, and are told to watch out for themselves and others, and never to leave a club, pub or

party with someone they have just met. What might be coded as the operation of male power and the production of female vulnerability and culpability for sexual assault becomes a more generalised environmental risk exposure, and is accepted as something as a young woman's duty to manage by dint of taking place in an intoxication focused environment. The risk to the women is twofold. There is a generalised sense of being vulnerable to unsafe others (Bancroft, 2009), and as they are drunk they do not conform to the cultural stereotype of the ideal female victim – young, white, and, crucially, inexperienced (Forsyth, 2001). If assaulted they are liable to be held at least partly responsible for failing to properly police the bounds of their own femininity.

The group cohesion built up during pre-drinking comes in useful here. Accounts of the nightclub show how groups can be split apart, pursue different interests, or suffer problems as one or more of the members is in need of help due to advanced drunkenness. Pre-drinking can be a way for young women to guard against vulnerability and protect themselves from threats in the nightclub. Young women going out in pairs would also arrange designated meeting spots throughout the night in the event of being separated. A common reason for young heterosexual women to become separated from friends was due to sexual entanglement with others. The practice of having prearranged meeting points recognised, expected and allowed for female sexual agency while also providing some limited reassurance of safety for those involved.

For the women quoted in this paper, drinking and dancing evoked confidence and a sense of self-value that was linked to a sense of being attractive and 'glam'. Being attractive did not necessarily mean being able to attract men or be valued in the eyes of men. The pre-drinking phase with all female groups was crucial in creating a feeling of being dressed up, 'hot' and glamorous that was not dependent on the approval of men. In the nightclub this sense of self-attractiveness was under threat however. In an environment where women were judged on appearance the personal value of self-allure was harder to maintain as a value in itself. The club provided an opportunity to perform femininity and also an environment where it might fail in ways that were difficult to recover.

Where the bonds formed in pre-drinking broke down, the result could be a disappointing night:

I went to look for my friends but discovered one had been bundled in to a taxi by a bouncer for being too drunk, another had gone with her to make sure she was safe and the other was livid having been searching for



me for 'about an hour'. Our 'impenetrable fortress of friendship' had been well and truly penetrated by a terrible night ('Mila').

In this instance, the positive mood, the confidence and sense of attractiveness, generated in the pre-drinking phase were destroyed by the unpredictable nightclub experience.

## **Structuring and commodification of drinking**

Students reflected on how drinking was socially structured and patterned. They noted a strong cultural and media message that not drinking is deviant, alongside a problematisation of young women's drinking and an individualisation of risk in public discourse and public health messages (Berridge, 2007). Students made the point that drinking had dual characteristics, as overt/covert, public/private, and social/individual, and these shaped their own understandings of risk and strategies used to manage and minimise it.

There were various internal and external structuring factors in students' accounts. Pre-drinking was structured by the ritual process, drinking in nightclubs and superpubs' high volume vertical drinking spaces (Manchester, Poppleston & Allen, 2008) through the Illusion of order. These rapid drinking spaces rely on and encourage high levels of alcohol consumption. They face a problem of maintaining order without many of the informal regulators of drinking and drunken comportment that exist in drinking spaces with a clientele who are familiar to one another, or where there is a core of 'regulars'. The managers must maintain both a semblance of order and a rapid throughput of bodies and beverages. This is done by techniques of target softening, such as using plastic glasses, formal admission criteria, surveillance at key points such as entry and possible sites of drug dealing and use. The nature of these drinking spaces means that informal management of drinking is left to groups and pairs of friends, with more experienced users frequently tending to those who have been sick due to excessive alcohol use.

A primary structuring factor that was supported by the pre-drinking setting, the pub and nightclub venues, and in British society more generally, was the presentation of alcohol consumption and drunkenness as normal (Hayward & Hobbs, 2007). The alcohol industry promotes several messages in its marketing, among them that alcohol is a normal, healthy part of social life, that alcohol is not a mind-altering drug, that alcohol problems are the responsibility of a small proportion of drinkers who cannot 'handle' their drink, and that those who do not drink are possibly unhealthy

and definitely weird (European Centre for Monitoring Alcohol Marketing, 2011). The industry has also made a concerted effort to capture women drinkers using advertising targeted at women, and by developing female friendly products and pubs (European Centre for Monitoring Alcohol Marketing, 2008). Some students recounted their experiences when going through a teetotal period. All noted that moving from a period of drinking to one of abstinence involved a distinct decline in their social activity and a challenge to some friendship relationships. Abstinence could be freeing, while also requiring a re-working of a previously existing identity as a social drinker.

Gendered public discourses of risk and alcohol structured students' accounts. Intoxicated misbehaviour by women in public is a common meme throughout the British media. One student noted that in the media there is what amounts to a risk calendar. On a Monday, it is common for students to read disdainful and prurient reports of binge-drinking females in UK city centres. These reports characterise young women under the influence of alcohol as physically at risk of attack, as having their femininity put at risk due to their drunken and dishevelled state, and as a risk of committing violence against others (Slack, 2008; Smith, 2011; MacRae, 2011). In this way women's drinking became constructed as a public problem (Best, 2008). Students contrasted this discourse negatively with the individualisation of male intoxicated violence, which was they perceived not to be coded as a public problem.

Public health education campaigns construct a 'pedagogy of regret' and embarrassment (Brown & Gregg, 2012). One 2008 advert funded by the Home Office showed a young woman preparing for a night out by laddering her tights, ripping her top, getting vomit in her hair, wand smearing mascara and lipstick over her face. The message the advert ended with was 'you wouldn't start the night looking like this, don't end it that way' (knowyourlimits2, 2008b). Here it was not the shocking 'drinking causes harm and death' but a more personal 'drink makes you unattractive and messed up'. The advert confirmed the gendered nature of risk. A paired advert showing a young man preparing for a night out by spilling curry over himself, ripping his earring off, hitting himself in the face with a door and destroying a television (knowyourlimits2, 2008a). There was a distinct difference in the agency represented in the two adverts, with the man represented as possessing a violent potentiality, and the woman as having her ability to display femininity threatened. Like the Gin Baby myth of 18<sup>th</sup> Century England, which held that lower class women were being rendered unable or unwilling to provide maternal care for their young by gin consumption, the focus on women's drinking is linked to the expectation that females should be

fecund, healthily reproductive and demure (Fielding, 1824). Female students were well aware of the gendering of risk and responsibility, and the de-socialising nature of neo-liberal risk discourse prevalent in British society. Some public health education efforts targeting young women's alcohol consumption came to be resented as engaging in 'slut-shaming' (Brooks, 2011).

Students noted some negative effects of drinking on themselves, almost entirely in terms of short term physical, emotional and reputational consequences such as hangovers and personal embarrassment. One described having had her drink spiked by an unknown male, and said that she had since then felt much more vulnerable when going out to nightclubs. Apart from that example, most of their accounts of more serious consequences of heavy drinking were concerned about other people's problems rather than their own, such as alcoholism among relatives, addictive patterns of illicit drug use, and prescription drug misuse. They defined themselves in contrast to those with drink and drug problems, and none saw heavy drinking as a consequence of pre-drinking or as necessarily a problem in itself for them (Guise & Gill, 2007).

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

Young female students in British drinking culture have to manage conflicting norms and expectations. There is the expectation that heavy drinking is a central component of a good night out, alongside the specific problematizing of women's drinking as generative of a set of risks which they are charged with managing (Seabrook and Green, 2004). Pre-drinking has become a central part of youth drinking and nightlife culture. In the accounts of these women, it took on a nuanced character as a satisfying ritual, a demanding obligation, and a way of suitably preparing for the night as both an individual and a group. The Scottish Government is well ahead in its plan to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol with the aim of reducing problematic consumption (Scottish Government, 2012). Doing so is expected to lessen the economic benefits of pre-drinking over on-trade drinking, however as this paper shows pre-drinking was valued strongly in other ways so will likely continue in some form. While pre-drinking fuelled high levels of alcohol consumption, it was also valued for its socialising and protective effects, especially the way in which it can nurture and sustain young women's agency in the context of vulnerability. While many of the practices of pre-drinking at first sight appear to involve nothing more than aiming for the maximum consumption in the shortest time, they had other functions such as the creating of group cohesion and the

attaining of appropriate levels of intoxication while in a safe, controlled environment.

All intoxicant use cultures, including alcohol cultures, both support and regulate consumption. They are often held accountable for fuelling excessive and dangerous intoxicant use, but they can also provide the kinds of informal supports and peer surveillance that support safer intoxication. Pre-drinking has become an established part of youth drinking cultures and a viable focus of public health education. However to be effective health education messages need to be structured in ways that understand and support the potentially protective and supportive nature of female peer drinking cultures and practices. A key finding of this paper was that pre-drinking could be experienced as pleasure-denying. Health education campaigns that were able to acknowledge the pleasurable aspects of intoxication could engage more fully with those aspects of pre-drinking that participants may find not to be pleasurable, while also disrupting the dominant discourse of the alcohol producing companies that drinking directly equates to 'fun'.

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<sup>i</sup> Superpubs are branded large chain pubs designed for rapid throughput of custom in a highly managed environment. Club-pubs combine the features of superpubs and nightclubs. They often have a DJ booth and a small dancefloor, combined with a large bar area, and other design features of nightclubs such as varied lighting between seating and dancefloor areas.