'Possibilities and pitfalls? Moderate drinking and alcohol abstinence at home since the COVID-19 lockdown'

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Abstract: The global 'lockdowns' and social distancing measures triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic have brought about unprecedented social changes, including the sudden, temporary closure of licensed venues and significant modifications to leisure and drinking practices. In this piece, we argue that these changes invite researchers to consider the short and longer-term consequences in terms of continuities and changes to the practices and symbolism of alcohol consumption both within and beyond domestic spaces. We do this by drawing on illustrations from our emergent qualitative research involving internet-mediated semi-structured and focus group interviews with 20 participants from the UK (aged 26-65) concerning experiences of drinking in and beyond 'lockdown'. In sharing these early findings, we hope to highlight themes relevant to understanding drinking behaviour during the COVID-19 pandemic and to stimulate dialogue for immediate research priorities in this area. Key topic areas in our data appear to concern; variability in heavy/moderate/light/non-drinking practices while drinking at home, lockdown as an opportunity to reassess relationships with alcohol, and the symbolic role of alcohol in internet-mediated communications and interactions. Longstanding policymaker and practitioner concerns with managing public drinking and public order may have been unsettled by a growth in home-based drinking, although, as we argue, such changes were in motion before the global pandemic. We propose that a greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities the pandemic presents for (re)negotiating relationships with alcohol may offer wider lessons around how individuals and communities might be supported via innovative policy measures to change their relationships with alcohol both during and beyond lockdown.

Keywords: abstinence, alcohol, COVID-19, home drinking, lockdown, moderation

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Introduction

The series of global 'lockdowns' and social distancing measures introduced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic have triggered renewed interest in drinking practices as populations continue to renegotiate their relationships with social and leisure pastimes. Whilst the severity of the outbreak and the ongoing government responses to the pandemic have varied globally, many countries have seen sudden socio-cultural changes which may have influenced alcohol consumption levels and practices, including the temporary closure of licensed venues and potential increases in home consumption. From a UK perspective, much of the focus concerns reports of high levels of domestic alcohol consumption during the stringent initial 'lockdown' era between April and May 2020 (Institute of Alcohol Studies, 2020) when sales of alcohol increased (Finlay and Gilmore, 2020). Globally, inter-disciplinary discussions led by sociologists, psychologists, and physicians have centred around harmful drinking during this period, including possible increases in solitary home drinking (The Lancet Gastroenterology & Hepatology, 2020) and risks of relapse for individuals 'in recovery' from historically difficult relationships with alcohol (Columb et al., 2020; Narasimha et al., 2020). The pandemic has also raised the profile of hitherto neglected phenomena including 'home drinking' and 'solitary drinking' in the alcohol field (Callinan and MacLean, 2020). Clearly, evidence of riskier and *heavier* drinking practices at home during and beyond lockdown – and the longer-term consequences of such changes - are an inevitable and vital area of concern for policymakers, practitioners and academics. Indeed, as Foster and Ferguson argue, those who drink mainly at home tend to consume higher amounts overall than those who do *less* of their drinking at home, which may lead to 'long-term public health consequences' (2012: 355). It is also important to acknowledge that the stress, insecurity and social isolation associated with

this period may be a risk factor for increased consumption and alcohol misuse, whilst traditional support mechanisms around alcohol reduction are likely to have become less accessible during lockdown. Finally, with early research emerging around the pandemic suggesting something of a 'polarisation' in drinking in contexts such as the UK - with heavy drinkers consuming more but lighter drinkers consuming less (Garnett et al., 2020) - it is important to develop a nuanced understanding of the ways in which patterns of consumption are changing and which groups may be particularly 'at risk' of alcohol harm during the pandemic.

As researchers concerned with questions around moderate/lighter drinking and lifestyle choices involving alcohol abstinence and sobriety, we are currently undertaking new primary research exploring the relationships between lockdown and drinking practices. This research was designed to explore evidence of potentially heavier consumption patterns but we also sought to identify and understand implications for lighter drinking choices and/or aspirations, where apparent. Following institutional ethical approval we undertook qualitative, in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and household focus groups with current UK adult drinkers. Between May and August 2020, we recruited a convenience sample via institutional email (staff and university students) and social media recruitment drives (wider community). A total of 20 UK-based participants were included, ranging in age from 26 to 65 from varied backgrounds and diverse occupations. Data collection methods included 12 internet-mediated interviews and 4 household focus groups (each with 2 participants) dependent on participant preference. An optional drinks diary was completed by ten individuals or household groups. A standard interview schedule was used for both interviews and focus groups which comprised of sections concerning socialising and alcohol consumption pre-pandemic and during the initial period of 'lockdown'. Formal analysis is currently underway, but we are in a position to reflect on emerging themes and trends arising from our data. Our ambition for

this commentary piece is to outline and illustrate these. In providing this 'early view' of the data, we hope to facilitate timely further dialogue, discussion and interest in wider research around 'lockdown drinking' to inform understanding of alcohol consumption practices at a time when the pandemic and its implications remain a very real experience across the globe.

Our data has underscored how the initial lockdown era may have presented both possibilities and challenges for individuals (and/or groups) interested in continuing or initiating abstinence from alcohol consumption during the immediate lockdown and beyond, as licensed venues re-open and lockdown is eased but with 'social distancing' measures in place. In this commentary piece we report three key features of our emergent data concerning the challenges and opportunities around drinking alcohol moderately at home; new norms around home-based drinking; lockdown as an opportunity to reassess and change relationships with alcohol; and the new or reframed symbolic roles of alcohol apparent since the pandemic, particularly in relation to internet-mediated communications. We also consider the implications of our emergent findings for a responsive research agenda to develop understanding of home-based drinking and how alcohol health promotion policy could constructively respond in the post-pandemic era. All participants are referred to using pseudonyms.

Implications of new norms around home-based drinking for achieving 'moderate drinking'

Whilst the closure of licensed venues may raise questions around a potential increase in drinking in domestic spaces, these issues must be considered against a wider backdrop in which changing drinking patterns and trends prior to the pandemic are acknowledged. Research on alcohol consumption before the pandemic indicates that that home drinking is *already* a normalised (albeit little recognised) part of many drinkers' consumption routines (Holloway et al., 2008). For example, Ally et al. (2016) produced a typology of British drinking practices

which included routine drinking at home (particularly present among older couples) and which acknowledged the occurrence of heavy episodic consumption across both licensed venues and domestic spaces. Although the phenomenon of home drinking remains relatively under-researched, we also know that in the UK by 2017 less than a third of alcohol sold was purchased in pubs, restaurants and bars (British Beer and Pub Association, 2018, cited by Drinkaware, 2019), whilst a survey of over 2000 Australians in 2016 found that only 12% of their reported consumption took place in pubs, bars and nightclubs (Callinan et al., 2016).

Turning to the findings emerging from our own data, we observed that whilst some participants were drinking *more* during lockdown and / or drinking heavily at home, others were engaging in what might be defined as light-moderate consumption patterns at home, and some had seen a decrease in their consumption levels. Many of our participants reported that their drinking practices had not really changed significantly during lockdown, as they were primarily home drinkers and had largely maintained these drinking habits during this period. For example, Tina and Kev, a married couple in their 50s, drank roughly 12 units each per week at home before lockdown, and reported that during lockdown they had maintained this level of home consumption but that their overall consumption levels had *decreased*, because they weren't drinking socially in bars and restaurants on top of their domestic consumption. They were continuing this pattern even as licensed venues started to re-open in the UK, and had not yet returned to drinking socially outside the home.

In addition, several of those who had mainly drank socially in pubs pre-lockdown reported that their consumption had decreased since the closure of licensed venues and that lockdown had not simply caused them to shift their consumption to domestic spaces. This included our youngest participants, Jess and Lucie, who were both in their mid-20s and suggested that they

were drinking less overall as they were no longer regularly going to bars and clubs. This was also the case for older participants such as Bob, (60s), who was primarily a light pub drinker. As someone who already kept a record of how many units he drank each month, Bob found that his consumption in April and May *combined* was only a third of the total amount he drank in January. Other participants, such as Lois (58), explicitly positioned alcohol consumption as something to be done outside of domestic space, or as something bound up with socialising outside of the home.

Lois – and others – also feared it could be more difficult to keep track of consumption at home. Home consumption necessarily takes place away from the environmental cues and social pressures provided by pub environments which often encourage higher-than-desirable consumption levels through a range of strategies from the promotion of offers and 'happy hours' to the architectural design of drinking spaces (Tutenges and Bøhling, 2019). However, we might speculate that licensed venues could be understood, in some respects at least, to *constrain* consumption levels via alcohol pricing, using standard measures or glass sizes and through possible refusal of service if an individual is deemed too intoxicated. Pub consumption is also necessarily time-limited and drinkers may undertake informal self-policing of consumption and drunkenness in ways that exert a protective influence over personal intake levels; for example, Campbell (2000) argues that in rural pub settings, men's ability to successfully maintain bodily discipline when drinking acts as a marker of hegemonic masculinity, whilst those displaying visible signs of intoxication risk mockery. Such gendered/normative constraints may be partly or entirely absent in domestic spaces.

The challenges and opportunities around moderate drinking when in the home environment were apparent elsewhere in our interviews. Kriss, 32, referred to pros and cons of lockdown from the perspective of moderate drinking. On the one hand, lockdown had meant that his typical Saturdays involving heavy drinking sessions with friends in the pub were out of the

equation. On the other hand, Kriss described home-based drinking occasions where he would drink more, earlier, and less predictably, than would have been conceivable pre-lockdown. Kriss referred to one 4-5 hour drinking window when he consumed eight cans of lager in his garden, starting late morning and 'topping up' his glass without really thinking about it. He suggested that when drinking in the pub he would be more concerned about not coming across as 'too drunk' in public, so he might consciously drink more slowly and spend more time mingling and chatting to other people rather than focusing solely on drinking.

The challenges of moderate drinking while at home, alone, were clearly apparent in this account and others. Home-based alcohol consumption during lockdown could also be experienced as a device for partitioning time periods or marking temporal 'transitions' (e.g., day to evening; week to weekend). This could be particularly important for those who had lost their usual routines and ways of structuring the week (for example as a result of working from home, because they had been furloughed or due to the loss of previous childcare and schooling structures). The use of alcohol in this way could pose a *challenge* to attempts to drink moderately and could result in participants drinking more than they intended, drinking more frequently or finding it more difficult to keep track of their consumption levels.

Overall, the shift to home-based drinking brought about by lockdown made it easier for some of our participants to limit or reduce their alcohol intake, yet also enabled new drinking practices or opportunities for others. For example, being at home made it easier to drink at times when alcohol would not normally be consumed and offered a space that lacked the 'policing' that might come from licensed venues, from others or from 'self-monitoring' in public.

Lockdown as a catalyst for alcohol reduction or a period of abstinence

For some participants, lockdown served as a catalyst or opportunity to re-evaluate their relationship with alcohol and make striking changes to their drinking practices. There was evidence of using lockdown as an opportunity to drink more lightly or abstain completely. Alison, 41, had until fairly recently been a regular social drinker and pub goer. During the lockdown period, she described an initial increase in her drinking, before remarking that this 'scared' her and triggered further reflection on her drinking and what 'kind of person' she wanted to be at the end of lockdown. Noting that she didn't want her drinking to keep increasing to the point where she emerged from lockdown as a heavier drinker, she embarked on a new diet and exercise regime and started a period of complete alcohol abstinence. Alison framed lockdown as an opportunity to break old habits around drinking and emerge from lockdown as 'a better version of me', echoing Yeomans' argument that stopping drinking can be framed as a process of self-development and 'ethical self-formation' (2019: 460). The removal of the usual social cues and settings for drinking – such as bars and clubs – may also help to provide an opportunity for reconfiguring one's relationship with alcohol. In this sense, the lockdown period might be conceptualised as a type of 'teachable moment' (Lawson and Flocke, 2009); a unique and specific context in which health-adherent behaviour can be practiced, mastered and possibly entrenched in ways that support longer-term change.

Recent studies on lockdown era drinking suggest that whilst the prevalence of high-risk drinking has increased in the UK during lockdown, high-risk drinkers are *more* likely to report trying to reduce their consumption during this period (Jackson et al., 2020). This was the case with participants Nigel and Joan, a couple in their mid-60s. They had been heavy drinkers before lockdown but found themselves drinking more in early lockdown and consuming alcohol on a daily basis, partly as a result of boredom and a limited ability to get outside. However, lockdown had also provided time to reflect on the impact of alcohol on their health (both had under-lying, long-term health conditions and limited mobility) and they shared their

intentions to start a period of abstinence and healthier eating from the following Monday. Whilst the interview took place before the 'dry' period started, it is interesting to again observe the ways in which lockdown facilitated an initial increase in consumption that then provided a catalyst for reflection on drinking and possible short or longer-term change.

Another illustration of what appeared to be the reflective affordances of the lockdown period for some participants comes from Damien's interview. Damien, 32, had regular internet-mediated drinking get-togethers with friends during lockdown. Alcohol was central to Damien's pre-lockdown socialising and bonding with male friends, yet he spoke of a revised view of alcohol since lockdown, characterised by a new ambivalence toward alcohol's social role, and increased realisation of how much he disliked alcohol's effects in large quantities (i.e. inebriation) and after-effects (i.e. hangovers). Reflections were one thing, but social distancing had not diminished alcohol's presence in Damien's Zoom-mediated socialising during lockdown; on the contrary, he now always had alcohol in the fridge ready for online get-togethers (something unthinkable in Damien's pre-lockdown life). So data did suggest marginally raised consumption levels during his weekly get-together interactions online with friends but the circumstances mandated by lockdown and social distancing also seemed to increase reflective recognition of personal choices around lighter drinking and sobriety as raised in recent work (Caluzzi et al., 2020; Robert, 2018). Ambivalence towards alcohol, another feature of Damien's interview, chimes with previous work reporting ambivalence as a characteristic of drinking behaviour, whether in the context of the contemporary dynamics of the night-time economy (Haydock, 2016) or in the context of male friendship groups (de Visser and Smith, 2007).

An altered symbolism around alcohol during and post-pandemic

The discussion above produces a complex picture: some participants were drinking more during periods of lockdown, others were using lockdown as an opportunity to drink less than they had done historically. Perhaps more interesting, and relevant to understanding of changes to social drinking practices that might endure beyond lockdown, was a sense of alterations to the social and symbolic role of alcohol in peoples' lives since the start of lockdown.

Some interview material spoke to renewed understandings of alcohol's distinctive role as a catalyst for realising social connections in the absence of face-to-face opportunities to meet people. Stephen, 42, described how alcohol represented a kind of leveller that created a sense of consistency and normality in a context that was uncertain and anxious. One aspect of this normality explicitly concerned alcohol's role as a social emollient, particularly for those navigating – possibly for the first time – online or virtual social events and get-togethers. This was also noted by Charlotte, 43, who found online interactions could lack some of the usual 'rules' of communication, with a lack of clarity about whose 'turn' it was to speak. In this sense, the collective consumption of alcohol could provide a way of smoothing over features of imperfect internet-mediated communication and creating a sense of connection and intimacy (Conroy and MacLean, 2019; Nicholls, 2020; Niland et al., 2013) during unusual or unfamiliar social contexts. Alcohol was also something recognisable as symbolically shared during internet-mediated encounters. This could be further enhanced by – for example – all purchasing the same alcoholic drinks to consume together during online social encounters, a practice reported by Stephen and other participants.

Findings here underscore the symbolic value of alcohol as something which could enhance friendship across distances and contribute to the co-construction of shared virtual social spaces. Such findings share some similarity with the burgeoning literature on alcohol's role in online identity construction including online drinking practices in relation to harmful drinking behaviour among university students (e.g., Hebden et al., 2015; Ridout et al., 2012) and

experiences of drunkenness during social media interactions online (Moewaka Barnes et al., 2016). The symbolic role of alcohol in physical encounters is recognised in previous research; Brain (2000) draws attention to the symbolic pleasure of using drinking – and certain types of drink choice - to mark status and lifestyle and to manage image and identity. Ross-Houle et al. (2015) have suggested ways in which alcohol functions as a consumer object invested with symbolic meaning in *both* face-to-face and online communications yet overall, few studies have considered the symbolic role of alcohol consumption during internet-mediated interactions. An interesting feature of our data appears to be that alcohol may be, in some instances, incidental/irrelevant to internet-mediated social interactions, yet in other cases may hold a potent symbolic value that serves to cultivate intimacy, collective identity, and shared understandings in a situation where contact and proximity are difficult.

Initial insights into 'Lockdown' Drinking

Recent decades have seen a sustained interest amongst researchers, policymakers and the media in understanding and policing drinking that is public, excessive and highly visible. In the UK and more widely, alcohol consumption in public remains largely constructed as a 'problem' of crime and disorder, with research exploring issues of violence, crime and sexual assault in late-night leisure spaces (see Fileborn, 2016; Lindsay, 2012). This is reinforced through a media and policy tendency to focus on 'binge drinking' (Frost and Gardiner 2005) and problematise the visible drinking practices of groups such as students, young people or women (Day et al., 2004). It is arguably easier to target policy and regulation at public space, and to focus attention on young peoples' supposed predilection toward 'binge drinking' and engaging in crime and disorderly behaviour in public. This focus on public drinking spaces is likely to be a 'safer' strategy politically than attempting to police the activities and practices of people in the private sphere. The debates around the controversial introduction of Minimum Unit Pricing to set a limit for how cheaply alcohol can be sold for home consumption are a case in point.

However, it is clear that COVID-19 presents an opportunity for researchers and policy-makers to pivot their attention to under-researched areas including home-drinking and the role of alcohol in online social interactions. Home-based drinking (particularly heavier consumption) warrants greater attention given its association with a range of social and health harms demanding policy attention including, illustratively, consistent evidence that alcohol use increases the risk and severity of domestic violence (Gilchrist et al., 2014; WHO, 2006). Health consequences of increased home drinking are clearly relevant from a policy perspective as consumption in domestic spaces is generally affordable, unregulated and takes place outside of the constraints present in licensed venues. Such work is increasingly important if – as emerging research findings suggest - those most likely to increase consumption during the pandemic are already higher-risk drinkers. Emergent technologies relevant to home-based drinking practices - including apps that encourage users to 'check in' to alert their friends when they are drinking (see, for example, Beer with Me, 2020) – also present new opportunities for consumption that enable people to 'drink socially' even when physically separated. This challenges policymakers and practitioners to develop creative, responsive ways to bolster aspirations to drink moderately, and/or to warn against risks of alcohol-related harms linked to drinking alcohol at home. At the same time, understanding light and moderate home drinking can also provide important lessons for policymakers. To ignore the opportunities for those seeking to moderate or reduce their domestic alcohol consumption during the pandemic and its mandated lockdown(s) would constitute a missed opportunity to understand the triggers that may initiate drinking transitions and the strategies and processes that might sustain them. Greater understanding of domestic drinking patterns during the pandemic – and the strategies used by those making changes to their consumption – may offer valuable, wider lessons around ways in which individuals and communities might be supported to change their relationships with alcohol in a post-COVID context.

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