

“You see the pictures the morning after and you’re like I wish I was in them” – An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of University Student’s alcohol-related Regrets.

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Abstract

Objectives: University students report experiencing regrettable health and social outcomes following excessive alcohol consumption. Students also report experiencing regret when they are unable to attend drinking events. This study explored how such experiences influence risk appraisals and decisions about future alcohol consumption.

Design and Measures: Thirteen university students (69% female, 18-20 years old) discussed the interplay of regret with alcohol consumption, and nonattendance at drinking events, in one of three focus groups. Transcripts were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Results: IPA produced three super-ordinate themes: “It’s not something I would have done sober”, “Attitudes towards action regret” and “Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)”. Participants reported regrettable experiences (e.g., alcohol poisoning, tattoos), and a gender difference in risk appraisals was apparent. Attitudes towards action regret affected risk appraisals and informed future drinking decisions. Participants reported experiencing FoMO when they were unable to attend drinking events.

Conclusion: Regrettable incidents following excessive consumption were seen as common but did not affect risk appraisals or future drinking decisions. Students’ reported they preferred the regrettable experiences that follow excessive consumption than the FoMO experienced when they were unable to attend drinking events, suggesting FoMO may drive attendance at future drinking events.

Keywords: Regret, Excessive drinking, Alcohol consumption, Risk appraisal, Fear of Missing out (FoMO)

Word Count: 7068

Introduction

Alcohol consumption is driven by a range of external (e.g., marketing, peer drinking, policies) and internal (e.g., genetics, attitudes, risk appraisals, peer norms) factors (see Sudninaraset et al. 2016, for a review). Individuals report alcohol consumption allows them to obtain benefits such as increased sociability or to loosen inhibitions (O'Hara et al., 2014). However, the pharmacological and disinhibitory effects of alcohol, as well as peer pressure to drink more than planned, can lead individuals to experience regrettable health and social outcomes including blackouts, hangovers, unsafe sex and social embarrassment (Bellis & Jones, 2013, NHS, 2018). University students are a group that report experiencing regrets following alcohol consumption: Dunne and Katz (2015) found 66% of their sample engaged in regrettable social behaviours, like drunk dialling; Jones et al. (2020) noted that 79% of their sample reported regretting a hangover, 37% regretted missing work, and 36% regretted smoking cigarettes. Despite experiencing such regrets, university students continue to drink to excess, by regularly engaging with heavy episodic drinking (HED) (see Daveron et al., 2016). The definition of HED varies between nations and between individuals. The WHO (2018) suggests HED is consuming 60 grams of pure alcohol in a single session. Applying this volume to a relatable amount of standard drinks is problematic, as alcohol by volume differs between countries, but also that individuals adopt a more subjective approach, by defining excess drinking as reaching their "tipping point", i.e. exceeding their tolerance and experiencing a loss of control (Davies et al., 2020). Regardless of which definition is used, existing evidence suggests that regrettable experiences that follow excess consumption do not always deter future consumption. The main aim of this study is to explore students' reports of regrettable experiences that followed excess alcohol consumption to determine how, or if, such experiences inform decisions about future consumption.

Alcohol consumption can be partially explained by focusing on whether or not an individual anticipates experiencing affective reactions to a threat, e.g., regret or shame, which have been shown to influence risk-taking decisions (Loewenstein et al., 2001). The affective reaction regret has been defined as a negative emotion experienced when we imagine our present circumstances would be better if we had acted differently (Zeelenberg & Pieters 2007). Regret is positioned to influence risk appraisal by lowering risk propensity (i.e., our willingness to take risks, see Zeelenberg & Pieters 2004). *Action* regret (i.e., regret from our actions), e.g., regretting a hangover we have experienced due to excess consumption, is expected to have negative relationships with behavioural intentions and behavioural performance. Brewer et al.'s (2016) meta-analysis confirmed that action regret has negative associations with health intentions ($r_+ = -0.45$) and health behaviours ($r_+ = -0.36$). Several studies have confirmed that while action regret is related to alcohol intentions, there is little evidence that action regret predicts excessive drinking behaviour (Ajzen & Sheikh, 2013; Barratt & Cooke, 2018; Cooke et al., 2007; Jones et al., 2020). This suggests the experience of alcohol-related action regret fails to deter future excessive drinking.

Alternatively, theories of health behaviour like the Health Belief Model (Rosenstock, 1974) and Protection Motivation Theory (PMT, Maddux & Rodgers, 1983), posit that risk appraisals inform intentions to perform health behaviours; PMT proposes the risk appraisal variables fear, severity, and susceptibility, inform intentions. Applied to alcohol consumption, fear of hangovers, perceiving hangovers as severe or being susceptible to hangovers, should prompt formation of negative alcohol consumption intentions to avoid hangovers. In contrast, no fear of hangovers, perceiving hangovers as not severe or not believing we are susceptible to hangovers, should prompt formation of positive alcohol consumption intentions. Evidence indicates that risk appraisal is heightened when combining perceptions of susceptibility and severity with affective reactions like regret; appraisal based

on both factors results in larger effects on intentions to perform health behaviours and performance of health behaviours (Sheeran, Harris, & Epton, 2013). In sum, while affective reactions like regret are associated with health outcomes, it remains unclear how, or if, affective reactions contribute to risk appraisal when considering excessive drinking.

Qualitative studies provide insights from a social perspective as to why alcohol-related regret fails to deter future drinking. For example, de Visser et al., (2013) report younger adults are motivated to drink to enhance self-image and reputations, but that they also frame negative outcomes, such as suffering hangovers together, as opportunities for social bonding. It is likely that the social gains that can be obtained by drinking in a social setting, e.g. making new friends, or enhancing current relationships, are more salient than subsequent regrets. In addition, because the gains from drinking usually occur before the regrettable experiences it can be difficult to reach the right stage of intoxication to maximise pleasure whilst avoiding or limiting negative consequences (i.e., “the sweet spot” cf. Graber et al., 2016). Together, such issues may result in drinkers unintentionally drinking to excess.

Inaction regret and the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

In addition to exploring how action regrets from excessive drinking are conceived by young adults, there is also a need to explore how young adults make sense of their inaction, which may also be a source of regret. *Inaction* regret, e.g., anticipating or experiencing regret from inaction, e.g., not attending a birthday party because you have to work, has been shown to have positive relationships with behavioural intentions and behavioural performance; Brewer et al.’s (2016) meta-analysis showed inaction regret has positive associations with intentions ($r_+ = 0.52$) and health behaviour ($r_+ = 0.29$). These results suggest that missing out on the opportunity to perform a behaviour can increase the chance of performance in the future.

The experience of regretting missed opportunities to attend social events has been labelled as the Fear of Missing Out (FoMO; Przybylski et al., 2013) and happens when imagining others are having a rewarding experience without us. Higher levels of FoMO are associated with both excessive drinking and experiencing more alcohol-related regrets (Riordan et al. 2015). Nonattendance at drinking events may prompt a need to compensate by drinking excessively. Qualitative methods are well-suited to the task of exploring both the interplay between action regrets and excessive drinking, and if being unable to attend drinking events prompts inaction regret. Both forms of regret may influence young adults' future drinking decisions: action regret might discourage excessive drinking in the future, due to the regrettable experiences; inaction regret might encourage attendance at future drinking events. Qualitative methods allow people to express in their own words' personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions regarding alcohol. The aims of this study are to explore 1) how experiencing action regret, following excessive drinking, informs risk appraisals and future drinking decisions and 2) if experiencing inaction regret following nonattendance at drinking events informs decisions to attend future drinking events. We sought to answer the following research questions:

- 1) Why does experiencing action regret following excessive alcohol consumption fail to deter future excessive alcohol consumption?
- 2) How does experiencing inaction regret following nonattendance at drinking events inform decisions to attend future drinking events?

Method

The consolidated criteria for reporting qualitative research (COREQ: Tong, Sainsbury & Craig 2007) checklist was used to ensure complete and transparent reporting of the study (see supplementary file for details).

Participants

The host university ethics committee approved the study. Study inclusion criteria were: (1) aged 18 or older; (2) score between 8 and 19 on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT; Saunders, Aasland, Babor, De la Fuente & Grant, 1993) indicating drinking at a hazardous (8-15) or harmful (16-19) level consistent with experience of excessive drinking.

Thirteen university students (69% female, aged 18 to 20, AUDIT scores ranged from 8-19) were recruited from a university in the North West of England to take part in one of three focus groups lasting approximately 30 minutes. All participants were from the same university course and knew each other from attending lectures and/or seminars. Participants all identified as being of white ethnicity. Participants who signed up to the study were emailed an information sheet outlining the research and were advised that the study formed part of the first author's PhD research on young people and alcohol-related regrets. Table 1 provides details about group compositions. These were not intentional but reflected the participants who signed up for the study and attended each focus group; one female and one male signed up for but did not attend the third focus group.

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Data Collection

After reading the participant information sheet, all participants provided informed consent prior to the focus group discussion. Groups were facilitated in the host university's psychology department between February and March 2019. A semi-structured schedule was created to facilitate discussion. The schedule contained questions and probes to encourage participants to contemplate and express their experiences, thoughts and emotions. For example, one question regarding alcohol-related experiences was, "*can you tell me about a*

recent experience where you were drinking alcohol". This was followed by probes such as, *"why do you think you reacted that way"* or *"how did it feel to experience that"*. To ensure all participants provided experiential data, each participant was required to describe their first experience of drinking alcohol, share a narrative of a recent social drinking event and a time when they missed a similar event. During group interactions, participants who remained quiet were asked by the facilitator about their thoughts on the issue or if they could share any similar experiences.

The first author facilitated all focus groups, which were recorded using a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim. To ensure participant anonymity, participants were pseudonymised. After the initial focus group, the transcript and field notes were read and discussed between the first and last authors, noting which questions needed altering or followed up further. The remaining focus groups were run using slight variations of the original schedule e.g., questions were altered to focus specifically on certain experiences such as students' first few weeks at university. Participants were informed that they could request a copy of the transcript of their session and the themes generated from the analysis.

Analysis

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an experiential qualitative technique that aims to provide insights into individuals' lived experiences, and is ideographic and eidetic in nature (Smith, 2004). The ideographic nature of IPA presents a challenge for adapting this methodology for focus groups, i.e. how can individualistic phenomenological accounts be obtained from a group setting? The accounts obtained in a group setting are likely to be influenced not only by the discussion topics and the researcher's reactions, but also by the dynamics of the interactions between the participants. Smith (2004) suggests when attempting to apply this experiential technique to more complex social interactions, such as

focus groups, consideration must be made for the complexities that arise, noting that analysis will have to be approached twice: one for assessing the group dynamics and shared accounts and a second for ideographic accounts.

IPA was adapted to suit the medium of focus groups using the protocol outlined by Palmer, Larkin, de Visser and Fadden (2010). The analysis was conducted by the first author. Step one entailed the repeated reading of the transcripts and noting any preliminary thoughts from excerpts of interest, along with noting individual participants' narratives and shared narratives created from group interactions. Step two involved reading the notes and looking for emergent themes based on the characteristics of the excerpts and the authors' interpretations of them. Step three consisted of assessing the emergent themes for conceptual similarities and clustering them together. Step four entailed a re-reading of the transcripts to explore different interactional and contextual components e.g., how the group setting influenced the way in which perceptions were shared and the nature of the group narratives, paying close attention to the language used to construct the narratives. Step five involved a cross analysis whereby the themes generated from each group were compared. Similar themes were grouped together into super-ordinate themes, whilst individual themes from the separate groups were retained as distinct themes. The final step resulted in a table of themes being produced. The table detailed the themes, with line numbers from the transcripts, which served as a link to the data excerpts.

Results

Three super-ordinate themes were identified: "It's not something I would have done sober", "Attitudes towards action regret" and "The Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)".

It's not something I would have done sober

In this theme, participants discussed how their alcohol consumption during drinking events resulted in them engaging in risky behaviours. Sarah discussed an incident that led to her unintentionally ingesting an illicit substance:

Sarah: "I had a night like, were I got spiked in the club, which was like bad"

Louise: "Oh god"

Sarah: "I was quite excited on that night, we were in [REDACTED] (night club) and I was like taking drinks from the side that people had left, and I was like free drinks yeah!

Someone had put something in their drink and left it at the side and I was like shaking and my eyes were like., hmm., I don't know, I can't really remember much but apparently I was in a state"

Gemma: "You do not take random drinks!"

Sarah: "Yea I have not done it since, it was a bad idea"

Facilitator: "Ok, to what extent would you say you regretted doing it?"

"Oh yea totally! I felt really stupid for doing it" – Sarah (Group 2)

Sarah freely admits to action regret from taking unattended drinks during a night out.

However, when reflecting on her actions, the decision to consume unattended drinks was not based on risk appraisals—concerns about the severity of ingesting a spiked drink, or how susceptible she would be to being a victim of crime after consuming a spiked drink—but was driven by her mood ("quite excited") at the time, and by the expectancy that consuming more alcohol might further enhance her mood. Additionally, Sarah rationalises her behaviour as driven by financial reasons, she saves money by taking other peoples' drinks and celebrates saving money ("...free drinks, yeah!"), which reflects the attitudes of students who live on a

limited budget. Based on Sarah's account the financial and social gains from her actions were salient, the potential health and social losses were not.

Sarah's expression of regret over the incident is a reaction to the judgement of her focus group peers - Louise reacts with shock and disbelief while Gemma reprimands her. The immediacy of these reactions suggests both possess preconceived notions about the risks of consuming unattended drinks, e.g., safety, hygiene and being caught stealing. From Gemma's perspective, Sarah put herself at unnecessary risk, which could have led to her experiencing regrettable consequences. Sarah suggests she has learnt from the incident by stating that she has not repeated the behaviour, implying that she experienced action regret after the event, which deterred her from taking unattended drinks during future drinking events. Nonetheless, this admission may have been impacted by social desirability, in that Sarah wants to project a favourable image of herself to other members of the group. Thus, future decisions about whether or not to consume unattended drinks may be driven more by worries about damaging her reputation through negative social judgement than action regret over taking unattended drinks, or, wanting to drink excessively, which may have been the aim of taking the drinks. The social costs of her action may be viewed as more significant than her experience of action regret, or other health, or personal safety, costs.

John and Tim also shared their experiences of extreme consequences following excessive drinking:

Facilitator: "Can anyone share some of the negative things that have happened to them as a result of their drinking?"

John: "I wouldn't call it a proper regret, but when I was on holiday with my mates., it was like the first night, so obviously I couldn't remember loads of it and then I woke up the next morning with a tattoo on my bum of a footballer's name"

(Neil and Tim laugh loudly at John's account)

Facilitator: "Which footballer?"

John: "Aguero, so I wouldn't say it was a regret cause I do love him but it's not something I would of done I was sober (laughs)!"

Facilitator: "Anything to add Tim?"

Tim: I think the biggest regret I had was when I went to France for a day trip and then it turned into a two day trip because I ended up in hospital for drinking too much., the last thing I remember was like just waiting outside the harbour with my friends and I thought I'll have a little nap on the grass and then I woke up in hospital the next morning surrounded by French people and I was like oh I'm not home yet! (laughs)

Facilitator: "Do you remember how you felt when you woke up in the French hospital"?

Tim: "It was very weird because I thought I was at home, so like I woke and I had like a nappy on! (laughs) and I was like oh ok, not fun"

(Neil and John laugh loudly at Tim's admission)

"but then it was ok cos I can speak French": Tim (Group 3)

John and Tim recall incidents that happened to them whilst drinking excessively on a lads' holiday: John awoke with an unsolicited tattoo and Tim ended up in hospital with alcohol poisoning. These serious consequences resulted from their decision to engage in excessive drinking while on holiday. Their decision to drink reflects normative beliefs regarding the culture of excessive drinking for young men which may exert a greater influence on decisions to drink than risk appraisal based on weighing up the pros (having a good time) and cons of

drinking (getting a tattoo, being hospitalised). Both John and Tim downplay the severity of what happened to them following engaging in excessive drinking; John claims that he does not really regret his tattoo, while Tim states that because he can speak French the regret at being hospitalised for alcohol poisoning is lessened. In contrast to Tim, John does note he ended up with his tattoo only because he was inebriated, suggesting he may possess lingering doubts over his actions. Both men's ambivalence towards their regrettable experiences suggests these experiences may not lead to action regret and are unlikely to encourage them to adopt "low-risk" drinking patterns in the future. Their ambivalence is reinforced by the reaction of the other young men present in the focus group when John and Tim recall their experiences: they react by laughing at their accounts, implying that such incidents are to be expected and are an accepted part of drinking culture for young men. This is in stark contrast to how Sarah's female peers reacted when she disclosed her regrettable experience. This indicates that it is still more socially acceptable for young men than young women to suffer the consequences of excessive drinking because when men report doing something they regret it merits laughter, whereas when women do the same, it leads to shaming. This may make young women more prone to report experiencing regret from their actions, i.e. young men's regrettable incidents are humorous tales, whereas young women's incidents are tales of caution, and hence this may heighten young women's risk perception and influence their future consumption to a greater degree.

Attitudes towards action regret

In this theme, participants discussed their attitudes towards their regrettable behaviour. In the first extract John discusses how his attitudes towards what happened after excessive drinking changed after experiencing injury following alcohol-related violence.

“Yea, since then I don’t think I’ve been that drunk cause, I see some people who do it every time they go out, they get to that level, now I know I’m prone, like prone to do stuff like that when I’m that drunk, when I can’t remember when I do lose control then it’s not good, especially for me cause the amount of concussions I’ve had, that makes me think a lot cause I can’t be getting in like fights or anything”- John (Group 3)

John highlights how his risk appraisals, particularly his sense of being susceptibility to getting into fights after excessive drinking, “...I know I’m prone, like prone to do stuff like that...”, have increased due to his past experience of concussions. These experiences were transformative for John in that it served as a basis for him reflecting on the interplay between regret and excessive drinking. This appears to be an example of action regret informing decisions about future drinking and specifically how drunk John intends to get. This new, lower, level of drunkenness is articulated when John contrasts his peers’ drinking behaviour, in that “every time they go out, they get to that level” with his current drinking; their excessive drinking is used by John as a heuristic for his revised attitudes.

Neil discussed possessing a different attitude towards his regrettable experiences:

“I have felt serious embarrassment, obviously you have these embarrassing moments when you can’t remember like the stuff you do but I think you just laugh it off in the end. I don’t think there is any point dwelling on it and getting down and too embarrassed about what has happened. Just laugh it off, see it as another stupid fresher doing silly things and you just laugh it off, cause it’s quite funny some of the things that happen but yea I guess I just laugh it off and move on instead of spending time getting embarrassed by it” – Neil (Group3)

Like John, Neil also reports undergoing a transformative process when reflecting on his excessive drinking; he engages in a process of acceptance, in which he transforms his

negative experience of feeling embarrassed into a positive experience of amusement. While, Neil alludes to reframing his behaviour in a positive light, he repeatedly asserts that he dismisses his actions by laughing them off. This reveals that Neil may be in denial about how he feels and may still possess action regret with regard to his embarrassing behaviour. The discord exhibited by Neil may be the result of his regrettable behaviours acting in opposition to his beliefs for excessive drinking, i.e., the potential for damaging his reputation. This implies the attitude he adopts towards his action regret enables him to continue to engage in excessive drinking while maintaining a positive outlook on how he views himself. This is further highlighted when Neil likens his behaviour to the stereotype of the excessive drinking student. By reframing his regrettable experiences as something that is expected of him as a university student, he can rationalise his behaviour as acting in line with others' expectations for him, distancing himself from responsibility for his actions.

Hope also discussed her attitude towards performing regrettable acts:

“Going out and embarrassing yourself or like, I don't know doing stuff that you wouldn't usually do when you were sober, that's not exactly negative, that's just a symptom of drinking alcohol, like that's what people do”- Hope (Group 2)

Hope's attitudes toward her regrettable behaviour enable her to rationalise excessive drinking and subsequent acts. She reports attitudes which lessen her liability for her actions in several ways. First, she contrasts her drunken behaviour with her sober behaviour, assessing her actions are due to the effects of alcohol. Second, she believes that it is expected of her to engage in regrettable acts whilst drunk and invokes a medical metaphor, framing these acts as a *symptom* of a drinking alcohol. Doing this allows her to account for these actions while simultaneously distancing herself from responsibility, i.e., would a person suffering from disease be held accountable for their condition? Hope's attitudes towards action regrets

highlight how her experiences fail to heighten her risk appraisal. By removing her sense of personal liability, Hope eliminates the fundamental element of regret, self-blame. Freeing herself from recrimination enables Hope to continue to engage with excessive consumption and the embarrassing acts that follow.

The Fear of Missing Out (FoMO)

Participants were asked if they had ever experienced *inaction* regret following nonattendance at drinking events. Group one participants discussed their experiences:

Helen: "I guess it's cause you don't know, like you don't know what you are missing out on cause you're not there. So you can big it up in your head as much as you want, you can be like that could have been the best night ever"

Steve: "Yea that could be like the biggest and best night ever"

Lisa: "Yea"

Helen: "Or you think like, you could of made another friend or like you could of done this or that and then it's like you said (indicates Lisa) you see the pictures the morning after and you're like I wish I was in them"

Lisa: "Or like the inside jokes, when they are like.."

(Collective murmurs of agreement)

Steve: "If there's an inside joke, you're just like stood there and totally missing out"

Elaine: "Yea you just have to fake laugh, and you just have to hope, no-one says you don't know that joke, like why are you laughing"

Mary: "It's like you can't reference it either, cause you weren't there"

Helen: "So then like sometimes I'm convinced to go out, like through my own fear of missing out"

Lisa: "Same here"

Steve: "Me too"

Helen's account provides a description of how her inaction regret or Fear of Missing Out (FoMO) manifests itself when she checks social media. Helen engages in a process of magnification, in which she inflates the subjective value of missed nights out, rather than inflating the value of achieving other goals like completing assignments or paid work. The posts remind her of what she misses out on providing an idealised version of excessive drinking, all of the fun is shown in the posts, but none of the aftermath is experienced *because* Helen remained sober. All the social gains, none of the losses. This perception may lead to risk appraisals that lessen the severity of experiencing these consequences, and because social media provides an excellent means to stage-manage how events unfold, where positive experiences are posted and negative experiences are hidden, perhaps also reducing risk appraisals about susceptibility to these negative outcomes. If you do not see people being sick or unconscious you might not believe these outcomes occur. Social media also shines a light on social losses that can occur from nonattendance. Helen reveals that by not going out she misses out on obtaining several desirable outcomes: hedonic pleasure, social gains and satisfying novel experiences. Through nonattendance at drinking events, Helen rues missing the opportunity to obtain these outcomes, *"...you see the pictures the morning after and you're like I wish I was in them"*.

The other members in group one elaborate the narrative and provide an example of how missing nights can result in experiencing a sense of social isolation, an experience described as aversive. Elaine even suggest playing along with her peers' narrative, even though she did

not attend the event, to avoid feeling isolated. This highlights that one-way university students experience inaction regret is through FoMO, following discussion of shared experiences gained during a drinking event. At the end of the extract, participants provide a striking statement about how keen they are to avoid FoMO; they would rather go out and risk experiencing action regret, by drinking excessively, than stay at home and suffer FoMO.

Neil from group three discussed his experience of missing nights out:

“I think this happened a lot in first term, when you’re new and you’re trying to make an impression and you don’t want to be seen as the boring one who doesn’t go out, so even when I was feeling rough I would always think to myself, oh I can’t not go out, oh what will they think about me, especially in this like rugby, laddish culture, will they like me, will I fit in, will they lose respect for me if I don’t go out. So yea even if it was against how I felt, against my instincts I always had to go out, I felt like it was needed” – Neil (Group 3)

Neil’s account reveals how his FoMO directly impacts his risk appraisals, but these are centred on appraising risks about his social status rather than his health. His FoMO prompts him to attend future drinking events because he fears missing out on the social gains, he perceives being able to obtain from attending these events. His experience is driven by a desire to avoid both the negative emotions associated with missing out on social activities and a loss of social face, if he fails to conform to the expectations of the “*rugby, laddish culture*”. These feelings are so intense that even when feeling ill, Neil convinced himself to attend the events, suggesting maintaining social relationships is perceived to be more important than maintaining individual health. This highlights how FoMO experienced from nonattendance at drinking events directly impacts risk appraisals for attending future drinking events. The impact of Neil’s FoMO on his risk appraisal is also influenced by his self-identity and the

group identity he aspires to construct. Neil assesses the risk of not conforming to the group norms around drinking as being worse than suffering the consequences of excessive drinking.

In this extract, Sarah and Hope discuss how their feelings of FoMO diminished over time:

Sarah: "I think it was more important in first term, when you don't know people and like the bonds were more crucial to like establish at first, whereas now (semester two), we're all kind of like comfortable around each other, like we're all good friends, so if you miss a couple of nights then it's not the end of the world, like you're still going to be mates, you got that foundation"

Hope: "I feel like in the first semester, cause like you said you don't really know anyone and you're trying to settle down into this like group and I think like first you are sort of grasping every opportunity to go out and meet new people, whereas now you've got your friends and if you don't go out with them it doesn't really matter cause you'll still be friends with them at the end of the day"

Sarah and Hope's discourse suggests that FoMO's effects on risk appraisals about attending drinking events are most pronounced when social relationships are in their infancy; in the developmental stages of relationships FoMO is heightened, with individuals acting to avoid the potential risks of missing out: "...grasping every opportunity to go out". As time passes, and relationships develop, participants establish circles in which they feel valued and will not be judged negatively for missing nights out, reducing their experience of FoMO.

Gemma and Molly revealed an alternative view on their FoMO:

Facilitator: "What do you think would be the consequences of missing one of those big nights out with your friends?"

Gemma: "I think if you miss a lot of them, they just naturally get closer and you're not as close naturally"

Molly: "I think what you just said is true, one of our flat mates only comes out like once every two or three months and we're like really close and she's kind of left a bit to the side, like she's not involved as much and I feel like kind of bad for her, cause that means she doesn't get invited to like other things as well, cause we automatically assume that she won't want to come, so she ends up like really left out"

Gemma: "That's happened in my flat as well, there's a girl and she's always like oh yea I'll come out with you tonight and then she cancels every single time. So now obviously we stopped asking her"

Gemma and Molly's discussion highlights the knock-on effect of nonattendance at drinking events on their risk appraisal; they perceive that missing nights presents both social loss, in terms of failing to accrue social gains, but also increases the risk of missing out on future social gains via exclusion from other social activities. Gemma and Molly express fear at the possibility of being excluded which provides them with a strong motive for attending drinking events. This highlights how the anticipation of inaction regret influences risk appraisal and informs the decision to attend drinking events. While Sarah and Hope suggest that the impact of FoMO on risk appraisal diminishes over time, Gemma and Molly's account suggests while FoMO may diminish it does not completely fade away due to the perceived need to maintain social ties.

Discussion

This study used qualitative methods to explore why experiencing regret following excessive drinking (action regret) fails to deter future excessive consumption, and how regret

experienced following nonattendance at drinking events (inaction regret) informs decisions about alcohol consumption during attendance at future drinking events.

In most participants accounts of their experiences of alcohol-related action regret, such experiences generally failed to inform their risk appraisals, or attitudes towards excessive drinking regarding future drinking events. Therefore, experiencing action regret does not appear to result in changes to psychological variables outlined in models of health behaviour like the Health Belief Model or Protection Motivation Theory; action regret was rarely linked to fear, perceiving increased severity of negative health consequences or made participants view themselves as susceptible to these consequences. One participant, Sarah, reported that action regret led her to reflect on how she acted when excessive drinking. Her actions, taking unattended drinks, posed a direct threat to her personal safety and prompted social censure over behaviour from other members of her group. However, if it takes experiencing serious regrets to prompt reflection on excessive drinking then it is understandable why most of the time action regret rarely informs behaviour because experience of serious regrets is, thankfully, rare. Jones et al. (2020) report a much lower prevalence of serious regrets than other types of regret, e.g., experiencing a hangover or saying something embarrassing. It should also be acknowledged that we cannot be sure that Sarah's reaction was not an attempt to maintain her social standing with the other focus group members.

Existing studies can help us to explain our finding that action regret did not deter excessive drinking. Griffin et al. (2018) report that some UK university students reframe experiencing negative consequences like hangovers, as positive experiences (collective suffering) that strengthens social bonds and reinforce identification with group norms. A study by Johnston and White (2003) shows the importance of identification with group norms in terms of intentions to engage in excessive drinking. In a sample of Australian university students, they found that the relationship between the group norm to drink excessively and intentions to

drink excessively was moderated by the how much students identified with the group norm: Students who identified with the group norm displayed a linear relationship between norms and intentions such that those who viewed the norm more favourably reported more positive intentions. By contrast, among students who did not identify with the group norm, there was no relationship between norms and intentions. Whether or not we identify with a group norm can affect our planning regarding future drinking.

Such findings imply decisions to drink excessively are not based on a risk appraisals or action regret but may instead focus on the social gains (reinforcing friendships) and losses (embarrassing oneself) of attending drinking events. Cox and Klinger's (1988) incentive motivation model would frame this process as the incentives (social gains) to drink excessively drink outweigh the incentives not to drink excessively (financial or health gains). Moreover, some of our participants expressed that regrettable acts are what is expected of their social group, and by performing acts that are expected of them they can remove the self-blame associated with experiencing regret, linking such actions to the development of their group identity as discussed by Griffin et al. (2018). Research has shown that regrettable experiences are a normalised part of a night out for UK university students (Davies et al., 2017). Upon entering university, students rapidly gain first-hand experience that social events typically involve excessive drinking and the embarrassing incidents that follow come to be seen as both expected and acceptable (Davies et al. 2017).

We found evidence of gender differences in how female and male students responded to reports of engaging in regrettable behaviours. Our female participant who admitted to taking unattended drinks was immediately held accountable by her female peers, who perceived her actions as extremely risky. This is contrasted with how our male participants responded to an account of alcohol poisoning, which is potentially fatal, by laughing. This double standard can be seen as reflecting gendered norms for excessive drinking, where drinking to excess,

the risky behaviours that follow, are consistent with masculinity but not femininity (Montemurro & McClure, 2005). de Visser and McDonnell (2012) argue that women's alcohol consumption and behaviour are more harshly judged than men, exactly what we found in our focus groups. This notion may help explain why female students report experiencing more alcohol-related regrets than male students (Orchowski, Mastroleo & Borsari 2012).

We also found that male participants in our study downplayed the severity of their actions. Findings from de Visser and Smith (2007) suggest young men exhibit ambivalence towards the negative outcomes of excessive drinking and that they rationalise this by framing the consequences as the trade-off needed to have a good time. In addition, young men's experiences whilst on holiday highlight potential circumstances where the normal cues to drinking are not present, resulting in greater consumption than normal: evidence indicates younger adults tend to increase their alcohol consumption and engagement with risky behaviours whilst abroad (Hesse et al. 2008).

Turning to discuss how inaction regret following nonattendance at drinking events can inform future drinking decisions, our participants reported a clear fear of missing out (FoMO), where they assigned great importance to the social losses associated with nonattendance. Returning to Cox and Klinger's (1988) incentive motivation model, the incentives to attend drinking events were perceived to be greater than the incentives to not attend; participants did not mention the academic (e.g., completing an assignment), financial, (e.g., earning money), health (e.g., not having a hangover) or social (e.g., not having to apologise for an argument) gains that follow *nonattendance*; such gains were not salient among our participants. While it is possible that if we had asked more directly about these issues, participants would have recalled experiencing such gains, it is also possible that such gains do not occur to young adult drinkers.

Participants did report that their FoMO has the potential to drive attendance at future drinking events, particularly during the early stages of friendship formation but also in coping with FoMO, young adults report attending more social drinking events to compensate for missing out (Crawford et al., Unpublished). Participants' accounts revealed alcohol-related FoMO is fundamentally social in nature, which is supported by existing literature (Przybylski et al., 2013). FoMO may impact decisions to drink as it is driven by a need to avoid social losses, like isolation. This suggests a possible mechanism linking FoMO with experiencing regrettable consequences from excessive drinking: fulfilling the need for social gains results in excessive consumption, to achieve social gains, but excessive drinking can lead to regrettable acts. These findings add to the literature on health-risk behaviour, which suggest inaction regret predicts behavioural outcomes (Richard, de Vries & van der Pligt 1996, Brewer et al. 2016)

In discussing how the experience of FoMO impacted their risk appraisals, participants revealed that social media provides a vicarious experience of the missed event. By viewing posts, participants inflated their imagined sense of enjoyment from attending the event, imagining the fun their friends were having and not experiencing the consequences. Evidence from Lyons et al. (2016) highlights that positive alcohol-related images and posts are shared on social media. Furthermore, the rosy-view effect (Mitchell et al., 1997), a cognitive bias that means people's recollection of events are much more positive than their actual experience, suggests that when recalling a previous event or a night out, individuals tend to focus on the positive aspects over the negative, and hence display this bias when assessing the subjective worth of an experience. This can explain why our participants experiences of FoMO impacted their decisions to attend future social drinking events.

Future studies are needed to address questions that flow from the present study such as 'How do young adults process and cope with experiencing FoMO?', 'Does FoMO decrease over

time?', and 'What mechanisms link FoMO to regrettable behaviours?'. To our knowledge this is the first study to employ qualitative methods to explore the interplay between regret and excessive drinking, with a particular strength being our novel findings about FoMO following nonattendance at drinking events. Nonetheless there are limitations with this study. This study only addresses individual and social influences on alcohol consumption. It is beyond the scope of this article to account for all the influences on consumption, such as cultural, environmental or policy factors, and how they interact to shape alcohol use. Due to the facilitator of the focus groups being male, this may have encouraged the male participants to share their experiences. Alternatively, having a male facilitator may have made our female participants less inclined to discuss sensitive issues. Due to the data being collected retrospectively, it was not possible to assess how students anticipate experiencing regret to allow us to compare results with quantitative work on this topic (Davies & Joshi, 2018). A further limitation is the homogeneity of the participants in terms of their shared white ethnicity. Our results cannot be generalised to other ethnic groups until future research studies have been conducted with more ethnically diverse samples.

In conclusion, this study provides an account of why experiencing action regret following excessive drinking fails to deter future excessive drinking behaviour and how experiencing inaction regret (FoMO) following nonattendance at drinking events can influence future drinking decisions. Extreme risky behaviours were reported and a potential gender difference in the perception of risk for these behaviours may exist. Attitudes towards action regret influences risk appraisals and subsequent drinking. Importantly, the study also revealed that FoMO experienced from not drinking socially, impacts risk appraisal by lowering the perception of risk from drinking and heightens the risk of missing out on perceived benefits. For these reasons, FoMO may be an important driver of excessive drinking amongst university students, who trade-off the negative consequences of excessive drinking in

exchange for the gain of maintaining positive social relationships. Understanding these experiences allows us to further understand excessive drinking among university students.

Data Availability Statement

The data that supports the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author (JC), upon reasonable request.

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Table 1: Group Compositions and Characteristics

Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Elaine – 19, Female, White	Gemma – 19, Female, white	John – 19, Male, white
Helen – 19, Female, White	Hope – 18, Female, white	Neil – 19, Male, white
Lisa – 19, Female, White	Louise – 18, Female, white	Tim – 19, Male, white
Mary – 20, Female, White	Molly – 19, Female, white	
Steve – 19, Male, White	Sarah – 19, Female, white	