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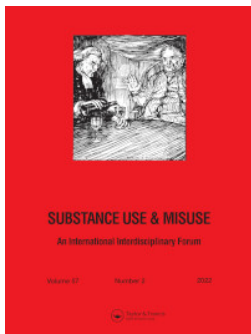
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"If You Don't Drink at University, You're Going to Struggle to Make Friends" Prospective Students' Perceptions around Alcohol Use at Universities in the United Kingdom

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ABSTRACT

Background: New students arrive at university with pre-determined perceptions around how alcohol can be used as a tool to overcome anxieties and secure new friendships, which in turn influences students' drinking behaviors. From a health promotion perspective, the transition to university may present a unique yet understudied opportunity to challenge and reframe situated drinking norms. This paper explores prospective university students' perceptions of the role that alcohol plays at university and the influence that these perceptions have on behavior. *Method:* Focus groups with 46 prospective university students (aged 16-20 years) recruited from colleges and sixth forms in the North West of England. *Results:* Through various sources of information, new students arrive at university with pre-conceived perceptions of a heavy student drinking culture and knowledge around how alcohol can be used to aid successful integration with new peers. Alcohol was viewed by new students as a social lubricant which is key to accruing social capital. Cultural presentations of the student drinker identity led prospective students to formulate negative connotations of those students who transgress from the norms of drinking. *Conclusions:* The findings provide new insights into how young people conceptualize alcohol at university and the impact that these perceptions have on shaping ideology and influencing drinking behavior. Breaking down these norms presents real challenges for those trying to address excessive drinking in universities, therefore, early intervention which challenges, re-frames and modifies perceptions before students arrive on campus may help to reduce the pressure and expectations to drink in social situations.

Introduction

Globally, harmful, and excessive alcohol consumption has been evident in university student populations for many years (Davoren et al., 2016; Hebden et al., 2015; Hepworth et al., 2016). In the United Kingdom (UK), a systematic review of studies found the proportion of university students classifying as hazardous consumers (8+ on the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test scale) ranged between 63% and 84% (Davoren et al., 2016). These observed alcohol levels have been linked to multiple adverse health and behavioral outcomes among students, including poor mental health and wellbeing, increased injury, being a victim of crime, increased risk of unprotected sex (Penny & Armstrong-Hallam, 2010), and wider impacts on academic attainment (El Ansari et al., 2013; Mustaine & Tewksbury, 2005).

For most first-year students, the start of the academic year (known as Fresher's week in the UK), signifies a period of orientation, typically associated with alcohol dominant social events, a relaxed culture of intoxication and higher levels of alcohol consumption (Fuller et al., 2018; Gambles, 2019; Riordan et al., 2015). Evidence indicates that although Fresher's week is seen by many as a singular event (typically occurring over a one-week period), heavy drinking habits

established during the initial months of university can continue throughout students' university careers and develop into patterns of harmful drinking in later adulthood (Bewick et al., 2008a; Merrill & Carey, 2016). Student life following Fresher's week is often accompanied by a distinct drinking trajectory, with alcohol consumption levels peaking in the first year of study and tapering off in years two and three (Bewick et al., 2008a).

Starting university is a major transition event in the lives of many young people which presents new experiences and pressures, such as separation from existing peers, social network demands and exposure to new people and behaviors. Drinking holds important social dimensions for young adults during this time as alcohol is used to enhance social interaction and create a sense of belonging among new social groups (Brown & Murphy, 2018; Newbury-Birch et al., 2009; Ross-Houle & Quigg, 2019). Whether via media depictions or vicarious experiences, young adults develop beliefs about normalized student drinking behaviors before arriving at university. These behaviors are often overestimated and then acted out by individuals in an attempt to gain acceptance from new social peers (Baer et al., 1991; Garnett et al., 2015; McAlaney & McMahon, 2007; Perkins, 2002; Perkins

& Berkowitz, 1986). Despite emerging evidence demonstrating social norms held by new university students are associated with increased alcohol use and adverse alcohol outcomes during the early academic year, few alcohol prevention approaches have focused exclusively on this period of transition (Baer et al., 1991; Borsari & Carey, 2001).

Globally, social norms theory has been popularly applied to alcohol intervention and prevention in university settings. Social norm approaches acknowledge the importance of peer influence on drinking behaviors and steer students toward the perception that alcohol is consumed moderately among peers (Bewick et al., 2008b; Kypri et al., 2014). However, the application of such approaches has in the past failed to lead to any sustained changes in university students' drinking behaviors. For example, analysis of 70 social norms approaches conducted in universities found that post-intervention, many students returned to previous drinking habits (Foxcroft et al., 2015).

One explanation as to why public health interventions often fail to change drinking behaviors in the student population is that approaches are predominantly delivered within mainstream university campus settings. This campus environment is often dominated by targeted alcohol marketing and alcohol focused events and therefore incongruent with the safe drinking messages delivered across universities (Brown & Murphy, 2018; Ross-Houle & Quigg, 2019). This heavy drinking landscape reinforces pre-arrival stereotypical conceptions of a student intoxication culture and leads students to internalize norms and disregard health messaging as they view their own drinking as normal and non-problematic (Livingstone et al., 2011). Therefore, safe drinking messages delivered across UK campuses are directly contradicted by environmental norms promoting heavy alcohol use and consequently have limited impact.

From a health promotion perspective, the transition to university may present a unique yet understudied opportunity for moderation efforts as new students' perceptions and behaviors have not yet become established and therefore may be more malleable and sensitive to change (Riordan et al., 2015). For universities to effectively prevent excessive drinking and reduce harms among students, better understanding of the development and underlying perceptions and expectations of the role alcohol plays for incoming students at university is important to gauge whether the transition to university may be an important and unique intervention opportunity. This study explores prospective university students' perceptions of the role that alcohol plays at university and the influence that these perceptions have on behavior.

Materials and method

Educational establishments (N = 78) with varying levels of deprivation in the North West of England were contacted via a letter of introduction, which provided information about the study. Three high schools and colleges agreed to take part. Seven focus groups were undertaken with 46 high school (sixth form) and college students (aged 16-20 years) who all had the intention of attending university.

The seven groups were self-selected by staff at the school and included class peers and consisted of mixed and single sex groups. Written consent was obtained from the students prior to the focus group interview. Group discussions were carried out in a private room at the school/college and with preexisting peer groups to allow for more fluid discussion where participants could challenge and expand on peers' views (Liamputtong, 2011). An interview schedule was developed around the principal research questions, linking to two core discussion themes (1) perceptions of the drinking culture and role of alcohol at university, and (2) the influences on these perceptions. A series of photographs obtained from local and national news articles depicting university drinking norms were used to prompt discussion (Comi et al., 2014). Careful attention was paid to the sequencing and language of the schedule to ensure that the young adult audience could comprehend the types of question being asked and items were kept open-ended and were conducive to a conversation.

Focus group interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim, with all identifiable data anonymised. Transcripts were analyzed in QSR NVivo and adhered to the six phases of thematic analysis set out by Braun and Clarke (2006) where initial discursive codes were identified. Each script was then carefully examined and reexamined to elicit underlying meanings and nuances across the data, and subsequently emergent codes were organized into clusters. No themes were identified in the final transcripts analyzed therefore it was concluded that data saturation had been reached. Codes were then reviewed by other members of the research team. Four themes were identified and collated and are supported by illustrative quotations throughout the results. Full ethical approval for the study was received from Liverpool John Moores University Research Ethics Committee.

Results

Participant characteristics

Three fifths (57%, N = 26) of the sample attended a college in one area of high deprivation in North West England). Over half (57%) the participants were male, aged 16- 20 years and the majority were White British (96%). In terms of alcohol use, 20% of the sample did not drink alcohol. Of those who drank (n = 37), two fifths (38%) drank monthly or less, almost half (48%) drank two to four times a month, 19% drank two to three times a week and 5% drank four or more times a week (the legal age limit for purchasing alcohol in the UK is 18 years).

Drinking is the norm

Drinking at university was viewed as a normalized practice and presumed to be culturally embedded and a socially expected part of university life "*Like that is what you do when you become a student [drink alcohol], everyone knows that" (Female Group 7).*University students were presumed to drink because they feel compelled to in order to fit in

with those drinking around them. Participants recognized that as alcohol is consumed within a social setting at university it would be easy for individuals to get "*lured*" into drinking and therefore avoiding alcohol would be difficult. This was thought to be especially true in the initial weeks of university when new social relationships are formed in an alcohol-dominated environment.

> P1: At uni [university] there would be a lot more like, not like pressure but if everyone around you was drinking, it would be harder to not drink wouldn't it
>
> P2: You also like want to fit in so in the first week you might feel like you have to drink, so it is a bit of pressure (Female Focus Group (FG) 7)

Through cultural presentations, Freshers' week had been conceptualized as a unique period of excessive alcohol consumption which permits students to drink excessively and go beyond their personal drinking limits.

> P1: It's like beyond binge drinking though, it's like a different level
>
> P2: It's not like sensible drinking it's like find your limit and then go like way past it (Female FG 1)

A popular view within the focus groups, regardless of current drinker status, was that individuals intended to consume more alcohol and engage in more high-risk drinking, such as preloading (consumption of alcohol within a private space prior to going out to a commercial venue) and drinking games once they started university as alcohol was considered key in aiding group development and social connectedness.

> P1: It will definitely increase for me [alcohol] when I go to uni
>
> P2: Yeh I think because everyone is doing it around you all the time then yeh you would drink more
>
> P3: Well I don't drink at all so it probably will, I think I will be cautious cause it's just not something that I have ever really done before, but I am definitely open to try (Female FG 2)

As alcohol was seen to be important to group belonging, not conforming to the heavy drinking norms at university was thought to lead to detrimental social consequences, such as social exclusion and fewer social relationships. Some felt that nondrinkers would form friendships with other nondrinkers in order to seek inclusion and that these social experiences would not parallel those of a drinker.

> P1: I think if you don't drink while you are in uni you are probably going to struggle a bit on the social side, cause (.) well it just won't be as fun
>
> P2: But then you would make friends with the people who don't drink, so you would have a social life, but probably in a different way (Male FG 6)

It was presumed that whilst nondrinkers would still attend social events, sobriety would be unpleasant. Several participants expected that non-drinking students would assume the role of sober minder during a night out. This would involve caring for peers who had drank excessively and making sure they got home safely. Such discussions encapsulated how this would make attending university difficult for those who did not drink.

> P1: Yeh if you're the one that has to look after everyone when they're drunk and that is just like awful
>
> P2: Mother hen
>
> P1: Then that's your experience that gets ruined (Female FG 1)

Aspects of university perpetuate drinking

A busy and varied nightlife was important for participants when choosing which university to attend "*Its important [the nightlife] cause I wouldn't want to be at a uni and there be nothing to do*" (Female FG 7). Participants across five of the groups referred to cities such as Newcastle, Leeds and Liverpool as having a long-standing reputation for excessive drinking. These popular cities were perceived to have a high density of drinking venues offering more variety to students, thereby shaping the expectation that drinking is synonymous with a positive university experience.

Alcohol at university was thought to be both cheap and freely available: "*It's everywhere [alcohol at university] isn't it?*" (Male FG 5). Through drinking in the local nightlife environment, most participants were aware of student aimed events and low-price alcohol offers heavily promoted in student dense areas. From this, it was felt that the surrounding university environment perpetuates the use of alcohol rather than simply tolerates drinking.

> P1: It's advertised isn't it, students' nights, there are loads of offers I bet it makes you wanna go out and drink (Male FG 6)

Identified across four of the groups was the view that the time spent at university is a unique life stage free from any major responsibility and discrete in comparison with adults and similar aged peers who had the burden of a career and family commitments. Participants presumed heavy alcohol use would be accepted on campus as there are no legal parameters restricting students' drinking and therefore individuals would hold autonomy over their own behaviors. As such, university was viewed as a rite of passage, in which young adult experiment with alcohol and other substances, where the rules and boundaries enforced at home no longer exist.

> P1: Cause it's the last chance people get to drink isn't it really, like when you go off to uni there is almost like there is no excuse not to drink cause you are at the age where you don't have a family or whatever
>
> P2: Yeh you can just enjoy yourself without worrying about the impacts
>
> (Female FG 7)

Drinking serves a socio-cultural function at university

Across all groups, the move from home to university was perceived to have been associated with anxiety over new experiences and responsibilities, such as negotiating a new and unfamiliar place and integrating into new social groups "*Like I am scared to like move and not know anyone and not make any mates and stuff like that*" (Female FG 7). As a means of overcoming such anxieties, participants believed

that alcohol could act as a *"social lubricant"* in the early stages of university, reducing social discomfort and strengthening new peer relationships.

> P1: I think that, that is one of the reasons why people drink quite a lot in freshers' week probably is cause it is a bit easier to get to know people if you're like less nervous yeh (Female FG 2)

Across the narratives, drinking alcohol was believed to gain social approval from unfamiliar peers and therefore ease the transition into new social groups. Not only was alcohol viewed as essential when making new friends, it was also seen to be important in securing friendships. One group of female participants spoke of the camaraderie that a night of drinking creates. Sharing drunken entertaining stories and experiences was viewed as a way of establishing a sense of commonality and strengthening new friendships.

> P1: I think people do it as a like as a way to socialise when you're young and from then on when you're drunk you just have like stupid drunk stories to tell and then like they just continue being friends from there, that sort of thing just as a way to socialise (Female FG 7)

Influences on preexisting perceptions

Wider cultural norms, institutions, interpersonal relationships and individuals' own experiences helped to shape the widespread expectation that heavy drinking was a normalized student behavior. The experience of older siblings and peers who had attended university acted to develop and reinforce expectations that socializing at university was strongly associated with heavy drinking. Older peers frequently uploaded content on social media sites depicting alcohol as key to friendship formation, and important in creating shared memories at university.

> P1: Friends who have gone to uni post stuff all the time, you see things on like Facebook and Instagram and it's of them out with their mates drinking and sharing drunken pictures
>
> P2: Yeh them like out all the time [drinking], having fun and with all their mates
>
> (Male FG 3)

Mass media outlets (TV programmes and newspapers) helped to reinforce the associations of university life and alcohol. However, unlike social media sites, the focus was on the more extreme effects of alcohol use amongst students, which helped to shape harmful stereotypes of students' excessive drinking behaviors *"Students are shown to be drunk passed out on the floor"* (Male FG 5). The marketization of the student social experience began before prospective students had even arrived on campus through the promotional material that universities sent to individuals. Those who had registered interest in attending university spoke of receiving alcohol related promotional material via email and university prospectuses featuring common student drinking practices. Some of this material signposted individuals to the Student Union web page where tickets for university alcohol focused events were being promoted.

> P1: I have been sent a few uni leaflets in the post and they have been full of students out drinking
>
> P4: Yeh same actually (Female FG 1)

Discussion

The findings from this study indicate that through various sources of information (e.g. older peers, media), new students arrive at university with pre-conceived perceptions of a heavy student drinking culture and knowledge of how alcohol can be used to assist with the adjustment to student life. Excessive drinking was recognized as a key feature of the student social experience with participants anticipating that alcohol would effectively aid new relationships and help overcome social anxiety around integration.

These findings echo other research which has similarly identified pre-arrival anxieties associated with the transition to university (Brown & Murphy, 2018). The primary concern for most prospective students was in relation to social integration of new friendship groups and concerns of the loss of support from family and established peers. The motivation to drink at university was perceived to reduce interpersonal anxiety and enhance social connectedness among new peer groups (Griffin et al., 2009; Newbury-Birch et al., 2009; Piacentini & Banister, 2006; Seaman & Ikegwuonu, 2010). This paired with the expectation that heavy drinking would be central to the formulations of student identity and a normal aspect of university life, ensured that alcohol was widely considered to be key to accruing social capital and peer recognition during the transition to university (Bourdieu, 1984; 1986). This notion suggests that individuals arrive at university with the perception that their development needs will be met through heavy drinking and shared social drinking experiences which is likely to influence drinking behavior. Therefore, alcohol intervention efforts need to acknowledge the social benefits that underpin drinking practices at university and aim to target expectations and cultural presentations of student drinking before young people arrive on campus.

Deviations from the norm, such as abstaining from alcohol puts social capital at risk leading to social disassociation and exclusion (Conroy, 2014). This notion can be seen across the views of prospective students in this study where cultural presentations of the student drinker identity were found to formulate negative connotations of those students who transgress from the norms of drinking. These unfavorable opinions highlight the social challenges facing those who abstain from alcohol and give insight into how peer scrutiny relating to non-drinking manifests within universities. These impressions are a concern given evidence associating negative evaluations of non-drinking with increased levels of alcohol consumption among students (Regan & Morrison, 2011; Zimmermann & Sieverding, 2010). Universities should therefore seek to challenge students' prejudicial beliefs about nondrinkers as being less sociable than students who regularly drink. For example, arranging non-alcohol events, altering drinking expectations of events and promoting healthy behaviors such as non-alcohol alternatives. This has been attempted by some universities in

the UK who have designated alcohol-free spaces on campus and activities in venues that do not have an alcohol focus (Ross-Houle & Quigg, 2019). Alternatively, promotion of the positive experiences that students have when attending non-alcohol focused events and making non-alcoholic drinks on a night out more appealing to students by ensuring that they are cheaper and a more readily available alternative to alcohol may help to challenge these norms.

Prospective students viewed student life as transient in which for the first and only time in their lives they have few responsibilities and greater freedom to drink (Banister & Piacentini, 2008). Theorists argue that the position of students is ambiguous as they occupy a time between childhood and adulthood in which they experience the freedom to drink and the independence of living away from parents whilst still being protected within the institutional environment (Arnett, 2004; Banister & Piacentini, 2008). The challenge for policy makers seeking to encourage behavioral change is that students are of an age where for the first time they have newfound freedom to consume alcohol legally, regulating behavior is therefore complex. In past studies students and staff responded negatively to university policies of regulation arguing that such approaches go against students' independence and freedom to drink (Larsen et al., 2016). Encouraging students to be responsible for their own drinking behavior through reducing risk and harm may therefore be a more appropriate response.

The findings from the current study support those of previous research which show that universities themselves play a key role in setting the expectation to drink through the promotional material they send to incoming students (Fuller et al., 2018; Ross-Houle & Quigg, 2019). For example, pre-admission information, alcohol promotions and Student Union events espoused the view that drinking was an integral part of most social events and key to enjoying social occasions. Universities which market themselves on the nightlife of the local area are more likely to draw in students who enjoy a heavier drinking culture, which reinforces and maintains the heavy drinking reputation of the institution. In order to disrupt cultural drinking presentations, institutions should attempt to promote other aspects of life on campus and alternative events that do not rely upon drinking during the build up to students' university transition. In the UK, there have been some examples of universities offering alternative non-alcohol based events which aim to encourage students to drink less alcohol, such as quiz and movie nights, however research into their effectiveness is sparse (Leeds University Union, n.d.). One event which may have the potential to alter perceptions of a typical student night out is 'Sober-raving', which exchanges alcohol for smoothies and dancing (Oxford Brookes University, 2017).

The dominance of alcohol in student life was also reinforced by social media and mass media activity. Reflecting findings from previous research, older peers who attended university used social media to create memories and relive drinking experiences with peers. This acted to create a 'intoxogenic digital space' where prospective students learnt about the positive outcomes of alcohol use and the context in which it is consumed (Griffiths & Casswell, 2010: 528; Nicholls, 2012), reinforcing the notion that social capital is accrued through engagement with particular drinking practices (Atkinson et al., 2015; Barnes et al., 2016; Ross-Houle & Quigg, 2019). Designing other ways to create, share and relive memories with friends that do not center around drinking need to be established. This approach however is unlikely to be effective whilst health messaging is countered by online alcohol advertising (Atkinson et al., 2011).

Current alcohol educational interventions delivered in universities contrast with the normalization of drinking in UK campus settings and therefore have limited effect in challenging heavy drinking norms (Foxcroft et al., 2015). Established heavy drinking routines and norms are transmitted to new students before undergraduates arrive on campus which are then reenacted within university settings, strengthening the norms of a student intoxicated culture (Davies et al., 2018). This has implications for attempts to challenge alcohol behavior, as once normative perceptions and behaviors are established within groups, they become difficult to challenge. Research indicates that early intervention may be more effective in challenging heavy drinking norms (Livingstone et al., 2011) and that interventions delivered before and during the transition to university may have long-term influence in reducing students' drinking behavior over their university life course (Riordan et al., 2015). This coupled with the role that alcohol has in meeting students' developmental needs during the transition to university suggests that there is a need to target expectations and disrupt alcohol's role in adaptation before young people arrive on campus. The transition to university may constitute a 'teachable moment' in which interventions can influence positive behavioral change through tailored and targeted approaches. Such interventions should aim to re-frame and modify situated norms and present an alternative means of adaption that does not revolve around excessing drinking (Davies et al., 2018).

Limitations

An opportunistic sampling method was adopted, which recruited high school and college students across one area in North West England. This means that those recruited may not necessarily represent the diverse local student population in terms of ethnicity. Studies have shown that other groups, such as international students (Thurnell-Read et al., 2018) have very different perceptions of drinking at university. Therefore, the views recorded in this study may not be representative of those that do not fit the mainstream stereotype of young people in the UK. In addition, existing peer groups were utilized for focus group discussions which may have led to the possibility of peer influence on participant responses.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have created a comprehensive picture of how prospective students conceptualize the use

of alcohol at university and what students expect to gain from drinking when they arrive at university. This study highlights the significance of pre-arrival alcohol expectations and demonstrates the impact that widely held perceptions have on shaping ideology and influencing drinking behavior. As past research has shown, once heavy drinking norms become established, they become difficult to challenge (Livingstone et al., 2011). Breaking down these norms present real challenges for those trying to address excessive drinking in universities. Early intervention which challenges, re-frames and modifies beliefs at this developmental time-point are crucial if universities want to create a moderate student drinking culture.

Author Contributions

ZQ conceptualized the research. NG designed the study. NG managed the data collection and conducted the analysis. NG wrote the first draft of the manuscripts and all authors have contributed to and have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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