

Branded consumption and social identification - young people and alcohol

A new paper by Professor Christine Griffin et al from the University of Bath, UK, looks at the motivations behind drinking behaviour in young people in the UK. The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) suggests several considerations for future policy.

Focusing on the role of marketing practices in shaping young people's attitudes to alcohol consumption, the research included analysis of 216 alcohol adverts, both in print and broadcast. While extreme drinking and determined drunkenness may be perceived as the norm amongst young people, there is some positive news from the research. Evidence suggests that increases in young people's alcohol consumption is levelling off. Previously, representations of binge drinking as a source of entertainment, coupled with pervasive coverage of drunken celebrities, increased the social acceptance of binge drinking. The glamorous depiction of excessive drinking, along with an increased use of internet based social networking sites to share images of drunken nights out, has enabled the linkage between alcohol and 'having fun'.

The paper describes how the retail trade has been transformed, since the 1980's with the emergence of café bars, dance bars and themed pubs in most city centres, broadening the traditional customer base well beyond the traditional pub clientele of white working class heterosexual men to include more culturally and sexually diverse groups in the 18 to 35 range. Alcohol consumption is now central to the night-time economy in British towns and cities (Chatterton and Hollands, 2001). Drinking to intoxication has become normalised amongst the majority of young men

– and women – as an integral part of a 'good night out'.

This study attempts to present a systematic and in-depth examination of young people's accounts of alcohol consumption and the meanings of drinking in their everyday social lives, set in the context of the sophisticated global marketing of alcoholic drinks.

Key findings

The report found that 'Calculated hedonism' was mobilised as an important element in the culture of intoxication that dominates young people's relationship to alcohol consumption, and as a significant counterpoint to the overwhelmingly negative discourses around young people's 'binge drinking' in contemporary British government, health education and social policy in alcohol. The report states 'Official discourses of panic over young people's 'binge drinking' that emphasise recommended 'safe' levels of drinking in terms of restricted units of alcohol consumed, are unlikely to have any substantial purchase on young people's drinking practices'.

The central importance of the social friendship group as a focus of young people's identities, and the central role of drinking (to excess) in the everyday practices of friendship and having 'fun'.

For many of our male participants this formed the basis of all-male friendship groups and was a key element in male social bonding. Young men in particular made a distinction between going out drinking "to get wasted" and going out "on the pull". Each form of drinking practice involved a different pattern of alcohol consumption, visiting a different set of venues

with different intended outcomes. "Getting wasted" was usually represented as an all-male practice. When going out "on the pull", young men referred to using alcohol (as did young women) to give them "confidence" in order to facilitate the formation of heterosexual contact.

For young women, although drinking is key to their friendship groups and socialising, drinking to excess was (still) construed as fundamentally unfeminine (and risky), retaining its traditional association with hegemonic masculinity. However, alcohol consumption also forms a central (and compulsory) part of young people's social lives. Drinking stories played an important role in study participants' social lives and in the formation and consolidation of their friendship groups. Their stories involved cautionary tales of risk and the dangers associated with drinking; narratives involving loss of (self) consciousness and loss of memory linked to excessive drinking; adventure stories of fun, risk and excitement; and a wealth of 'funny stories' about the pleasures and perils of drinking, socialising and 'going out' in the night-time economy.

The study concludes that alcohol advertising and marketing in contemporary British Society recognises the motivation of drinking amongst young people as far more diverse, complex and sophisticated than a traditional focus on alcohol adverts would suggest. It concludes that Government 'sensible drinking' messages are largely ineffective among this age group.

Source: Griffin, Christine et al (2008). *Branded Consumption and Social Identification: Young People and Alcohol*. The Full Research Report is available from the ESRC website <http://www.esrcsocietytoday.ac.uk>