

Attitudes and behaviour of young adult drinkers in Northern Ireland

A qualitative study



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Introduction

In recent years, alcohol research has focused on the impact of heavy drinking occasions, or binge drinking, on both societal and individual health. Analysis of national survey data in several countries revealed that the level of consumption and the number of heavy drinking occasions were related to various alcohol problems, and it was consistently found that the number of heavy drinking occasions was a stronger predictor of drinking problems than consumption.¹ The likelihood of experiencing drinking problems is greater for a moderate drinker who occasionally drinks to excess than for a heavy drinker who rarely drinks excessively.² Heavy drinking over time will increase the risk of chronic health effects such as cirrhosis. However, those who consume relatively small amounts but who occasionally binge drink contribute substantially to acute alcohol problems, such as impaired driving, alcohol-related family trouble or difficulties in employment, in addition to other problems in society.

Findings like this prompted the UK Government to change the sensible drinking guidelines from a weekly to a daily limit to discourage saving units for the 'weekend binge'.³ Current guidelines for sensible drinking are: for men, between three and four units a day; for women, between two and three units a day. Recent analysis of drinking patterns in Northern Ireland reveals that this change in recommended safe drinking levels has had little effect in decreasing the pattern of binge drinking for Northern Ireland drinkers.⁴

Work in Northern Ireland suggested that alcohol incurs costs of £34.3 million per year that directly impact on government spending (eg health service and prison service). In addition, it is estimated that £743.2 million per year is incurred in costs that indirectly impact on Government spending (eg premature death, costs to industry due to sickness absences and road traffic accidents).⁵

The new *Strategy for reducing alcohol related harm, 2000*, contains several proposals for action grouped under five areas, one of which was encouraging responsible drinking: "to encourage people who do drink to do so responsibly, in line with current medical advice, in order to avoid alcohol-related problems".⁶ The strategy proposes a health promotion programme that includes initiatives developed for specific at-risk groups, based on local conditions, and that draws on local experience and expertise. In response to this, the Health Promotion Agency for Northern Ireland (HPA) – guided by findings of a survey of drinking patterns in Northern Ireland – commissioned this piece of qualitative research in January 2001 to gain a more in-depth picture of the drinking context, experiences and attitudes among those young people identified as heavy occasional or binge drinkers by the drinking patterns survey.

Drinking patterns in Northern Ireland

A survey of drinking patterns in Northern Ireland conducted by the HPA found that 70% of adults in Northern Ireland drink alcohol - 75% of men and 67% of women.⁴ Younger people are more likely to drink than older people. Those from higher income households are more likely to drink, but socioeconomic group and marital status affect the likelihood of women's drinking more than men's.

The survey reveals that over half (56%) of drinkers in Northern Ireland drink at least once a week, just over a third drink less often than weekly but 1 in 10 drinks almost daily. Twice as many men as women drink on a daily basis, but daily drinking is more common in older people of both sexes. Daily drinking was found to be most common among higher income and non-manual socioeconomic groups, but analysis of consumption revealed that these frequent drinkers were more moderate drinkers.

Analysis of drinking events for all drinkers over a seven day period confirmed that most drinking in Northern Ireland occurs at weekends. This general pattern of low weekday drinking with a steep increase at weekends – peaking on Saturdays – is consistent for men and women, regardless of any other personal characteristics. The youngest age groups have the lowest drinking incidence during the week and the highest on Saturdays. For example, the majority (71%) of younger men (aged 18-44) drink at least once a week, with 22% drinking less often than this. The rise in drinking incidence from weekday to weekend (from Thursday to Saturday) for the oldest age group is 25 percentage points, compared to a dramatic 47 percentage point rise for the youngest group.

The current daily drinking recommendations were not regularly exceeded by Northern Ireland drinkers but analysis of daily drinking limits reveals a persistent tendency to still concentrate drinking into one or two days of the week. Thirty seven percent of male drinkers and 20% of women drinkers who had drunk in the week prior to the survey had exceeded their weekly sensible drinking limit (over 21 units for men, over 14 for women).

This pattern suggests that the majority of Northern Ireland drinkers and younger drinkers in particular are concentrating their drinking into a small number of sessions at the weekend. Analysis of consumption revealed that these few sessions were heavy sessions, which would indicate a binge drinking culture.

Binge drinking

There is no widely accepted definition of a 'binge'. The general public may still interpret the term 'binge' to mean prolonged bouts of continuous drinking, which can last for weeks.⁷ In some epidemiological studies, a binge has been defined as the consumption of five or more drinks in one sitting for men and four or more for women. In UK literature a binge session is defined as the consumption of at least 10 units of alcohol for men and seven units for women, ie roughly half the recommended weekly limit, in a single drinking session.⁸

For purposes of analysis, binge drinkers were defined as those males who drank ten or more units at one sitting or females who drank seven or more units at any one sitting. Forty eight percent of men and 35% of women who had drunk in the week prior to the survey had participated in at least one heavy session, or binge. Analysis revealed that binge drinking was more common in younger age groups: incidence dipped sharply with age.

There was significant variation in the incidence of binge drinking between men and women in different socioeconomic groups. Those from semi-skilled and unskilled socioeconomic groups were more likely to binge drink. Women in the lowest income group, while least likely to drink overall, are most likely to binge when they do drink.

The costs of binge drinking

Apart from the cost to the health service, the cost of absenteeism from work and the cost to criminal justice services, there is also a risk to the individual's health. New evidence suggests that there is a higher risk of heart attack among binge drinkers.⁹

A comparison of people's blood pressure throughout the week in Northern Ireland and France has added to the emerging consensus that bingeing is particularly hazardous to the cardiovascular system. The data linked the increase in blood pressure in people in Northern Ireland with their pattern of Friday and Saturday bingeing, and led the researchers to suggest that the results could help to explain the increased danger of having a heart attack on a Monday.¹⁰ The conclusion from this research is also supported by research in Scotland.¹¹

Canadian research indicates that binge drinking, possibly even at relatively infrequent intervals, presents a significantly increased risk of CHD and hypertension.¹² Regular heavy consumption of alcohol heightens the danger of ischaemic stroke, and potentially fatal kidney damage has been added to the catalogue of harm that can result from binge drinking over time.

Research from Scotland found that 64% more people were admitted to casualty suffering from the effects of alcohol on a Saturday than the daily average.¹¹ Furthermore, young people who binge drink could be risking serious damage to their brains now and increasing memory loss later in adulthood, according to new research. Adolescents may be even more vulnerable to brain damage from excessive drinking than older drinkers.¹³

Recent research suggests that while women who take alcohol in moderation do not increase their chances of contracting breast cancer, there is an increased risk of breast cancer among those who binge.^{14,15}

Aim

The aim of this research is to gain an in-depth picture of the experiences, views and perceptions of 18-35 year old adults in Northern Ireland with regard to their own alcohol consumption. The principal themes that the research aimed to explore among young people were:

- perceived benefits of drinking - psychosocial benefits and motivation to drink;
- drinking context - including with whom, when, where, what and how much;
- knowledge and attitudes - understanding of current sensible drinking guidelines, perceptions of binge and problem drinking, social acceptability of drinking and being drunk, drink-driving and drinking in front of children;
- perceived negative effects of drinking - on the individual's health, mental health and lifestyle, on the family and on society.

Methodology

The target group for this research was those highlighted in the drinking patterns survey to be most likely to participate in heavy occasional drinking or binge drinking. These were young adult drinkers (between the ages of 18 and 35) throughout Northern Ireland belonging to the social class groups C2, D and E, with a slight bias towards men. Note that social class grouping is based on the occupation of the chief income earner of the household.

A combined approach of semi-structured interviews and focus groups was used. It was anticipated that in group discussions participants may be less honest or even prone to exaggerate due to the group dynamic. Personal interviews therefore allowed probing on more sensitive issues and verification of issues that emerged from group discussion. A preliminary observation exercise had taken place in some pubs in Belfast to aid development of a discussion guide. Participants were recruited based upon the following criteria: whether they were a drinker, their age, gender, social class and geographical area.

In total, 20 semi-structured interviews (13 male, seven female) were undertaken with adults aged 18-35 in the C2DE social class grouping. The makeup of the interviewees is detailed in Table 1, page 46.

A total of 12 focus groups (eight male, four female) were held in several locations throughout Northern Ireland. The number of participants in each group ranged from 7 to 10 people. The location of the groups together with the social class profile of participants is detailed in Table 2, page 47.

The report uses verbatim quotations that are labelled by sex, social class, methodology and age in the case of interviews. All discussion group participants were aged 18-35 years. Where observations are made in the text about the age of group members, eg 'older members', these were based on the moderator's perception.

Findings

Perceived benefits of drinking

The role of pleasure as not only a motivation for drinking but also as a potential cause or indicator of positive health outcomes is attracting medical attention. Increasingly, public health and clinical medicine have begun to identify general quality of life and level of functioning as essential to health.¹⁶

Perceived benefits were readily discussed among participants. They suggested that the relaxation and increased social confidence that result from drinking enhance social cohesion and help strengthen relationships. The majority agreed that drinking added to their enjoyment of a social occasion.

“The laughter is better when you’ve been drinking.”

Male, C2DE, group.

Reduced stress

All of the women agreed that drink had relaxing effects. If they were out this would be energising but at home it would tend to calm things down and “send them to sleep”.

“If you’re uptight then it calms you down - especially after a bad week at work.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“You are happy, carefree and relaxed.”

Male, C2DE, group.

Some felt that drinking definitely made you more energetic, while others did not agree with this.

“Drinking would help me relax if I was trying to relax but if I was tired I would end up getting drunker.”

Male, D, interview.

“If you are tired when you go out you get more tired, but if you have energy before you go out then you have lots more.”

Male, C2D, group.

Increased confidence

A number said that they felt more attractive and that drink improved their personality. For example, some find it easier to talk to people of the opposite sex or might only dance when they were drinking. It was evident that alcohol gave these participants more confidence.

“You also think you are beautiful - before you go out you are worried about how you look, by the end of the night you don’t care.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

“You think you’re a better dancer when you’re drunk.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You don’t turn off the telly and pretend you’re Robbie Williams after a cup of tea.”

Female, C2DE, group.

"I think sometimes people come out of their shell when they get a drink in them you know. You usually find that the quieter ones usually come out more."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

"It boosts your confidence."

Male, C2DE, group.

An issue that arose in the male groups was the fact that drink made some men feel more powerful, but this was not true for all men. Those who experienced an increased sense of power after drinking stated that they had more confidence to confront other men.

"When I have drink on me I think I can overpower other men."

Male, aged 19, interview.

"I feel brave... invincible."

Male, C2DE, group.

"I'm as hard as f**k."

Male, C2DE, group.

"You can see why men think they're superman."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"You have to watch yourself though because you can get aggressive."

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

One man said that he used to intentionally pick fights with people who were bigger than him when he was drunk because he felt so powerful (male, DE, group).

Participants did not directly state that they purposely drank a certain amount to feel these effects; however, it was evident that this feeling of power was seen as a beneficial effect of drinking alcohol.

Social bonding

"The use of alcohol is seen as a social cement which along with other group activities brings together the members of the community thereby enhancing group solidarity."¹⁷

For some groups of friends drinking was the core activity that gave them reason to meet. There was variation among the men in relation to the importance of drink in maintaining social relations. A number of men said that they would see friends when they were not drinking. These occasions would often relate to sporting events such as football practice, going to the gym, snooker, golf and rugby. However, after discussing this point further a number of men did admit that there would be drink involved at some point during the meeting. One group said that the local football team's beer was sponsored by the local pub for a few hours after the match, so they all went there after a game and drank. Some men said that social contact with friends did occur when there was no drink involved but it usually related to deciding where they would be drinking at the weekend. For some men, they would meet up "9 out of 10 times" (male, C2DE, group) when there was drink involved. Others said that they would only see their friends when they were drinking.

Strengthened relationships

The majority of participants agreed that their existing friendships had been strengthened as a result of going out and drinking with their friends. However, some did not agree that it strengthened their friendships even though they said that they would usually only see their friends when they were drinking.

"When you're drunk you tell your friends a lot more."

Female, C2DE, group.

"The proof of a true drinking friend is when they hold your hair back when you are being sick."

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

Some men felt that their friendships are stronger as a result of drinking. Some said that they felt closer to friends who drink as opposed to non-drinking friends and felt that the latter may feel left out in drinking situations. For most of the participants this was not really an issue as all their friends drink. They felt that strong friendships were often already well established before drinking was commonplace (ie from school). The majority acknowledged that drink made them more open with their friends and they would tell them more about themselves. One respondent said, "I could get by without drinking and still have mates" (male, C2, aged 24, interview). However, this was not commonplace.

"It's easier to take a drink and fit in than not."

Male, C2DE, group.

"Being drunk magnifies things - I have a great wife and great kids. My wife feels like this too."

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

Meeting new people

Participants felt that drinking is a very good way to meet people, though some females admitted that this aspect was more relevant when they were younger. Most of the participants felt less inhibited after drinks and found it easier to talk to new people. The majority of male participants felt a key benefit associated with drinking was meeting new people. Some men referred particularly to holidays and being able to meet new people easily at the bar, others related this to everyday drinking.

"Standing at the bar and taking up a conversation with someone is good."

Male, C2DE, group.

"Offering someone a drink immediately breaks down shyness, helping with friendships... making people more responsive and friendly. It's acceptable to buy a stranger a drink - you wouldn't stop someone on the street and offer to buy them a cup of coffee."

Male, D, aged 32, interview.

"It breaks down barriers because there are less inhibitions."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"I wouldn't do a lot of the things I do drunk when I'm sober."

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

"It does help you talk to people, although I can never remember what I've said."

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

Some female participants recognised that they would flirt more. They felt that it was a lot easier to approach men. Other women acknowledged that they were more likely to 'end up' with a man when they had been drinking; for men, drink gave them the courage to approach women or the ability to accept rejection.

"You would definitely chat to anyone and would stand at the bar and chat to men and they buy you drinks and it's great."

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

"You would just walk up to anyone you wouldn't normally approach."

Male, C2DE, group.

"It's much easier to approach women."

Male, C2DE, group.

“It doesn’t matter if you get knocked back when you’re drunk because you can blame it on the drink.”
Male, DE, group.

Drinking context

How often do we drink?

There was variation in the frequency of men’s drinking during the week. For women, the main pattern was to drink at the weekend. Having children had a significant bearing on the regularity of women’s drinking; whereas work patterns had more significance for men. Men’s drinking frequency ranged from once a fortnight to every night. It was not common to drink every night, although it was recognised that drinking frequency could vary depending on the amount of stress at work, as well as the amount and type of work and whether they had been working shifts.

“If I’m working sevens days out of the seven I maybe wouldn’t be up for it.”
Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“I have a beer every night when I come home from work to relax.”
Male, C2DE, group.

“(Working a shift) changes the night you go out but not the amount you drink.”
Male, D, aged 30, interview.

For some men, drinking heavily three nights in a row was not uncommon. Some were quite clear about the nights they would go out and had a set pattern.

For the most part, women said they drank at the weekend (Friday or Saturday night), with the main night of drinking being a Saturday. This was largely related to age and whether or not they had children. For women with children there was limited opportunity for weekday drinking outside the home. Most women said their drinking was limited to weekends because of the effects of hangovers.

“I have a babysitter on a Friday evening. That’s why we go out on a Friday.”
Female, D, aged 31, interview.

“I try not to drink at all during the week.”
Female, C2DE, group.

Only two women said that they drank every day. One did so to alleviate the stress of the day. “I have a glass of wine with my dinner every night and, depending on how bad my day had been, I would end up drinking the whole bottle” (female, C2, aged 34, interview).

However, some of the younger women (aged under 25 years) without dependants stated that they drank regularly during the week.

“Because I work in Belfast on Tuesdays and Thursdays I go out then and also drink on a Friday and Saturday.”
Female, C2DE, group.

For both sexes, frequency of drinking can depend on how much money is available.

“Your pocket dictates when you go out.”
Male, D, aged 30, interview.

"If I had more money I would drink every night."

Female, C2DE, group.

At what time of day do we drink?

Most of the men drank in the evening. The main exception to this was on a Saturday when it was commonplace for them to drink during the afternoon. This was usually after they had been playing or watching football and/or other sports. Some men would also drink on a Sunday afternoon. Drinking after work on Friday afternoons was also commonplace and, while participants did not treat this as a drinking occasion, they would drink up to six pints.

"If I'm out on a Saturday I would call in (to the local) for a couple and get the football results."

Male, C2DE, aged 32, interview.

"I'd have a couple of pints after work on a Friday with workmates."

Male, C2DE, group.

Most of the women said that they would only drink in the evening.

"I would wait 'til the kids have gone to bed before I have one, so that's about 9.00pm."

Female, C2DE, group.

Exceptions to this would occur if the participants were on holiday or out for a day trip. Others said that occasionally on a Saturday they would go to the pub during the day with the whole family and have one drink. One woman said that Saturday afternoon drinking would be associated with gambling. Some younger women without children would occasionally meet someone in town on a Saturday afternoon and go to a pub for one drink and end up staying there.

"Those are the best types of days - the ones you don't expect."

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

"I do like to have a drink on a Saturday afternoon, maybe put a bet on."

Female, C2DE, group.

Where do we drink?

There was variation within and between groups and interviewees about where they drank. Some of the women only ever drank at home. Some of the men would drink at home mainly and others, while they would have a drink at home, would go out on the majority of occasions. The reason for the variation was largely to do with family circumstances. "Going out was a rare occurrence" (male, C2D, group). Some mothers viewed this as a stage in their lives and that it would not last forever.

The younger men and women who were not married (although a number had girlfriends or boyfriends and children) went to pubs, nightclubs and sports/social clubs to do most of their drinking. The regular drinking venue for men was most often social or sports clubs.

"(I go to) the British Legion."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"(I go to) sports clubs 'cause of the cheaper drink and late opening."

Male, C2DE, group.

The majority of participants said that on a 'big night out' they would have a carry-out at home as a means of starting off the night. They would also drink in their own or someone else's home when they came back from the pub (this will be discussed in greater detail on page 19). It was common to go to someone's house after the pub. This was usually a spur of the moment decision and the location tends to be "the house where there's the most drink" (female, D, aged 31, interview).

"You wouldn't go to a club unless you were rightly."

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

"I drank two Bacardi Breezers when I was getting ready but I had to drink them dead quick 'cause I was meeting them (friends) on the bus. I was buzzing - it was great."

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

When going out to drink some of the younger participants stated that they would drink at more than one venue during the course of the evening. This was often part of a routine and venues were chosen depending on the cost of drinks, the type of establishment, ie bar or club, the time of night and the opening hours of different venues.

"I look for somewhere with a late bar or a lock in or a party in a friend's house."

Male, C2DE, group.

An example of a typical Saturday night out was given by one of the younger participants (female, D, aged 20, interview). She and some friends would start drinking on Saturday at about 5.00pm in her home. They would then go to their local pub for a few drinks ("the drinks are cheaper"). She would get a taxi into Belfast where she would go to a nightclub. This would finish at 2.00am, after which she would often go to a club that stays open until 7.00am.

Who do we drink with?

Overall, there was a mixed response to who people drink with. Six key groupings that participants would drink with have been identified, in order of regularity: single-sex company; mixed sex groups; with partner; work colleagues; family; alone. Drinking company for males and females was determined by the following factors:

Men	Women
• age	• age
• who he lives with (self, partner, parents)	• whether or not she has a partner
• whether he works	• whether she has children
• day of the week	• whether she works
• if involved/interested in sport	• day of the week

The girls night out

All participants agreed that going out with the girls (throughout the research the term girls was used by the female participants to refer to female companions of all ages) was when they would have the most fun. This type of night out occurred most regularly for female participants who were not married or did not have children. For those with children, the 'girls night out' had become the 'girls night in'.

"I like going out with girls more because you do tend to have a better laugh."

Female, C2DE, group.

A further aspect of the girls night out is the fact that the participants would meet up with their partners at some stage in the evening.

"I would normally meet up with him later on in the night - but I don't go out with him."

Female, C2DE, group.

"I would go out with a group of girlfriends and sometimes meet up with him later."

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

The all male group

For the majority of the men, drinking occurred in all male groups. The amount and frequency with which this happened depended on where the participants worked, what sports they played and the age of the participant. The men all had regular drinking mates. Drinking friends were generally known for quite a long time (some mentioned that they were friends from school), and for most they tended to be a similar age to themselves.

"I would go out with a regular group of (male) friends."

Male, E, aged 20, interview.

"(I would go out with) long-term mates - people I have grown up with."

Male, C2DE, group.

For some men, those they played sport with (again all male) were those they would socialise with most frequently and they would have regular nights where sport is played or watched while alcohol is consumed.

"If there's a football match on then we would head out to the pub."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"I play cricket during the summer and as soon as it is over we would be straight up into the bar for a few drinks."

Male, E, aged 25, interview.

"I usually play football on Saturday morning until 1.00pm and go to the bar afterwards and sit in the bar until about 4.00pm or 5.00pm to watch the football results and then head back to the house and get changed and head out to a club."

Male, C2DE, group.

Mixed sex groups

For those who went drinking in a mixed sex group (including their own partners), the women often did not sit with the men in the pub. The men would go off and play darts or pool. However, they would usually all come together at the end of the night. For the most part, there was limited evidence of mixed company drinking together all evening.

"Her husband came over and sat with us for a while and I had to tell him to clear off - you can't have as much fun."

Female, C2DE, group.

It was evident that men did drink in mixed gender groups but this was not discussed at length.

"There's a particular group that go out on a Friday night. She knows all their wives."

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

"We would drink in each other's houses on a regular basis and go to pubs and clubs at the weekends together. My girlfriend is friendly with their girlfriends."

Male, DE, group.

Some of the older male participants stated that they would go out for meals with their partner and other couples.

"We would maybe go out for a meal with another couple."

Male, C2D, group.

"Unless I'm out with the guys, it would be couples."

Male, C2D, group.

Drinking with partners

The older women were more likely to go out regularly with their partners. Younger women who had partners would see them during the week for a drink but tended to go out in groups on a Friday or Saturday night. When women drank with their partners alone it was mostly at home.

"We would sometimes (go out for a drink), but not very often."

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

Those men who had partners/girlfriends would go out with them occasionally or have a drink with them at home. It was agreed by about half the men that partners and girlfriends were not as much fun to go out with and that they would take them out "just to keep them quiet".

"It's definitely better without your girlfriend there."

Male, C2DE, group.

Some men highlighted that when they are drinking with their partners or girlfriends they would drink differently, either a different type of drink or a lesser amount.

"If I'm with my mates it would be vodka but if I was with my girlfriend it would be beer."

Male, C2DE, group.

"I drink beer all the time but if I was with the girl I wouldn't drink as much."

Male, C2DE, group.

Drinking with work colleagues

Some men would drink regularly with (mostly male) workmates, particularly on a Friday night. But workmates were not considered to be regular drinking mates. This is similar to the notion discussed earlier that they did not consider the 'after work drink' a drinking occasion. For the majority of participants, drinking with work colleagues occurred infrequently.

"We would maybe arrange a night out. We would go somewhere with work... the last time we went out was a Giants (Belfast's ice hockey team) game. We all went down there."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

Those women who worked would occasionally go out with colleagues and this tended to be on a Friday night or at Christmas. Drinking with work colleagues did not appear to comprise a major part of these women's social lives.

"We would go out quite a bit - the men from work always go out on a Friday after work and the women would go out probably once a month."

Female, C2DE, group.

Drinking with family members

Drinking with family was not a big part of socialising for the majority of those participating. Some said that their families were 'against' drink and others who were younger said that their families were "too old" or had different friends and "a different way of doing things" (female, D, aged 20, interview). While participants mentioned the fact that they drank with family at Christmas and special occasions, there was little mention of drinking with the family other than these occasions.

Drinking alone

The majority of the women said that they never drank alone. Male participants were more likely to go out alone in the certainty that they would meet up with someone they knew in the bars. They would call into a local pub and "fall into company at the bar" (male, C2DE, aged 30, interview).

"I go out by myself to the British Legion 'cause I know I'm going to meet mates over there."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

A small minority of participants drink at home by themselves.

"I'd have a few if I was just watching Brookside."

Male, C2DE, group.

"I would sit and drink listening to my Eminem CD."

Male, C2DE, group.

Two older women who drank every evening said that they would have no problem having a drink in the house by themselves. One would always have two Bacardis and coke. She said that she had an optic on the top of the bottle to regulate the amount she drank. The rest of the group (female, C2DE, group) gave her a hard time for being "a typical tight Scot".

However, drinking alone was not commonplace and, for some, drinking alone or at home was perceived to be a sign of someone who had a problem with drink.

The usual night out

Amount drunk on an average night out

Most of the men found it difficult to quantify the amount they had drunk. Some said they would have no more than five pints when they were out for a 'quiet night' and for others a 'quiet night' would be one or two beers or glasses of wine at home. During what participants defined as a 'normal' night out at the weekend the amount of drink was well in excess of the recommended limits for all participants. Some examples are listed below:

- ***"eight to ten bottles of beer at home followed by six pints in the pub."***
Male, C2, aged 19, interview.
- ***"three to four triple vodkas, a couple of pints and a couple of bottles of beer."***
Male, C2DE, group.
- ***"two bottles of beer, eight double vodkas and three Aftershocks."***
Male, C2DE, group.
- ***"a bottle of wine before going out, six pints and then spirits and Aftershocks."***
Male, C2DE, group.
- ***"six to eight pints followed by five to six shorts; three beers and at least 20 Vat 19s."***
Male, C2DE, aged 30, interview.

Initially, most female participants were not prepared to say how much they drank on an average night. They would not quantify the actual amount, stating that it would depend on a number of factors, such as who they were with and how they were feeling, how much money they had and also what the occasion was.

"It depends on who I am with and if I'm staying out all night or not."

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

"It depends on the group you're with."

Female, C2DE, group.

"It depends on how much money you have."

Female, C2DE, group.

Some participants stated that they would not know how much they drank because they had never thought about it before.

"I have never analysed how much I drink so I wouldn't know."

Female, C2DE, group.

This reluctance or inability to quantify the amount of alcohol consumed was especially evident in the focus groups where initially the women were not comfortable discussing their own drinking habits.

"More than you're supposed to have - let's put it that way."

Female, C2DE, group.

As the discussion progressed, more women gave examples of how much they drank. A couple of women said that five or six vodkas would 'do them' when they were out but most of these did say that they drank before they went out. A number of women said they drank 8 to 10 drinks; some said it was 10 to 15. (The drinks that participants are referring to would be spirit measures or alcopops.) One woman said she would drink a bottle of wine before she went out and then "a couple would do me when I'm out" (female, C2DE, group). Others said they would have over 15 drinks. One stated that on a very heavy night she could drink the equivalent of a ten-glass bottle of vodka (female, D, aged 20, interview).

Choice of drink

The older men were more likely to say that they drank beer, wine and spirits. Younger men drank cider, alcopops and shots. A number of the younger men would get drunk on cider alone.

"Well, I like my pints and I also like alcopops like Smirnoff Ice or WKD. There's a new one out now, a blue one, which is quite nice."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

Changing choice of drink during the night was common. It would be normal to start on pints (or carry-out cans in the house beforehand) and then move on to shorts. This would be for two main reasons: that the beer was making them feel full and that they were not getting drunk enough.

"(I go on to shorts) when I've got sick of drinking beer."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

"I drink pints until my stomach can't take any more, then I go on to whiskey."

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

"If you weren't really drunk enough or you didn't think it was hitting you or anything, you would probably go on to it (spirits)."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

Most women would not have the same drink all night. Some would have wine at home but would change to something different when they went out. Some started on beer and went on to spirits. Others had spirits and then changed to alcopops and vice versa. Quite a number said that they would drink shots at some stage during the evening - especially if it was a girls night out. These included Aftershock and Goldschlager.

"I have a desperate tendency to mix my drinks. If someone buys it, I'll drink it."

Female, C2DE, group.

"I would normally drink about 10-15 drinks and that would be vodka. On Saturdays it's vodka and Red Bull and then I would go on to gin and tonic, and then I would have a few shots."

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

Some participants mentioned that they did not like the taste of drink but would take it anyway because of the effect. Others admitted drinking a certain type of drink because it would get them drunk.

"I like something sweet like Malibu - something that's easy to drink."

Female, C2DE, group.

"Bacardi Breezers, I like them. They are easy to drink and you drink them quick but once you get outside they hit you all of a sudden, one minute you are fine and the next you are talking like a washing machine."

Female, C2DE, group.

"I drink wine all night because it gets you drunk."

Female, C2DE, group.

If they were going on to a party they would drink "whatever drink is there" (female, D, aged 31, interview) or finish off whatever drink is on the table (female, C2DE, group).

Buying systems

There is a clear distinction between the buying systems used by men (round-buying) and women (kitties). The majority of men stated that when they were out they would tend to buy in rounds. They acknowledged that buying in rounds added to the social cohesion of the group and was more efficient and convenient, as they had to go to the bar less often.

"It shows the people who you are buying a drink for that there is no hard feelings among you, no fighting or anything."

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

Round-buying applied a social pressure to drink faster or drink more than they wanted to or when they had had enough. Two factors emerged in relation to round-buying: social pressure to keep up; and wanting to get back the equivalent of what you spent, regardless of whether you wanted the drinks.

"The fastest drinker dictates how much you tend to drink... you're maybe not ready for a drink yourself but you don't like to see anybody sitting with an empty glass."

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

"You don't want to miss a round. There is pressure on you to keep up with them."

Male, C2DE, group.

“If you have had enough to drink and there is still two other people to buy a round, the chances are you drink faster.”

Male, C2D, group.

One man noted the difference between a large round and a small round. When there was a large group “you would drink fast to get all those drinks back” (male, D, aged 30, interview). He said that if he were drinking too slowly he would feel “agitated” and would have to speed up and rush his drink.

Many felt that the only way they could get out of being in a round was if they had no money. However, this “was not easy to admit in front of mates” and so for some men this never happened and for others it was rare (male, C2DE, group). One man said that his group of friends “slags off” people who don’t join in.

Kitties were not seen as a male method of buying but would be used at weddings or weekends away. They acknowledged again drinking to “get your money’s worth” and the “chaos” caused at the end of the night to get the money spent.

“Having a kitty is a woman’s thing.”

Male, DE, group.

When a kitty was used, they would tend to switch to shorts more quickly because “you want to keep up with everyone else” (male, C2DE, group) and “you want to get your money’s worth” (male, C2DE, group).

Some felt the kitty was a good idea because “you’re not stung for mixers” (male, C2DE, group). Others, however, said that “they can cause chaos at the end of the night if there’s money left over - people will drink loads” (male, C2, aged 33, interview).

The majority of female participants, on the other hand, said that they would put money into a kitty, the reasons given being similar to that for round-buying among men: social cohesion and convenience.

“It seems to work well having a kitty. It brings people together as a group... a couple of people do opt out but then they’re tight.”

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

“No one feels under pressure to go to the bar.”

Female, C2DE, group.

The strong social pressure to keep up, not to appear ‘tight’ or to get value for money was not as apparent for women as it was for men. A number of women said that they would rarely use a kitty because it “wasn’t fair on those ones who only drink half a lager” (female, D, aged 25, interview). Most groups did say that it was possible to opt out of round-buying or for people to do their own thing, although this was largely related to how well they knew the crowd.

If women were out with partners the men would always buy the drinks even if the men and women were not sitting together. In this instance the partners would normally buy in rounds.

What else do they spend their money on?

The men interviewed said that when they were out drinking they would spend money on cigarettes, food, drinks for others, jukebox, pool table and condoms.

“If I’m in the pub, (I spend money on) playing pool and the jukebox.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

About half of the group said that they did not spend much money on games machines. However, there were some men and a small number of women who said that they would “pump a huge amount of money in those machines” (male, DE, group). In quite a few of the groups, the men also said that they would undertake other forms of gambling. They stated that they would gamble much more recklessly when they had been drinking: “you make stupid bets” (male, C2D, group). Some said that they would often bet on horses or play cards when drinking and would gamble more when they had been drinking.

Men said that they would also spend money on buying drinks for other people, particularly women. They would spend more money on cigarettes. Almost all of those who smoked stated that the amount they smoked multiplied when they were drinking.

“I smoke five a day normally but when I'm out I'd smoke 25.”

Female, C2, aged 22, interview.

After the pub

There was a mixed response from participants as to what they did after the pub closed. This was largely related to age. The younger men and women (aged 18-25) tended to go on to other venues or to friends' houses for more alcohol, and the older participants would go home.

“I normally have enough to do me inside the period that I am out.”

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

“I look for somewhere with a late bar or a lock in or a party in a friend's house.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“I would always be looking for a party.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Going to someone's house after the pub is the most common occurrence, and the house chosen depends on “where there's the most drink” (female, D, aged 31, interview).

Drinking at home

A number of the younger participants lived with their parents and so the amount of drinking they would do at home was limited. As well as this, some of the men's partners did not drink and so they would not drink at home. Others stated that their partners did not think that it was a good idea to keep drink in the house because of children.

“I don't drink at home... my wife doesn't drink.”

Male, D, aged 32, interview.

A wide variety of situations were described when participants discussed drinking at home. These can be categorised as follows:

- having a drink at home before going out;
- having a drink at home after a night out;
- drinking at home either alone or with partner/friends;
- drinking at home when there is a party/crowd.

Getting in the mood

The majority of participants gave examples of times that they had a drink at home before going out for the evening. For most participants the purpose of this was twofold: to save money; and to get them in the mood or to get them drunk. When participants are drinking before they go out they will do so either alone or with a group

of same sex friends. Several men stated that they would drink in the house by themselves prior to going out, but this did not seem to get acknowledged as a drinking occasion. This was seen as “cheap drink” and would be the normal pattern of drinking at the weekend. They would normally drink about six cans before they went out.

“You’d get tanked up before you go out.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“It (five to ten bottles of beer) acts as a starter for the night.”

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

“I would have a bottle of wine in the house before I go out and then one or two would do me.”

Female, C2DE, group.

After the night out

After returning from a night out some participants would have a drink either in their own house or in a friend’s house in order to extend the enjoyment of the night and to drink more.

When participants drink in the house after a night out then it will be mixed between all male and mixed sex groups depending on the night. If participants are going to a planned house party there is usually a mixed gender group and this will often include family as well as friends.

“If I am going to a house party it would usually just be with my girlfriend. If it was one of my mates having a house party then we would all go back to the house.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

The quiet night in

When participants are having a quiet night in this will often involve drinking with their partners. Some of the younger men (aged 18-25) stated that they would be more likely to drink in the house and not go out if they had a girl with them, as staying in would be more likely to lead to a sexual encounter compared to going out.

“There’s a better chance of getting sex (if drinking in the house with partner).”

Male, C2DE, group.

Some participants stated that they would have a different drink when at home compared to other times. Participants stated that they would drink stronger drinks in the house before they were going out in order to get them drunk or tipsy.

“I always have a drink when I’m getting ready to go out. A Bacardi Breezer is usually what I like but I don’t like to go out unless I’ve had a few drinks.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

When participants went to a house party after the pub/club, the choice of alcohol available was often limited. If this was the case, participants admitted drinking whatever was available.

How much?

The quantity of alcohol consumed when drinking at home depends on the individual situation. Prior to going out, many male participants said that they would drink six bottles or cans of beer. One of the most common situations where participants (particularly women) would drink in the house was if they were with their partner or one or two friends. For the majority, this would be described as a ‘quiet drink’. A quiet drink for women was considered to be up to four or five drinks. For men a ‘quiet night’ would be a few beers (number not specified).

“It would only be a couple of cans in front of the TV.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“If he’s having a drink on a Saturday night I would have one or two to pass myself but I couldn’t be bothered.”

Female, D, aged 31, interview.

“On average five to six good home measures of vodka on a Saturday night. On a Sunday with my dinner a bottle of wine.”

Male, C2D, group.

Some said that they would have more drinks at home if there was a special event (such as a christening, birthday, Christmas or the World Cup) and that they may also drink more at home in the summer time, eg if there were barbecues, when they would tend to have drinks with people in the street “who you would not normally socialise with” (male, C2, aged 33, interview).

The majority said that they drank less at home. This was especially true when there was only one or two people drinking. It was felt that it was the impact of the crowd that made them drink more and so if there was a crowd in the house then more drink would be consumed. Participants described a house party as more similar to being out. They would drink for longer and drink more. Participants generally were less sure of the amounts that they would drink at home. Some stated that they would get drunk quickly at home due to larger measures. Some stated that they could only tell how much they had drunk by looking at the empty bottles in the morning.

“We would always end up getting very drunk in the house. I don’t know what it is but we just can’t handle our drink in the house... I suppose it must be the bigger measures.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

“My family all came round to my house and kept pouring me (drink).”

Female, C2DE, group.

“If there’s a couple of people around, you don’t think about how much you’re drinking, you just look at the empties the next morning.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

One woman mentioned that she had an optic on her bottle of Bacardi in the house and this was instantly derided by the rest of the group as she was referred to as “tight” (female, C2DE, group).

Drinking too much at home, particularly alone, was seen to be a sign of problem drinking by a number of men and women. This was referred to as “blue bag syndrome” (male, C2DE, group) and was deemed inappropriate. One man said that if you got drunk in the house you would be “inviting the belief from others that you had a drink problem” (male, C2DE, group).

Buying alcohol for in-house drinking

All of the group expected to bring drink to other people’s homes and that people would bring drink to theirs. Some complained that people sometimes don’t bring enough drink. When they had experienced not having enough drink, there was usually a local bar/club/off-licence that opened late, and they would get a taxi to go to or deliver from it. In some of the groups the women did not know that the bar/club opened late, and when they heard this they thought that this was useful information to know.

“I phone and say ‘get a carry-out up here quick’... they do bottles of vodka and beer and cigarettes.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You can get it through dial-a-drink and all night off-licences. Even if you’re hammered you still won’t be happy until you get a few more tins. Even if you don’t drink them it’s good to know they are there.”

Male, C2DE, group.

Physical effects of drinking at home

The majority of participants who drank at home felt that alcohol had a different physical effect when drunk there compared to when they were out at a pub or club. The majority of participants agreed that they would be more likely to be relaxed or sleepy at home compared to being more lively when out. Some men put the relaxed feeling when at home down to not “being obliged to keep up with anyone” and being able to drink at your own pace (male, C2D, group). Men also felt they could stop drinking earlier when they were at home.

“It’s mellow and you wind down... and ease into a state of drunkenness.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“I tend to fall asleep in the house and keel over but you never fall asleep when you are out.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“(When out) ...you plan to get drunk.”

Male, E, aged 18, interview.

“When I’m out you can dance and keep going more.”

Female, C2DE, group.

In one group, participants said that they would be more likely to become down if they were drinking in the house.

“It’s just boring (drinking in the house) and you can get yourself down.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Impact on behaviour

For the most part, participants reported being calmer when drinking at home than when they were out. Paradoxically, many reported feeling less inhibited drinking outside the home, especially in a club. This appeared to be related to the social norms and acceptability of being drunk and loud with certain people and in certain settings (see page 25).

“You are less inhibited (when you are out).”

Male, D, aged 32, interview.

Women had more mixed ideas about how drinking alcohol impacts on behaviour when they are drinking inside or outside of the home. This appears to be related to age and whether or not they had children. Some participants felt that they could “let their hair down” more if they were at home because there was no one to watch them.

A further difference between drinking inside and outside of the home was the aspect of safety and how women felt about being out of the house and having a drink. Participants agreed that they felt safer drinking at home, as they would not have to worry about getting home. A further aspect of safety that was mentioned by some of the younger women (aged under 25 years) was the awareness of date rape drugs.

“I don’t mind getting drunk in the house due to the fact that you are not out anywhere and you don’t have to worry about getting home.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“I wouldn’t drink out of a glass now because of this date rape drug. You have to be dead careful now.”

Female, C2DE, group.

A further impact on drinking in the house was the presence of children. Many stated that they would not want to get drunk at home with children present and would not want to let their child see them drunk. Others did not approve of drinking even in moderation at home when children are present. This aspect is dealt with in further detail in the section on social acceptability on page 27.

Knowledge and attitudes

The current recommended guidelines for safe drinking without accruing significant health risk are “between three and four units a day for men of all ages” and “between two and three units a day for women of all ages”. Consistently drinking more than these recommended units a day is not advised as a sensible drinking level because of the progressive health risk it carries”.³

Participants’ understanding of sensible drinking guidelines

The majority of participants were not aware of any guidelines. Only one or two individuals knew that there were current government sensible drinking guidelines. Neither did participants readily talk about the pre-1995 guidelines based on a weekly consumption of 21 units per week for men and 14 per week for women. While some men were able to state the correct number of units, they did not appear to understand the unit concept or have any practical understanding of what a unit of alcohol was.

There was a mixed perception among participants regarding what was a sensible amount to drink. Several participants would not give an actual amount as they felt that it would depend on the tolerance level of the individual and a number of factors, such as age and family circumstances. “Everyone’s tolerance level to alcohol is different” (female, C2DE, group). One man said that “it’s how much it would take for me to get fuzziness in my head” (male, C2, aged 30, interview). This would depend on time of day, mood and how much he had eaten.

Others who offered their views on sensible guidelines did not focus on a daily amount but on larger amounts on a small number of occasions. Some said five to seven or seven to eight drinks on any given night once or twice a week (referring to their usual drink, which would be at least two units per drink for men and one and a half units for women). Some said this would be a couple of glasses of wine a day and then a bit more at the weekend. Other examples include:

- ***“four to six pints, two to three times a week”;***
- ***“seven to twelve pints in total”;***
- ***“seven pints at one go”;***
- ***“drinking the whole weekend - as long as you don’t drink during the week”;***
- ***“three to four pints two to three times a week”;***
- ***“four to five pints twice a week”;***
- ***“one to two glasses of wine a night”.***

While the men quoted these amounts as “sensible drinking” very few of them related this to their own drinking habits, which were for the vast majority of men a lot heavier than they had described as a “sensible amount”.

When advised of the current guidelines, focusing on a daily limit, quite a few felt that this was reasonable, although the majority misinterpreted the focus on a daily amount and typically said they would “save them all up and drink them on the one night” (female, C2DE, group). They typically multiplied the daily amount by seven to give a weekly amount of 21 units per week for women and 28 units per week for men. Saving units up for one night is precisely what a daily guide is designed to discourage, and one reason why a weekly guide was changed to a daily guide.

Those who were made aware of how much is too much said that they would not take any notice, while others said that it was a good guideline to have, “I suppose it’s a good guide to have” (female, C2DE, group), but perhaps not necessarily follow. The majority of men did not agree with it and did not understand how it could fit in with the practicalities of their drinking pattern. Some men in the groups could understand why you should drink a couple of drinks every night but they still preferred to “save them all up for the weekend” (male, C2DE, group).

“You don’t say ‘this glass is four units so I can’t have any more.’”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You want to keep the craic going so you don’t think about stopping drinking.”

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

“There’s no point in having just two drinks unless it’s lunchtime.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“You couldn’t just have a pint and go home, it’s impossible.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“They (the Government) probably know what they are talking about, but I would prefer to not spread it over the week.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“I save mine up and drink them all in one night.”

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

A number of the women were embarrassed by the sensible drinking guidelines as they had clearly indicated earlier in the discussions that they would drink more than this.

Participants’ definition of problem drinking

Participants were asked for their beliefs about what would indicate that someone had an alcohol problem. Most felt that those who had a drink problem were people who drink every day. However, a number of women were able to give examples of friends or relatives who would be “dry” for months and then drink heavily for months. These people were also defined as having a problem.

“If you drink every day to get drunk.”

Female, D, aged 31, interview.

“If you drink seven drinks every night, then you have a problem.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

“It’s drinking every night and then when you wake up reaching for another.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“Drinking a bottle of wine by yourself every night.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

“If you sacrificed other things for drink, then you have a problem.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Some saw a distinction between themselves - who drink occasionally - and those who “need to drink” as the main definition of someone with a problem.

“It’s someone who starts to shake if they don’t have a drink.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“Going clean mad if they couldn’t get a drink.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Among men, while the definition of what constitutes a drink problem did vary slightly, it was generally accepted that someone who drinks every day has a problem. Some people defined a drink problem as having five pints a day. However, drinking 70 units of alcohol (as some participants did most weeks) at the weekend

was not seen to be an alcohol problem. None of the men interviewed felt that they currently had a drink problem.

“I think anybody who needs a drink every day definitely has a problem.”

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

“Needing alcohol.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“It’s whenever being sober is strange.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“Someone who drinks at breakfast, dinner, tea and supper.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“Someone who can’t go a day without taking a reasonable amount of drink.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

For both men and women, drinking alone or drinking too much at home was also seen by some as a sign of a problem. This was referred to as “blue bag syndrome” (male, C2DE, group) and was deemed inappropriate. If you got drunk in the house you would be “inviting the belief from others that you had a drink problem” (male, C2DE, group). However, most participants also drank at home while getting ready to go out but did not acknowledge this as an actual drinking occasion.

Social acceptability of drinking and drunkenness

“I really don’t worry what people think of me. I leave the house drunk and come back drunk - I have a good time.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

This quotation summarises the general attitude among younger participants. Paradoxically, many reported feeling less inhibited drinking outside the home, especially in a club, this appeared to be related to the social norms and acceptability of being drunk and loud with certain people and in certain settings (see page 22).

When discussing drinking in different settings, participants reported being calmer when drinking at home than when they were out, or having to be better behaved in a pub rather than in a club. As one man explained, if you were drunk in a pub you are often told to calm down, in a club “nobody cares” and at home people would be asking you “why are you getting drunk?” (male, E, aged 19, interview).

“Being drunk in a club would have no problems but in a pub people may think you’re a fool.”

Male, E, aged 18, interview.

“You’re less concerned with watching what you are doing when you are out than in your own house.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

For others, the drinking company rather than the setting influences their behaviour.

“I don’t really care what people think of me. We’re out in the same crowd and we’re all a bit mad so that’s it. I suppose you would be a bit more reserved if you were with work people.”

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

One man said that while his family would frown on him being drunk, his rugby mates would make him feel ostracised for not drinking.

More of the older females took into account the opinions of others and were more self-conscious:

“You do watch a bit when you are out. I was over in Liverpool in a bar and we went for it 'cause there was no one there who could cast it up to you.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“Since I've had the children I've been more sensible... 'cause you don't know who is watching you.”

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

The general consensus was that drunk men are more socially acceptable than drunk women. Some women themselves were also of this opinion.

“A man can get away with it more than a woman.”

Female, D, aged 31, interview.

“It's horrible seeing girls drunk with boke all over their hair.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“If a woman is drunk people say that she is a slag. And women do always make a beeline for a fella when they are drunk.”

Female, C2, interview.

However, this was not the case for all women. Some felt “drunk men are more annoying” (female, C2DE, group) and “women can hold their drink better” (female, D, aged 24, interview). Others felt that there was little difference.

“Well, I think it is acceptable to see both. My father, for example, wouldn't like to see a drunk woman. He wouldn't like me to be drunk but it's alright for my brothers to be drunk.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

Female participants who had positive attitudes to women drinking changed their opinion if it was likely that children would be affected.

“I would only think it was bad for a woman if there were children about.”

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

Some women said that they don't mind seeing their own friends drunk. However, some said that when they get really bad “you would worry for their safety” (female, C2DE, group). The agreed perception among women was that drunk men were more likely to be violent, although a number said that they had encountered violent women or had turned violent themselves.

The majority of male participants did not like to see women drunk.

“When you see a drunk woman you think ‘she shouldn't be doing that!’”

Male, E, aged 18, interview.

“From my point of view, a drunk man is more acceptable than a drunk woman.”

Male, D, aged 32, interview.

"You don't expect them to get as drunk as that."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

However, some men did not distinguish between the two and were accepting of the fact that women get drunk.

"A drunk man is as bad as a drunk woman."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"Women work as hard as men and so are entitled to play as hard."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"If my girlfriend is drunk, then happy days."

Male, C2DE, group.

Several participants distinguished between whether the woman was in their company or not. Some felt that if the woman was in their company, her drunkenness would not be so much of a problem. Others, however, said that they would be embarrassed if their partner was drunk and "I'd pretend she wasn't with me" (male, C2DE, group).

Some men stated that they did not like to see a woman drunk because they would be concerned about her safety. A woman "could be taken advantage of" (male, E, aged 19, interview) and "was more vulnerable" (male, C2DE, group). Others were not so worried and viewed a drunken woman as an opportunity. "You'd help a woman who was drunk so as to get into her knickers, or her purse" (male, C2DE, group).

A number of men felt that women should be excluded from pubs because "they fight on drink" (although one of these men had admitted to regularly starting fights himself).

"Women are schizos on drink but men can handle drink."

Male, DE, group.

Certain men used words such as "tarts", "fair game", "more shameful" and "tragic" when describing drunk women.

Drinking in front of children

There was a mixed response to the issue of whether people should drink in front of children. Some of the younger participants (aged under 25) who did not have children did not have an opinion on this issue, but over half of the female and most of the male participants stated that they did not think it was a good idea for anyone to be drinking at all in front of children. Some felt it was okay to have one or two drinks but not to get drunk. One man said his wife found it acceptable for him to drink beer in front of his children but not spirits. A number of men did not mind getting drunk in front of the children because their partner would stay sober to look after them. One man acknowledged that "alcohol impairs your ability to manage a crisis" (male, D, aged 32, interview). For example, he said that if he had been drinking he could not drive his child to hospital if he had to.

Examples of differing opinions are detailed below.

"It's best not to, especially if you have an infant."

Female, C2DE, group.

"The men just get on with it and drink away but you'd never be able to settle."

Female, C2DE, group.

“So long as children cannot get drink there is no problem them being present when drinking is going on.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

“So long as there is someone responsible enough to look after them.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“My child has seen me drinking but I don’t think he has seen me drunk.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“They’ve never seen me drunk.”

Female, D, aged 31, interview.

Some men feel it is important that drink is not hidden from children. One group of women (female, C2DE, group) and a number of those who were interviewed did not have any reservations about drinking in front of children. They felt it was better that “kids grow up in the real world”. They felt their own parents were more likely to hide their drinking and it didn’t do them any good. One mother said, “the kids love it when mummy has been drinking because there is always a disco” (female, C2DE, group).

Some women also said that they would let their children drink. For example, one woman said that at dinner when she is having a beer she would make shandies for her eight year old and ten year old. Another example was of a four year old who would try her mother’s Bacardi and coke “but I know by looking at her that she really doesn’t like the taste of it at all” (female, C2DE, group). One woman said, “In France all the kids drink wine dead early, so what is wrong with it?” (female, C2DE, group).

Drinking and driving

All of the female participants stated strongly that they were against drink-driving and that they did not do it, although some had done it in the past. However, in many of the female group discussions if there had been a woman who did drink and drive the strength of negative opinion against it would mean that she would not have said anything. One woman in a personal interview said that she would drive home after a big party. She lived in the country and felt that this was not a problem.

“I would never do it.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You can’t have any amount of drink.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“It cracks me up that people do it.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

The majority of women felt that they could not have even one drink and drive and that this should be the law.

“I don’t think you could have anything to drink and still be able to drive.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

Others did say that they would have one drink but nothing more. Most also felt that even though they couldn’t have anything to drink and then drive, their partners could.

“You can have a couple of drinks before it affects your driving skills but I don’t drink and drive.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

“He would have a pint or two and drive but I wouldn’t.”

Female, C2DE, group.

In contrast to the women, the majority of men felt that drinking between one and three pints was considered safe for driving. Some were adamant that one pint would affect driving skills, while others stated that they would feel okay after three. One man said that two to three pints was okay “but I would end up driving faster” (male, D, aged 30, interview). A number of participants said that they had drunk four or five pints and driven home “but you end up driving more carefully” (male, C2DE, group).

However, about half of the men said that although they had in the past, they personally would not drink anything and drive.

“You get caught too easily.”

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

“I wouldn’t consider driving after one but I might after 15.”

Male, C2D, group.

“In an emergency.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“It is a real temptation to drive... you think you’re okay but you’re not.”

Male, C2DE, group.

In three of the groups the majority of men said that they would drink and drive. They said that some of their nights out would involve driving around the local area with their mates in the car while they carried on drinking.

Driving the next morning

If the issue of driving the morning after alcohol had been consumed did not arise naturally in the groups, it was introduced by the moderator. The majority of participants admitted that they would regularly drive the next morning after a late night of drinking alcohol. As many of the men admitted that they would drink and drive they had not considered driving the next morning after a night’s drinking as being a risk at all. While participants did realise that sometimes they should not be driving first thing in the morning, they were not aware of how long the effects of alcohol last. A number of men but only one woman had thought about this issue. One woman (female, D, aged 20, interview) admitted that she would be drinking until 7.00am and then drive at 10.00am or 11.00am. The majority said that they realised they were probably doing wrong but continued to do so anyway.

“Nine out of ten people would do it.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“It’s still drink driving but you don’t think about it... you bluff it.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“It doesn’t cross my mind not to drive actually. I know I probably shouldn’t but I do anyway.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“I do think about it when I’m in the car but it doesn’t stop me driving.”

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

“I think that although you know you probably have alcohol in your system the fact that it is the next morning makes it seem OK.”

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

Binge drinking

Throughout the course of the interviews and groups, episodes of binge drinking were described by participants. Generally, the term 'binge' was not used by researchers or participants. Later in the discussion researchers introduced the term to elicit answers to the following questions:

- How do participants define a binge drinking event?
- What type of person do they think is most likely to binge?
- When is binge drinking most likely to occur?

Participants' definition of binge drinking

Participants were asked to give their opinions on what is binge drinking. This was defined, by most participants, as the length of time a person has been drinking rather than amount consumed over time. For the majority, drinking over an extended period of time constituted bingeing.

"A binge is when you drink for three to four days constantly."

Female, C2DE, group.

"Keeping going for 24 hours is a binge."

Female, C2DE, group.

"If you go off for a week or two and drink non stop."

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

"Disappearing at the weekend and being found in the pub drunk all the time."

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

Others defined it by the quantity of alcohol that was consumed or level of intoxication reached.

"If you take 15-20 drinks in one go."

Female, C2DE, aged 22, interview.

"Binge drinking is when you don't know when to stop and you go on until you fall."

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

"Binge drinkers hide the amount they drink and drink secretly."

Male, C2DE, group.

"Drinking to the point where you don't remember anything."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

Some men admitted that they were binge drinkers before the epidemiological definition was explained to them.

"It's the type of drinking I do on a Friday night when I have two hands and only one mouth."

Male, C2DE, aged 30, interview.

"Probably what I would do on a Friday night."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"I don't consider myself a binge drinker but I'm not far off it at times."

Male, C2, aged 24, interview.

However, the majority of participants did not consider their alcohol consumption as bingeing.

Image of a binge drinker

Participants were asked to describe their image of a binge drinker. For men, it was simply defined as someone drinking until they were “incapacitated”. It was felt that you could not define a person who was a binge drinker as they could be “aged 18 or 56 - you can’t pigeonhole them” (male, D, aged 30, interview). The female participants described mainly the drinking habits of older men and those drinking alone. No one referred to themselves as being a binge drinker. However, a number of participants did recognise that they would binge when on holiday abroad or if they were going away for the weekend.

“You would do it on holiday for two weeks. We just drank all day and all night but we were hardly drunk, you sweat more.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Researchers outlined for participants that the general epidemiological definition of binge drinking used in UK studies was ten units in one sitting for men (equivalent to five pints) or seven units in one sitting for women (eg three to four glasses of wine or spirit mixers).

The reaction was somewhat incredulous. The majority said that to be defined as a binge at this level was totally unreasonable, “not relevant to modern drinking” (male, C2D, group), and they quipped that they were all alcoholics or binge drinkers.

“It’s not a binge at all.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“That says that any time I drink I binge - most people do that. I would be more worried about those who drink every day.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“We’re all alcoholics then.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Men felt that drinking five or more pints one or two nights a week was normal and that it did not constitute binge drinking.

“Five pints is just someone having a drink.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

“I can’t believe that - 90% of the population would be binge drinkers then.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“It’s possible to be a binge drinker and not a problem drinker.”

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

When is bingeing most likely to occur?

The evidence from the interviews and groups suggests that episodes of binge drinking are related to the following factors:

- day of the week;
- occasion at which alcohol is consumed;
- drink setting;
- people with whom alcohol is being consumed;
- ‘happy hours’ and drinks promotions.

Day of the week

The majority of participants described episodes of binge drinking taking place at the weekend (Friday and Saturday nights), but for most this would be a Saturday night.

"I would try and save my money for a Saturday - that would be the main night."

Male, E, aged 18, interview.

Several participants stated that they would not want to drink too much during the week because of work the next day, and so the main drinking night would be at the weekend. Some of the men were not in full time employment and relied on agencies for work. They felt that this would lead them to binge more often. For most of the men, being in work seemed to reduce the amount they would drink during the week.

"I can only drink at the weekends as I am driving now in the mornings."

Male, C2DE, group.

However, those who worked weekends said that at the end of the shift they would be most likely to binge - therefore the actual day would vary.

"It depends on work shifts - whether you are working the next day."

Male, C2D, group.

Some men who lived in an area with a regular club night mid-week had a tendency to binge on a Wednesday night as well as at the weekend.

"It's the biggest night of the week (Wednesday)."

Male, C2DE, group.

Occasions

A second influence on whether or not bingeing is likely to occur is what type of occasion it is. Apart from weekends, holidays, Christmas and special events were the times mentioned when people are most likely to binge. As well as these, some of the men mentioned going on 'tours' associated with the sport they played.

"I would drink more at Christmas and in the summer, you know, when there are barbecues. You tend to see people during the week and have a drink in the summer."

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

"My hen night is in a few weeks time... that'll be good."

Female, C2DE, group.

"You would drink more at weddings."

Male, C2DE, group.

"I would drink more when the club are playing away."

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

Drink setting

Drinking more would occur while out at pubs or clubs, but this was strongly related to drinking company.

Drinking company

The most important factor that impacted on the amount that women drink was the people they were out with.

Bingeing was most likely to occur when there was a crowd. Some drank more when there was a crowd of women. For others, however, the gender makeup of the crowd was not as important as the crowd itself.

“When there’s a crowd you always have more drink.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“If I’m out with one or two friends we sit and natter... I couldn’t be bothered getting really drunk.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

“With bigger groups you drink more because you are getting all them drinks back.”

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

“It depends on your mates too. If they were all going out and you didn’t normally drink on a Tuesday night and your mates were all going out then you would go out anyway if you had the chance.”

Male, C2DE, group.

An aspect of drinking in crowds that contributes to more alcohol being consumed is the system used to buy drink (see page 17). Those who used a kitty regularly admitted that it made them drink faster, which would therefore contribute to their binge drinking and getting drunk. However, those participants who said that they would not use a kitty did not appear to drink any less than others.

“Some nights when you are not on form you would have to try to keep up with the other girls who are drinking very fast and all your drinks mount up, but you have to drink them.”

Female, D, aged 31, interview.

“You would feel like you are losing a round (so you continue to order drinks).”

Female, C2DE, group.

In a kitty system they would always order another drink: “it doesn’t matter how much you get because someone will always drink it at the end of the night” (female, C2DE, group).

Participants felt that you never really notice how much you are drinking in this system; however, at the start when there is so much money on the table “you would tend to be a bit greedy” (female, C2DE, group).

The system for men was buying in rounds. It was acknowledged that most of the men tended to drink faster in rounds “trying to keep up”, and they would also accept drinks when they did not really want them.

“You don’t want to miss a round. There is pressure on you to keep up with them.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“You’re drinking to the pace of the fastest drinker.”

Male, C2D, group.

A number of participants said that when they were out with their partner their drinking patterns would change and they would definitely drink less. Very few men said that they would binge while out with their partner.

“I would drink a lot as well if I drink with him but not as much as on the nights out with girlfriends.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“I would sip drinks when I am out with my boyfriend.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You can’t drink ‘til you drop” (when partners are there).

Male, C2DE, group.

The majority of participants who had children stated that they would not binge drink in front of the children or if they were in the house.

Happy hours and drinks promotions

Not all participants stated that ‘happy hours’ or drinks promotions would encourage them to drink more: the impact of these was largely related to age and location. In some locations there was a higher availability of promotions in the pubs and clubs. The men in these areas also had a mixed view on these promotions. Some said that the promotions give them the opportunity to “test out new drinks” (male, E, aged 19, interview), while others said that their “preferred drink was never on promotion” (male, C2, aged 30, interview) so it would not impact on them.

Those who did buy promotional drinks said that they would drink these quicker than other drinks and end up buying more drink on those evenings. “I would buy doubles all the time” (male, D, aged 30, interview).

“I’d drink as much as they want to give you.”

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

Some of the older men said that they would avoid bars where this type of promotion might be on because of their perception that younger drinkers would be attracted to them, saying “let’s go and get blocked” (male, C2D, group).

A number of women said that these promotions were obviously not targeted at them as they would not be out before 9.00pm, and promotions tended to be on earlier in the evening.

“They tend to be on between 6.00pm and 7.00pm... because of the child, I couldn’t really go.”

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

A number of women did mention that it would definitely impact on the amount of drink they would have while they were on holiday. Then they would go to cocktail bars and try lots of different drinks during promotions (female, C2, aged 34, interview; female, C2DE, group).

“I would make the most of it when I’m on holidays, I would go in for cocktails all the time.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

“I would always do it (drink more during happy hours) on holidays.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Perceived negative effects of drinking

Overall, the negative impact alcohol has on physical health was not widely acknowledged or considered by many of the participants. There was very limited awareness of the physical and mental health effects that are associated with drinking alcohol. Short-term impacts such as hangovers were discussed more readily than long-term impacts. In the long term, participants were aware of some of the health effects but no one related these to their own drinking.

“I suppose the next day you feel crap for a couple of hours but I don’t drink enough to cause me any great harm.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

"I wouldn't drink if there were downsides."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

"I'd cut down if I thought it was damaging."

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

Short-term health effects

Some participants discussed negative physical effects on nights out such as vomiting, falling over, jaywalking and getting into fights. For some, cuts and bruises were a measure of a successful night out. But the main negative effect on health mentioned was a hangover.

"It dehydrates your body."

Female, C2DE, group.

"If it has been a really heavy session on the Saturday it can be Wednesday before I'm fully recovered."

Female, C2DE, group.

"The worst hangovers are when you are physically sick the next day. They usually happen when you have been mixing your drinks."

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

Long-term health effects

No participant described any long-term negative impacts from alcohol or made any reference to the link between excessive alcohol intake and such negative health effects as strokes, certain cancers and high blood pressure. Some men were able to state that it impacts on the liver and heart or stomach - however, no other physical impacts were described.

"Your liver and kidneys can only take so much."

Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

"It's the same as smoking, its not good for you but you still do it."

Male, E, aged 19, interview.

"It could increase the risk of heart disease perhaps. I never really think of the risks."

Male, E, aged 18, interview

"I would say it would be your lungs, your liver type of thing you know. I am sure it's not good for you... but life's too short and you have to enjoy yourself."

Male, C2, aged 26, interview.

Younger men felt they had youth on their side; older men felt they did not drink enough to come to any physical harm. It was acknowledged among men that alcohol can lead to death but this was something they personally did not have to consider, believing that their own intake was not enough to do any harm. The amount that someone would have to drink before they experienced any type of negative physical impact had not been considered by any of the men. However, it was perceived that heavy drinking would need to occur every day, especially if the person was drinking spirits - "I think maybe if you drink spirits it would affect you more than actual beer" (male, C2, aged 26, interview) - and for a prolonged period of time, eg for at least three years.

"If you drink bottles of vodka every day for a couple of years."

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

"If you are drinking loads every day."

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

“If you drink a bottle of wine every night - and I know people who do that - then you could be on a slippery slope.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

Overall, however, most men did not think that they drank enough to have any impact on their physical or mental health.

“We’re just social drinkers.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“Only drinking two nights a week doesn’t do you any harm - and it’s better than church.”

Male, C2DE, group.

As well as this, the men felt that they would be changing their drinking patterns when they got older and so would not be drinking as great an amount in the future.

“Nobody our age thinks about health risks.”

Male, C2DE, group.

In a number of groups and interviews, particularly with females, the impact that alcohol has upon weight was mentioned as a long-term health problem. One woman’s weight loss advice was of great interest to other women in the group.

“The woman in Weight Watchers told me to go off the red wine and stick to the Bacardi.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Impact on mental health

Again the focus was on the short term. Only a few said that they experienced negative consequences to their mental health as a result of drinking alcohol. They described this as being depressed the next day.

“I suppose I would sometimes get depressed and tired the next day. Some days I would cry and feel dead sorry for myself.”

Female, D, aged 20, interview.

However, some described being embarrassed about what they did as having an impact on their mental health.

“I don’t really think it has any impact on my mental health unless I’ve done something stupid and I think ‘what the hell state did I get into to let myself do that?’”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

Some of the parents said that they were not as patient with their children the next day and some felt that their concentration was poorer. One woman, for example, said “when people come into the shop I keep charging them £1,000 and things like that” (female, C2DE, group).

No participant said that they drank enough for alcohol to have any impact on their mental health in the long term.

“To impact on your mental health you would probably need to be drinking every night and you would need to be drinking more...”

Female, C2, aged 24, interview.

During the discussion on mental health, it was evident that the majority of women had never considered that their mental health would be damaged as a result of drinking. Only a couple of men acknowledged that drink could cause mental health problems.

“Alcohol can be used to cope with problems and lift depression... when you feel bad it can act as a release. But people could become dependent on drink.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

“It can make you feel good, but it is also a depressant.”

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

“You don’t have your wits about you.”

Male, C2DE, group.

It was at this stage that several men mentioned their greater concern about drug taking. One also mentioned that one effect of alcohol was to take more drugs.

“I’d give up drugs if I had kids.”

Male, DE, group.

“You take more drugs than you’re meant to (when drunk) ’cause you are so relaxed and feel good.”

Male, C2DE, group.

While dependency on alcohol was discussed in relation to other people, only one participant admitted that it was something they worried about themselves. A number of participants (both male and female) gave examples of relatives or friends who had died as a result of heavy alcohol consumption. However, only extreme cases of where alcohol impacted on health were acknowledged.

Other negative aspects

Quite a few men gave examples of sustaining physical harm (as a result of fights) after they had been drinking. In one of the groups three of the men were involved in “gang wars” and used drink to psyche themselves up (male, C2DE, group). Another man admitted that violence occurred regularly as a result of his drinking and that spirits made him nasty. Some felt that they would be more likely to get into a fight if they had been mixing their drinks. In a number of the groups the men did not admit to any violent behaviour but had witnessed it in the past and felt that it took away from the enjoyment of the evening. However, in some of the groups a fight was seen to add to the enjoyment.

The majority of men were aware that if they were drunk they were more likely to get into trouble through being vulnerable.

“Some people think ‘there’s a drunk guy, we’ll mug him.’ And if you have head injuries and you are hospitalised then it is going to affect your work situation.”

Male, C2, aged 30, interview.

Several men did realise that they were more prone to getting annoyed if they had been drinking, for example if someone were to bump into them or if something was said to their partner.

“Too much drink causes people to overreact.”

Male, C2D, group.

“Slobbering or arguing that could lead to getting a hammering.”

Male, D, aged 30, interview.

A number of men and women mentioned that relationships could break up due to long-term use of alcohol. Several men also remarked that they would be more likely to row with their partners, family or friends after a drink.

“I used to (start an argument) years ago but only with my husband.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“You can start arguments as well as friendships.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“Sometimes you wake up and remember having a stupid row with someone.”

Female, C2, aged 21, interview.

Women acknowledged the potential dangers of encountering drunk people.

“It can be quite dangerous because you can't argue with a drunk person.”

Female, C2DE, group.

The majority of women had witnessed fights but had not been a victim as such. A small number of women gave examples of getting involved in fights. Some stated that they tended to feel no fear after having a few drinks and so could get into trouble more easily.

“It took nine policemen to get me off this woman... someone mouthy would make nastiness come out in me.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“If you look at someone sideways you could get into trouble.”

Female, C2DE, group.

Family life

When prompted about the impact on family life, most women immediately said that drink can have an impact that is “definitely negative”. However, none of the participants felt that their own drinking habits impacted negatively on their family life. Effects mentioned by participants included an increase in violence and the likelihood of arguments occurring and that people can spend all their money on alcohol. A number of women were speaking from experience of having fathers, brothers or husbands who had drink problems.

“Some men go on benders and will be out of the house for days.”

Female, C2DE, group.

“Everyone in Ireland has an alcoholic somewhere in the family.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

A number of women who had a parent with a drink problem recalled the constant arguments.

"In a relationship a drink problem is often highlighted when there are arguments all the time."
Female, C2DE, group.

The men did not report any negative impact on their own family situation as a result of their drinking, but talked in general terms about the impact on families where drinking was a problem, such as encouraging children to drink, fights and arguments and relationship difficulties.

"It would be a problem if the money spent on drink was needed elsewhere."
Male, D, aged 32, interview.

"It can rip families apart."
Male, C2, aged 33, interview.

Risk-taking behaviour

Other aspects of risky or regrettable behaviour as a result of drinking were identified and discussed. These ranged from making their own way home drunk and not doing normal safety checks before going to bed, to unsafe sexual behaviour and drinking at work.

"I would stop a car and jump into it whether it was a taxi or not."
Female, C2DE, group.

"There's been many a morning I've woken up at 4.00 in the morning still in my stilettos and thought 'is the fire guard on?'"
Female, C2DE, group.

The majority of those interviewed had woken up and had regrets about the night before. This would include being embarrassed by their behaviour, for example if they had been dancing on tables, being less inhibited when talking to someone about their personal life, and antisocial behaviour. This latter aspect varied from stealing other people's property to having a row or fight. The majority of men admitted to having woken up at some point and thought "why did I do that", although a number did say that they often woke up and thought "what did I do last night?" (male, C2DE, group).

It was generally accepted among group discussions that the men would take more risks in their sexual behaviour when drinking.

"You don't care if you use a condom or not."
Male, C2DE, group.

Some men were aware of the issue of condom use, however a large proportion thought that condoms were a "gay AIDS things" (male, DE, group), and would never use them - drinking or not. Quite a few said that they would sometimes take risks when they weren't drinking but would take what they referred to as "riskier risks" when drinking.

For the most part, female participants said they did not take risks regarding sexual behaviour, or were more reluctant to talk about it. They would have "went with someone who was ugly" but not put themselves in a risky situation. Only a few admitted to risk-taking behaviour with their sexual health but the issue was not discussed at length.

“When I was younger I would have done more silly things but I’ve wised up now.”

Female, D, aged 32, interview.

There was awareness, particularly by younger women (under 25), of the risk of being targeted with date rape drugs. One woman said she would not drink out of a glass because of date rape drugs. “You have to be dead careful now” (female, C2DE, group).

The issue of whether anyone had missed work because of a hangover was introduced during the discussion. Half of the female participants had missed work. For some it had only happened once and for others it was quite a regular occurrence.

“I had to come home from work a couple of times with a hangover but I’ve only once phoned in sick ‘cause of a hangover.”

Female, D, aged 25, interview.

The majority of men had said that drinking had affected their work at some stage and one had got the sack for being drunk in work.

“My sick record at work is hectic ‘cause I’m always on the piss.”

Male, C2DE, group.

Others admitted that, while they had made it to work, they were not able to carry out their jobs properly. Some said that this would happen “once in a blue moon” and was “nothing serious”. Others, however, did seem to miss work regularly.

“I miss part of every day’s work ‘cause I’m always drinking.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“I can get to work the next day but not do my work.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“I miss Monday morning once a month.”

Male, C2DE, group.

“I’ve been sent home ‘cause I’ve stank of drink.”

Male, C2DE, group.

One man said that he regularly went from a nightclub straight to work. Two men said that they brought drink to work with them and said that many of their colleagues would do the same.

Financial consequences

Most participants were in agreement that when out drinking they would always spend more than they thought or intended. Some said that they had tried to cut down but the effects of the alcohol would mean they stopped caring how much they spent. The amounts mentioned varied from £30 to £80. They described trying not to spend as much money but admitted that they usually continued drinking until they had no money left.

Some pubs have started taking Switch - that’s a disaster.”

Male, C2DE, group.

They said that they would borrow money from others or go to the cash machine. Some women said that they would put £20 in another part of their purse for emergencies not intending to spend it but invariably they would.

"I tell myself I am only taking out a certain amount of money, but after a few drinks I use it all and then borrow money from friends."

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

Some men said that when drunk they would lend money to other people and not remember about it the next day. Some participants would end up buying drinks for people if they had been drinking, which they would not be inclined to do if they were sober.

"When I'm drunk I think I'm the richest person in the world."

Female, C2, aged 20, interview.

Others realised that they spent a considerable amount of money on going out but did not plan to reduce this.

"It's a terrible waste of money and what do you get out of it... but it wouldn't put me off going out."

Female, C2, aged 34, interview.

Discussion

It is clear from these findings that, for many drinkers in Northern Ireland, drinking well in excess of the current daily benchmark at weekends is perceived as normal and acceptable behaviour. It is also clear that the nature and pattern of this style of drinking does vary according to age, gender and family circumstances, but there are also other variables that affect the overall drinking pattern and style to a greater or lesser degree. At the same time our understanding of drinking patterns and culture, especially the issue of drinking beliefs and expectancies, enables us to draw some tentative conclusions and consider the implications for reducing alcohol-related harm in Northern Ireland.

The findings from this research are not entirely surprising, as they probably confirm a commonly held view on drinking styles in Northern Ireland. However, the research does provide a unique insight into a wide range of factors and variables and acts as an impetus for future research and initiatives.

The observation that 'bingeing' could be described as normative behaviour among young adult drinkers is a challenging one. Attempting to change behaviours that are socially acceptable and indeed supported is difficult, and involves cultural change. Such cultural change means addressing the drinking expectancies of young adults as well as those elements that seem to go hand-in-hand with bingeing: the 'rounds' culture, the pursuit of pleasure and instant gratification, and the apparent social acceptability of getting drunk. This research indicates that such elements are a feature of the drinking experiences of young adults in Northern Ireland.

Another feature of the research is the role played by gender and relationships. The role of single sex groups is a distinctive feature of this report, and it was noticeable that binge drinking is often associated with groups - hence the previous allusion to the role of rounds. Previous research in England with young people has suggested that there are differences between male group drinking and female group drinking, with males often competing with each other in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed, while females tend to see drinking in a group as more of a 'bonding' experience, with perhaps less inducement to get drunk or binge, but still supportive of those who do drink to excess.¹⁸

It is also noticeable from the research that the effect of drinking in couples is less straightforward - couples on their own will tend to drink less than in a group setting, but when couples meet up in a pub or bar setting, single sex groups may form. Further research on the impact of groups, relationships and partners on drinking styles and patterns could be useful.

Another issue raised in the research is that of setting. Binge drinking is probably associated in most people's minds with a pub or club setting, with additional images of 'pub crawls' and groups of people out on the street after closing time. However, as this research shows, not all binge drinking takes place in the pub, and there is almost a ritualistic pattern emerging involving take-aways, carry-outs, meeting up at someone's house, going out to a pub or club, and then a taxi home. In these circumstances it is even more difficult to address the actual issue itself, ie the bingeing, as it is supported by and supportive of a whole host of secondary factors.

Another issue that emerges from this research is the drinkers' own perception about their drinking, and the extent to which they can identify themselves as 'bingers'. It is fairly clear from this study that they are quite uncomfortable to be seen as 'bingers' as they define the concept. The participants equate binge drinking with prolonged bouts of heavy drinking and in effect see it as synonymous with problem drinking. It is quite clear from this research that the people who took part in this study, who would easily drink more than five or six pints or more during an evening, would in no sense of the word see their drinking as 'problematic'. Other research in Northern Ireland has also shown that adult drinkers significantly underestimate how much they drink, or how they classify themselves, eg as being a 'light' drinker when their actual alcohol consumption showed they were risk or heavy risk drinkers. Over half of those who described themselves as moderate drinkers had in fact drunk to risk or dangerous levels in the previous week.⁴ This has obvious implications for any messages about alcohol in general and binge drinking in particular.

This last point is also supported by the role of alcohol expectancies. These have been a feature of discussion about reasons for drinking for a number of years. In essence the idea is that people hold a number of common expectancies about the behavioural and emotional effects of alcohol. An expectancy - essentially an

"if ... then" statement - about alcohol effects can be interpreted as a cognitive representation of one's past direct and indirect experiences with alcohol.¹⁹ The suggestion is that expectancies play a role in the initiation and maintenance of drinking. There is an assumption that the decision to drink is driven at least partly by the individual's belief that alcohol will serve certain functions or result in certain desirable consequences, such as relief from tension or enhancement of mood. Drinking then is maintained by ongoing expectations of alcohol's ability to result in these desired outcomes. Likewise, people have expectations about the outcomes of binge drinking. One point that is reflected in this research is that the expectancies people have about alcohol and bingeing may be either positive or positive and negative combined; they do not appear to be simply negative.

This research confirms that the whole notion of binge drinking as a simple, one-dimensional issue is without substance. On the contrary, binge drinking is a complex, multifaceted phenomenon with many inter-related factors, whose importance varies from situation to situation and from individual to individual. Therefore, any strategy that aims to address binge drinking must also be a sophisticated and integrated model that incorporates the findings from this research, the findings from other research and the lessons learned from other similar initiatives. Perhaps one aim any binge drinking campaign or initiative should have is to encourage drinkers to consider more carefully the negative expectancies of alcohol, as it would appear that most drinkers look at their own drinking through rose-coloured spectacles.

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Appendix: Participants' characteristics

Table 1: Interviews

	Location	Age of participant	Socioeconomic group of participants
Male	Belfast	33	C2
	Belfast	23	C2
	Belfast	28	D
	Belfast	30	C2
	Londonderry	18	E
	Londonderry	19	E
	Portrush	30	C2
	Portrush	30	D
	Portrush	32	D
	Portadown	26	C2
	Portadown	25	E
	Larne	24	D
	Larne	30	C2
Female	Belfast	31	D
	Belfast	20	D
	Newcastle	32	D
	Newcastle	34	C2
	Omagh	21	C2
	Larne	25	D
	Larne	22	C2

Table 2: Focus group discussions

	Location	Socioeconomic group of participants
Male	Belfast	C2DE
	Belfast	DE
	Belfast	C2DE
	Londonderry	C2D
	Portrush	C2DE
	Portrush	C2DE
	Portadown	C2DE
	Larne	C2DE
Female	Belfast	C2DE
	Newcastle	C2DE
	Omagh	C2DE
	Larne	C2DE

NB: All focus group participants were aged 18-35.



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