

**A qualitative investigation of socio-cultural factors influencing binge-drinking:
A multi-country study**

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Abstract

Despite substantial investment by governments in social marketing campaigns and the introduction of various legislative and supply controls on alcohol, the binge drinking phenomenon amongst young people continues unabated in many countries and appears to be spreading to others. This paper examines drinking behaviour amongst university students from 50 countries across Europe, North America and the Asia Pacific region and argues that more needs to be done in understanding socio-cultural factors. To date, little is known of the specific socio-cultural factors that are common in countries that have high drinking behaviour compared to countries that have moderate binge-drinking behaviour. Using a marketing systems approach, this exploratory study identifies two key themes that distinguish these countries, namely family influences and peer influences.

Keywords: binge-drinking, social marketing, alcohol, cross-cultural, qualitative

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Introduction

With funds for social marketing in many countries being tightened due to the financial crisis, governments find they need to “*Do More With Less*”. An area that is of increasing concern is binge-drinking. According to the World Health Organisation (2004), based on data spanning 1961-1999, the region with the highest per capita consumption of alcohol is Europe, followed by the Americas, Western Pacific, African, South East Asian and finally the Eastern Mediterranean. Across the European Union (EU), one in five young Europeans regularly binge drinks and it is estimated that injury linked to alcohol costs EU countries £86.5 billion a year (European Commission, 2008). In Australia, around 50% of 18 year olds are already drinking at risky levels (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2004) and in New Zealand, around 25% of teenager drinkers admit to bingeing (Alcohol Advisory Council of New Zealand, 2004).

There is no commonly accepted definition of binge drinking nor agreement on how much alcohol needs to be consumed to constitute ‘bingeing’. What often separates binge drinking from other excessive drinking is that a) large amounts of alcohol are consumed over a short period of time and that b) it commonly involves young people in the 15-24 age group (Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, 2007). It is suggested that a ‘binge’ corresponds to consuming five or more drinks for a male or four or more drinks for a female a single sitting or on one occasion (World Health Organisation, 2004; European School Survey Project on Alcohol and other Drugs, 2009; National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism in Plant and Plant, 2006).

A marketing systems perspective (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt, 2006) to the rising incidence of binge-drinking across the globe offers three possible approaches to the problem; legislative or policy interventions, restriction of supply or interventions related to socio-cultural factors. Typically governments around the world have used the first two approaches, with little impact on the rising rates of binge drinking. Thus it is the third of these approaches, socio-cultural factors, that we use in this research paper as the underpinning framework to understanding binge-drinking behaviour in countries that have high or moderate drinking.

A Marketing Systems approach to Binge-drinking

In order to identify new approaches to addressing the binge drinking phenomenon, we have adopted a marketing systems perspective (Mittelstaedt, Kilbourne, and Mittelstaedt, 2006). A marketing systems perspective places a phenomenon within a wider economic, social, and cultural context and can help to explain the constraints that a system can place on public policy initiatives or interventions (Mittelstaedt, Duke, and Mittelstaedt, 2009). Consumption constraints on binge drinking are embedded in a marketing system based on policy decisions, supply and demand controls (Fisk, 1967) and result from firstly legal, secondly supply restrictions, and thirdly socio-cultural factors (Mittelstaedt, Duke, and Mittelstaedt, 2009). The need to do more in stemming the binge drinking problem and the failure of measures taken to date, point to the need for a greater understanding of the third option for constraining consumption; socio-cultural factors, where ‘there is a clear and urgent need for large scale systematic research on social and cultural aspects of drinking’ and in ‘monitoring the shifts and changes particularly in terms of the effects of cultural convergence’ (SIRC, 1998, p.13).

There are different philosophical antecedents which shape socio-cultural paradigms (Kilbourne, McDonagh, and Prothero, 1997) and guide our views and values as to, for example, what is

acceptable or unacceptable in society. Thus attitudes and views towards the binge drinking are likely to be formed differently according to the philosophical antecedents such as whether binge drinking is a social right of the individual and should not therefore be subject to government or public policy interference. Across the globe, there are different philosophical antecedents and consequences which we have identified as high drinking 'socio-cultural' paradigms and moderate drinking 'socio-cultural' paradigms which we explore in our empirical study. Given the relative lack of socio-cultural approaches to binge drinking, our research is exploratory and aims to identify common socio-cultural influences that lead young people to binge drink. We compare respondents from a range of high binge drinking countries, identified as UK, Australia, Finland, Eire and Germany, with young people from countries with low or moderate binge drinking levels identified as France, Spain, Italy, Hong Kong and Japan (Social Issues Research Centre, 2009).

Socio-cultural factors and binge drinking

The debate linking alcohol and socio-cultural factors was started nearly half a century ago by Mandelbaum (1965) who argued that alcohol is a cultural artefact in the sense that the drinking of alcohol is almost entirely culturally defined and exists as an entrenched part of culture. Heath (1984) not only sees alcohol as embedded in culture but views many other cultural aspects as being embedded in drinking. However, despite many subsequent contributions on the topic, which specific cultural characteristics have an effect on binge drinkers is still inadequately explained (Kuntsche, Rehm and Gmel, 2004) and few studies have focused on identifying common cultural characteristics between high binge drinking societies or in comparing and contrasting such characteristics with those of countries perceived to have a low or moderate binge-drinking problem. The need to identify such characteristics is more pressing as the boundaries of drunken behaviour are learnt just as any other social norm (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969) and there are signs of a convergence taking place between traditionally ambivalent and integrated binge drinking cultures (MCM Research, 2004; Fox-Kibby and Marsh, 2006) and a spread of binge drinking from developed to developing countries (Jernigan, 2001).

Mandelbaum (1965) suggested that alcohol consumption is governed by cultural laws and rules where everything is explicitly stated. This might include the type of drink, the amount and rate of intake, the time and place for drinking, the accompanying rituals, the sex and age of the drinker, the roles involved in drinking and the role behaviour prior to drinking (Heath, 1995). For others, drinking is a symbolic activity linked to lifestyle (Solomon *et al.* 2006), a social activity or act dictated by sub-cultural norms (Engineer *et al.*, 2003; Machlachlan and Smith 2004) or a ritual (Social Issues Research Centre, 1998). Others have identified socio-cultural characteristics impacting on binge drinking such as the influence of family and family upbringing (Scottish Health Action on Alcohol Problems, 2007; Nash, McQueen and Bray, 2005); peer influences (Jamison and Myers, 2007; Borsari and Carey, 2001), the tolerance of societies for public drunkenness (Measham and Brain, 2005; David and Hanson, 2004; Schatz, 2005) and the role of the media (Scott, 2007). Thus this research seeks to address the research question: *What are the key socio-cultural factors that distinguish binge-drinking behaviour in high and moderate drinking countries?*

Method

Exploratory qualitative individual interviews were conducted both face-to-face and online with 216 respondents from 50 countries where alcohol was legal to purchase. A purposeful sampling approach was used, which involved the selection of information-rich individuals to interview (Coyne, 1997) with individuals of both genders and varying ages from a variety of countries sought. A sample of university students was considered appropriate as many fall into the age bracket deemed most at risk from binge-drinking. Starting university is at the epicentre of most binge-drinking revolutions as individuals are bombarded with 'cheap booze' offers from plentiful drinking

establishments, who commonly run promotions that encourage excess consumption (Wall, 2007). University students are known to be an at-risk market segment in terms of binge-drinking and much of the research on excessive drinking has focussed on this group (Gill, 2002). Using a sample of home and overseas students in the host countries of Australia and UK enabled the interviews to be conducted in English although it limited the results to students who had the financial means to travel. It is recognised that future research on a broader population is needed in order to provide a more holistic understanding of socio-cultural factors influencing binge-drinking. The data was analysed by categorized themes and patterns within each interview and across the interviews to identify common patterns, replications, and differences (Yin, 1994). The two key themes that emerged related to the social relationships the respondents have with other people; family and peers.

Results and Discussion

It should be remembered that even in high binge drinking societies it is still only a minority, albeit a substantial minority that participate (World Health Organisation, 2004). Therefore it is only the socio-cultural behaviour of some young people that needs to be influenced by any new initiatives or government policies. There is evidence of a shift in cultural behaviour in moderate drinking countries towards more binge drinking and thus it should also be possible to influence a change in the drinking philosophy of the young in problematic societies. These results address the research question of *what are the key socio-cultural factors that distinguish binge-drinking behaviour in high and moderate drinking countries?* In looking at differences between binge drinking attitudes and influences in high versus moderate drinking cultures, three initial cultural dimensions have emerged relating to the influence of the family; the level of contact with the family, family upbringing and expectations, and parental approval. In relation to peer influence, three dimensions emerged; group affiliation, value judgement, and perceptions of loss of control.

Depth of contact with family

In high binge countries, parents seem to play a less influential role on their children's drinking behaviour, particularly when they reach university age, move away from the family home and gain some financial independence (for example in the UK where they receive a student loan to cover their university and living costs). University life gives students freedom away from parental gaze to make their own decisions about who to drink with, when to drink and how much. In moderate drinking countries, parents seemed to have closer contact with their children at university and most students from these countries viewed drunkenness as something of a mistake if it occurred which would result in a loss of face and a source of embarrassment for their families, if discovered.. This quote is indicative of this view: *"Because my ethnicity is Singaporean/Malaysian, there is less focus on drinking and more focus on eating. People generally do not get overly drunk. Saving face is key. You don't want to be an embarrassment to yourself or your parents," Singaporean male aged 20*

Family upbringing and expectations

Family upbringing may have influenced behaviour through students observing their parents' drinking habits, by how much alcohol their parents allowed them to consume within the family home and by the minimum age restrictions which contribute to alcohol being perceived by some as the forbidden fruit only to be legally consumed from their 18th birthday. Drinking behaviour is known to be a learned behaviour where children model the behaviour of parents (Bobo and Husten 2000). In high binge countries, respondents indicated seeing parents drinking regularly: *"Again I will go back to the whole 'Irish' thing. We are renowned for loving our drinks and I suppose if you see your older siblings, school friends, parents doing it all the time then you follow suit," Irish female aged 21*. In more moderate binge-drinking countries, the family seems to play a more important role in introducing children to sensible drinking in the home at a young age (usually diluted wine, in small quantities, and accompanying food). However for some students from

moderate binge countries, they drank heavily due to curiosity stemming from lack of parental information: *"Although Singapore is a multi-cultural society, parents are still pretty conservative in educating their children on issues such as sex, pregnancies and drinking. This leads to the young generation being curious," Singaporean female aged 19*

Parental Approval

In high binge countries, some students claim that their parents would not care if they got drunk or might even expect it: *"I've seen my dad drink excessively on a regular basis but never appear drunk. My mum drinks quite often and I do see her drunk, but I am often drunk at the same time so neither of us is embarrassed,"* British female aged 20. However, others admitted that they would not tell their parents how much they drank as it would be likely to concern them. So while the respondents acknowledged that their parents would probably disapprove, they engaged in the behaviour anyway, possibly due to the removed contact they had with parents or as an act of defiance. This attitude is consistent with prior research that drinking by the young generation is often a rebellious way to show disregard for the social norms and etiquette put in place by the older generations (Zimmerman, 2008). In moderate binge countries, even when the parents are not around, the respondents recalled the advice from parents about the dangers of drinking as shown in this quote: *"Most people my age who go to parties would have heard warnings from their parents about how bad drinking is and what it could do to you healthwise. Some people follow that advice (I don't drink partly because of this),"* Malaysian female aged 18. Thus, while parental approval of heavy drinking appears to be negative in both sets of countries, it is the respondents from moderate binge countries that pay attention to parental approval.

Group affiliation

Being a member of the peer group was important for students everywhere but in the high binge countries, consuming alcohol was in most cases a requirement for membership (unless driving or pregnant): *"...if you don't go out and drink, what do you do? Like who are you? You don't have any friends, you're not social."* British male, aged 19. Consuming alcohol to the point of excess was something to be admired. For many it was hard to say no as peers piled on the pressure to drink in the first instance and then encouraged drinking to excess as shown in this quote: *"Peer pressure can be overwhelming and engulf you in what your friends are doing and what they think is 'cool',"* American female aged 22.

Value judgement of friends

The social norms of the group are known to determine drinking behaviour (Russell-Bennett and Gollidge 2009). In both high and moderate countries, the respondents indicated that the value judgement of their peers was an important influence on their drinking, if friends disapproved of drinking behaviour, then respondents were less likely to drink whereas when their friends either approved or were neutral about their drinking, they reduced their drinking: *"It's the norm among young people, so your friends rarely pass judgement,"* South African male aged 18.

Loss of control

For the high binge countries, drinking enabled them to fit better in the group, giving confidence and allowing them to interact more easily. Thus 'loss of control' was often viewed as a desired state: *"The idea of having a good time that comes with the not having complete control over your action,"* Australian female aged 21. Binging within the group gave them the opportunity to lose control with few giving any regard to health warnings, vulnerability or anti-social consequences. Many female students, whilst aware of the risks, also chose to ignore them. Although some admitted to drinking too much at times, unlike the male students, most claimed their drunkenness was unintentional rather than deliberate. This contrasts with research by Ricciardelli *et al.* (2001) who found an increase in the level of the acceptability of female drinking. In the moderate drinking countries, alcohol was regularly consumed but not as a vehicle for losing control but rather as an

accompaniment to the social ritual of chatting, dancing, and people watching. For these students, it was hard for them to comprehend the reasons for binge drinking as they did not feel the need for excessive alcohol to help them integrate with or meet friends and they felt sorry for those who got drunk because of their loss of image and embarrassment: *"In the UK you see drunk people every night in the street whereas in France you drink at home or at parties. You don't show that you are drunk; it's a bit taboo to be seen falling over in the street and embarrassing yourself," French female aged 21.*

Conclusions and implications

The research aim of the study was motivated by the need to take a fresh look at the issue of binge drinking as many public policy initiatives have failed to moderate or reduce the phenomenon. Taking a marketing systems approach the issue is viewed from the parental, individual and social peer group perspective. Thus for social marketing campaigns to be effective in curbing binge-drinking, a strong emphasis should be placed on facilitating the socio-cultural factors that inhibit binge drinking and restricting those that encourage the behaviour. This may include increasing the level of contact students have with their parents as many students did not want their parents to know their drinking levels, encouraging students to attend exchange –programs with countries that have moderate drinking behaviour to expose them to other ways of behaving, or encouraging friends to disapprove of high drinking. The 1990 anti-drink driving campaign in Australia of *"friends don't let friends drink and drive"* proved effective in changing the social acceptability of drinking and driving.

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