

“Basically, if you want to fit in, you’ve got to drink”: Understanding Non-Drinker Student Experiences at University

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Background

- Alcohol misuse harms well-documented^{1,2}, but continued research focus on alcohol misuse/ prevention and not related social practices/ performances.
- Most UK young adults drink, but emerging pattern of non-drinkers³, particularly within student body⁴.
- Drinking participation and non-participation has great implications for identity, inclusion and social-cultural practices.
- Excessive consumption viewed as part of university culture and many experience difficulties as part of their non-drinking status⁵.
- Need to tackle ‘cultures of intoxication’, make universities more inclusive⁶.

Methods:

- Student-led research project.
- Data collection: end 2019– start 2020 (pre-covid).
- 2 semi-structured student focus group interviews.
- N=10 undergraduate students (abstained/ low-consumers)
- Assessed using the AUDIT: 5 light 5 non-drinkers.
- 6 M, 4 F, 21-26 yrs.
- Thematic analysis identified 3 main themes.



University drinking cultures

“I have heard stuff about the University drinking [...] Those expectations that this is what uni is all about.”

1. Exploited by Universities

a) Unequal promotion of drinking events on campus

“This night is happening with 50% off drinks”, and that’s the biggest thing you see, but you are not really seeing the event.”

“They use alcohol to get copious amounts of money out of students; like club nights and stuff. Insane Tuesdays and stuff like that.”

b) On-campus alcohol presence and expense pushing consumption into halls and town centres

“From what I’ve heard from some people, they are most likely just go to McColls or Morrisons, buy themselves drinks and then drink in their Halls and then go on a night out.”

“The prices here are to exorbitant for students [...] The only place that you can go on Campus is the Waterside Bar and the prices there are just not friendly at all.”

2. Unappealing, non-inclusive & unsafe drinking contexts

a) Campus contextual determinants promote alcohol drinking

So if I was to go somewhere in the day I would want to go to a pub where it’s open and airy and there’s a garden and things like that. So the building itself [The Platform] doesn’t attract me to go there and relax. It’s designed to cram people in in the evening to get wasted.

b) Universities should keep students safe

“I just feel personally that now that we have moved here the safety of students is a lot more at risk because there’s no longer parties directly on the campus, they have to walk through the town centre and go to The Platform and come back. And obviously there’s the river and stuff and the risks are a lot higher.”

3. Concern over being judged as non-drinking student

a) Reluctance to engage in social events

“I was really reluctant to go because I thought if I go there I’m not going to have anything to do and I’m not sure what the culture is around drinking here.”

“I’ve been told by my ‘Mum’ group of friends who’ve always made sure that I’m not feeling peer pressured, but they said, ‘if you are ever drinking, never drink on an empty stomach’”

b) Adopting strategies to avoid identifying as a non-drinker/ light drinker

“Non-drinkers don’t want to be labelled”

“Surely there could be events that are designed as neutral, let’s call it that way, and could be accessible to everyone?”

Implications and Conclusions

- Research to focus on a range of drinking behaviours, not just preventing alcohol misuse.
- Alcohol an important part of university life, with participation and non-participation important for students.
- Universities key in constructing inclusive, safe and responsible campus cultures which reflect the diversity of the student body.
- Importance of social events and belonging for students, at a time when lifetime behaviours are created, reinforced and have a lasting influence.
- Students as partners: putting students at front and centre of research and enhancing student voice.
- Joined up approach required in tackling perceived drinking cultures, involving university marketing, Welcome Week, Student’s Union events, halls of residence, off-campus alcogenic environments.

References

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