

# Connected Communities

## Alcohol & Performing Community

Mapping representations of binge drinking and community health

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# Background

## Executive Summary

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**Public and media concern over excessive episodic public drinking among young people, dubbed binge drinking, has increased since the 2000s (Nicholls 2009; Berridge, Herring, Thom 2009).**

In response to growing evidence of alcohol harms, the World Health Organisation and EC urged the construction of national action plans 'emphasizing actions that regulate alcohol price, availability and marketing', to which the government's recent Alcohol Strategy responds (WHO 2010; The Government's Alcohol Strategy 2012). Yet, some commentators warn that 'social engineering techniques which attempt to modify well-established cultural drinking practices can have counterproductive results,' and that the outcomes of such policies are uncertain (Peele 1997). This project set out to analyse the cultural representation of group binge drinking by young adults (18 to 35 years old) in British film and theatre performance over the last forty years. Qualitative analysis of these representations was undertaken to reveal the cultural narratives around group excessive episodic drinking.

The project held two consultations around the qualitative findings: a symposium on representations of binge drinking and performance interventions (15 May 2012), and a consultation with the Interdisciplinary Alcohol Research Programme at the University of Sheffield (24 May 2012). A series of key concerns and issues for further research emerged.

## Researchers and Project Partners

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## Key words

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Alcohol  
Binge drinking  
Performance  
Film  
Theatre  
Representation  
Community  
Health

# Introduction

The Government's Alcohol Strategy (March 2012) focuses on 'binge drinking' as a social scourge, the 'crime and violence it causes drains resources in our hospitals, generates mayhem on our streets and spreads fear in our communities.' (p.2) Alcohol-related harm has been a longstanding cause of concern in public health. (Smith and Foxcroft 2009) A recent House of Commons Health Committee Report (2009) noted a five-fold increase in deaths from liver cirrhosis between 1970 and 2006, an annual cost to society of £20 billion a year, and a substantial increase in binge drinking linked to serious accidents, disorder, violence and crime. Since the early 2000s, binge drinking has been predominantly defined as excessive, risky, single session, public drinking among young people, with attendant public order issues. As yet, dynamic modelling and evaluation approaches have not taken account of the cultural determinants of alcohol consumption, wherein drinking has perceived benefits as well as harms, nor the cultural narratives around binge drinking as a social, performative behaviour. (Martinic and Measham 2008; Hayward and Hobbs 2007)

This project set out to analyse how group 'binge drinking' by young adults (18 to 35 years old) has been represented in, and understood through, popular culture in film and live theatre performance over the last forty years. Qualitative analysis of these representations was undertaken to reveal the cultural narratives around episodic excessive drinking. What interpretative narrative frameworks or patterns of behaviour do these representations offer? How have these changed over time, if at all?

The project analysed the complexity of filmic and theatrical cultural representations of group

binge drinking in relation to three questions. First, given that group and social interaction around shared values produces a symbolic and experiential sense of community, the project asked whether cultural representations offered dystopian or positive images of 'community-formation' through shared binge behaviour – were these communities of harm or pleasure? Second, we examined the portrayal of communities of binge drinkers in relation to other communities and in relation to community norms. And third, we asked how diverse class, national, racial, gender, and age identities affect the representation of groups of binge drinkers?

Methodology project undertook a qualitative analysis of thematic representations of group binge drinking by young adults, in selected new films and dramas produced by British mainstream theatres and film companies between 1970 and 2010. We established the range of new plays and films produced within selected mainstream venues, and the smaller subset of films representing group drinking. From this subset of plays and films we selected four examples from each decade, those with the most extended representation of group binge drinking, for detailed analysis.

We tested our findings, and explored what potential policy implications this understanding might produce for implementing culturally-aware policies on alcohol usage, through a series of consultations and meetings that connected representatives of communities of drinkers, alcohol policy modellers, public health academics, charities and theatre companies working with alcohol issues and representation.

# Findings from Qualitative Analysis

## Communities of harm or pleasure

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- Group episodic heavy drinking has been repeatedly represented as pleasurable for participants
- Group episodic heavy drinking has been consistently represented as socially bonding
- While binge drinking is represented as bonding, the controlling strength of these social bonds is frequently represented as simultaneously limiting opportunities for individual characters
- Graphic short term physical consequences are often comically portrayed; long term health issues and consequences are very rarely shown
- Violence is represented as an exhilarating outcome of binge drinking

## Communities of Drinkers and Wider Community Norms

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- Episodic heavy drinking groups are presented as 'normal', only individual heavy drinkers – those who drink alone – are pathologised or represented as engaged in harmful, addictive or alcoholic behaviour
- Socio-economic context determines the value of group drinking. There is a strongly normalised tradition of the community benefits of 'working-class' episodic heavy drinking
- Drinking location tends to determine the positive or negative portrayal of binge drinking communities – pub (older clientele, self-regulating and moderating community

of drinkers) versus club (younger drinkers, more frequently hedonistic, immoderate and risky drinking, less structured community groupings) – since the 1970s

- Episodic heavy drinking has been constructed as a 'public order' issue in films since 1970s, but public order issues have only emerged in theatrical representation in the last ten years.
- Films and dramas of the last ten years contain self-aware, and self-mocking, references to the 'media' depictions of binge drinking

## Identity and Representing Group Heavy Drinking

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- Women have been consistently represented as enthusiastic binge drinkers since the 1970s, notwithstanding recent media focus on young women's group drinking
- Episodic heavy drinking has been increasingly depicted as inducing violence, including by women, since 1990s
- Class forms a central determinant in the depiction of the value of group heavy drinking – middle-class episodic heavy drinking in domestic spaces among older characters is regularly represented, but not as problem drinking
- The most frequently depicted binge drinking characters are white or, since late 1990s, black British
- Group episodic heavy drinking has been represented as occurring in geographically diverse regions, but most regularly in settings in the North of England and Scotland

- Older binge drinkers are regularly depicted, although older binge drinkers are more often represented as individual problematic drinkers
- Binge drinking is most often represented as independent of other addictive behaviours

## Conclusions

- Whatever the moral coding of the overarching narrative structure, the representation of excessive episodic group drinking always results in carnivalesque, violent or emotionally heightened behaviour, offering audiences thrilling performance experiences
- The cultural narratives and representations of group heavy drinking are enduring, repeatedly revived, re-viewed (rental and home sales), and re-performed (amateur rights) in a wide variety of contexts, and are surprisingly little changed over the forty year period
- While medical and public health debates have evolved and been foregrounded over the last forty years, the representations of group binge drinking have not significantly altered to reflect this new rhetoric or agenda. The endurance of genres, structures and realist style have acted to keep the representation of group heavy drinking consistent over the period.

The project held two consultations around these findings: a symposium on representations of binge drinking behaviour and performance interventions held on 15 May 2012, and a consultation with the Interdisciplinary Alcohol Research Programme at the University of Sheffield on 24 May 2012.

A series of key concerns and issues for further research emerged:

- In line with studies of the representation of alcohol consumption in television drama and advertising more broadly (Hansen 2003; Nicholls 2009, 2011; van Hoof et al 2009), our study determined that the social pleasures and benefits of group excessive drinking have been consistently portrayed as socially 'normal' for young adults in film and onstage since 1970s. However, assumptions about the impact and interpretative strategies of audiences for these representations are more difficult to gauge. While current research broadly supports the view that 'exposure to alcohol imagery predicts alcohol consumption' in adolescent audiences (Gunter et al 2009, 148; Stoolmiller et al 2012), simple models of exposure / behaviour have been questioned (van Hoof 2009). The complexity of narrative and interpretative frameworks offered by portrayals in the British film and theatre studied here suggest that future research may benefit from a more nuanced approach to audience interpretation of these representations.
- Public health and alcohol studies researchers suggest that a reduction in anti-social and harmful drinking will come through multipronged approaches implemented at local levels, 'through the cultivation of responsible social attitudes towards alcohol consumption that promote self-control.' (Gunter p.201) Cultivating these responsible social attitudes has been linked to effective limitation and regulation of alcohol marketing and advertising strategies. While calling for a ban on advertising or product placement has been suggested as a strong mechanism

for controlling social harms (Barbor 2010), this will have concomitant implications for writers and producers beyond advertising. Do playwrights and screenwriters have a 'moral' duty to the public good to communicate the dangers of episodic heavy drinking? Does this produce a de facto form of censorship on creative output?

- Current research demonstrates that traditional educational interventions in school and college settings, universal public health messages, and counter-advertising have not been proven as a strong dissuasive from drinking, while intensive, interactive interventions 'seem to have some potential' (Barbor p.210). Examples of small-scale performance and filmic interventions from companies engaged in participatory theatre (*Women and Theatre The Palace of Wasted Dreams*), verbatim theatre (*Paperbirds Thirsty*), and filmic microcasts combined with family-based interventions with hard to reach populations (Trelya) effectively challenged some of the regularly performed cultural narratives around binge drinking, without falling prey to the 'credibility gulf' induced by more didactic or information-based interventions (Martinic and Measham 2008). More universally aimed interventions in cultural narratives have been attempted – for example, Channel 4's Hollyoaks/Home Office project to address binge drinking ([www.channel4sales.com/effectiveness/case\\_studies\\_details/hollyoaks+and+the+home+office](http://www.channel4sales.com/effectiveness/case_studies_details/hollyoaks+and+the+home+office)). Further research is required into the assumptions and aspirations underpinning impact evaluation, before appropriate evaluation of intensive, interactive interventions into prevailing cultural narratives around drink can be undertaken.

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