

Drunken nights out:

Preliminary findings from research commissioned by Drinkaware

CONTEXT: THE STRATEGIC REVIEW

The account of ‘drunken nights out’ set out in this note has been developed as part of an independent strategic review, commissioned by Drinkaware, which sets out to answer the question: What role could or should Drinkaware play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out?

The strategic review has included: a review of existing research, literature and responses to a call for evidence by Drinkaware; examination of available datasets, including Drinkaware’s own tracking research; interviews with key informants; and primary qualitative research, comprising:

- 48 ninety-minute interviews (plus pre-work) with young adults who enjoy going out and getting drunk (or, in a few cases, used to enjoy going out and getting drunk), aged 18-29.
- 10 two-hour workshops with a total of 60 young adults who enjoy going out and getting drunk, aged 18-24 (including recalls of interview participants).

Full details of the methods, findings and recommendations of the review will be presented in the review report, to be published later in 2014. This note provides a high-level preview of qualitative findings, and offers an account of ‘drunken nights out’ to be developed and evidenced fully in the report.

WHAT ARE DRUNKEN NIGHTS OUT?

A drunken night out is not a single behaviour (such as ‘binge drinking’), but a complete package of behaviours. Some of these are alcohol-related, such as predrinking and intentional drunkenness: others, such as getting dressed up or dancing, are not. However, drunkenness plays a central role in the package (see next section).

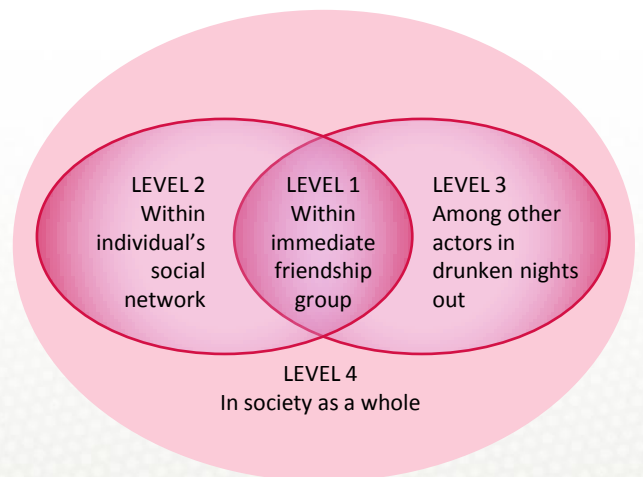
The whole package takes place in a specific context, defined:

- Temporally – a drunken night out takes place at a specific time of day and time of the week

- Physically – much of a drunken night out takes place in night-time economy venues, though the night out (and the drinking) starts at home
- Socially – a drunken night out is not something people do on their own, but in groups of friends – groups in part defined by the fact they go on drunken nights out together
- Normatively – different social rules apply within this specific context, requiring and permitting behaviour that is not required or permitted in other contexts

The journey into, through, and out of this context is structured by rituals – from getting ready with friends and drinking games to the last stop at the kebab shop.

Norms and rituals are social products. We suggest distinguishing four ‘levels’ at which such norms may be created and sustained – and at, therefore, which they might also potentially be weakened or co-opted:



THE NORM OF DRUNKENNESS

There are many social contexts in our society in which drinking is permitted and drunkenness (at least up to a point) an allowable consequence of participation.

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The modern drunken night out is different. In the drunken night out, drunkenness is a required condition of participation, not just an allowable consequence. You have to be drunk to enjoy participating – primarily because everyone else will be drunk.

Hence the intentional pursuit of rapid intoxication. Nowhere is this clearer than in pre-drinking – a practice which allows a group of friends to achieve a shared level of intoxication before entering night-time venues (with saving money an additional benefit). Drinking games in particular help to ensure alcohol is consumed at speed:

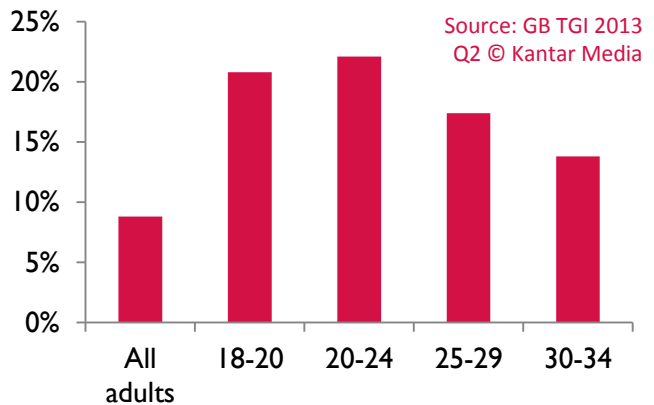
“It’s kind of like a get drunk quick sort of thing. Like, if we haven’t got much time to go out, if we’re going out and we haven’t got much time we’re like, right, let’s play a drinking game quick, quickly.” [f]

Indeed, many of our participants saw drinks as little more than ethanol-delivery mechanisms, used to get or stay drunk. A number told us they did not even like the taste of the drinks they drank. Many preferred not to drink with a meal, both because doing so would ruin the meal, and it this would be a ‘waste’ of alcohol (since one was not getting drunk):

“I don’t like drinking with food. I don’t really see the point in drinking if you’re not going to get drunk, if you see what I mean. I do enjoy drinking but I prefer a cup of coke than a cup of beer, like, with my food.” [f]

While not a majority view, this functional view of alcohol is not uncommon among young adults. In Drinkaware’s 2013 tracking research, 15% of 18- to 24-year-olds stated that they drank alcohol with the specific intention of getting drunk every time or most times they drank. TGI data on agreement with the statement “The point of drinking is to get drunk” reinforce the point:

%ge that agree with statement “The point of drinking is to get drunk”



WHY GO ON A DRUNKEN NIGHT OUT?

What do drunken nights out offer that makes people want to participate in them? What ‘benefits’ do they provide to their consumers, and what ‘features’ underpin these benefits? We believe that the defining feature of a drunken night out is more extreme social interaction. This extreme social interaction takes places at two levels.

First, within the group of friends that goes out together, individuals interact in more extreme ways: they banter, do stupid things together or to each other, play-fight or fight for real (in ways that will be forgiven in the morning). All these activities help to build the identity and bonds of the group, both in and of themselves and through the opportunities they create to tell and re-tell stories in the future.

Secondly, outside the immediate group, drunken nights out allow people to have ‘social adventures’ – more extreme interactions with people they don’t know:

“You wouldn’t just go up and talk to them usually; you just wouldn’t have the bottle; you would think, what am I doing? But if you’re drunk and you see a group of people and you think, oh, they look like a good laugh, you just go over; you just... you’re drunk, you don’t care, you just think, oh well, I’ll go and join them.” [m]

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Obviously flirting and sex are important forms of ‘social adventure’. So, for some, is fighting:

“I’m not saying that fighting is sexual, but I am saying that fighting can actually be, I mean it does hurt but it can feel good.” [m]

‘Social adventures’ provide both benefits in themselves and material for later stories.

Asking what ‘benefits’ drunken nights out provide to their consumers yields important insights, but it is not the only way of addressing the question of why people go on drunken nights out. An alternative approach emphasises not the choices people make but their (perceived or actual) lack of choice. When asked what they might do instead of going on a drunken night out, most of our participants were hard-pressed to answer. Cinema, going for a meal, bowling, paintballing – all were mentioned, none felt to be a viable alternative. Indeed, in Drinkaware’s 2013 tracking research, a third of those who drank with the specific intention of getting drunk every or most times they drank also *disagreed* with the statement “I don’t have to get drunk to have a good night out”

Part of the problem may lie in the invisibility of alternatives. For instance, it is striking that, when presented with statistics about the large number of young adults who do not drink, or drink only rarely, our participants were mystified. They did not see such people as ‘less cool’ or ‘having less fun’: they did not see such people at all, and questioned whether they really existed.

Analysing drunken nights out in terms of ‘features’ and ‘benefits’ is a useful exercise, but it may not be the whole story. For some, drunken nights out may better be understood as a kind of habit. As one participant put it:

“It’s not something I want to do or something I don’t want to do. It’s just something I do, and I just so happen to enjoy.” [m]

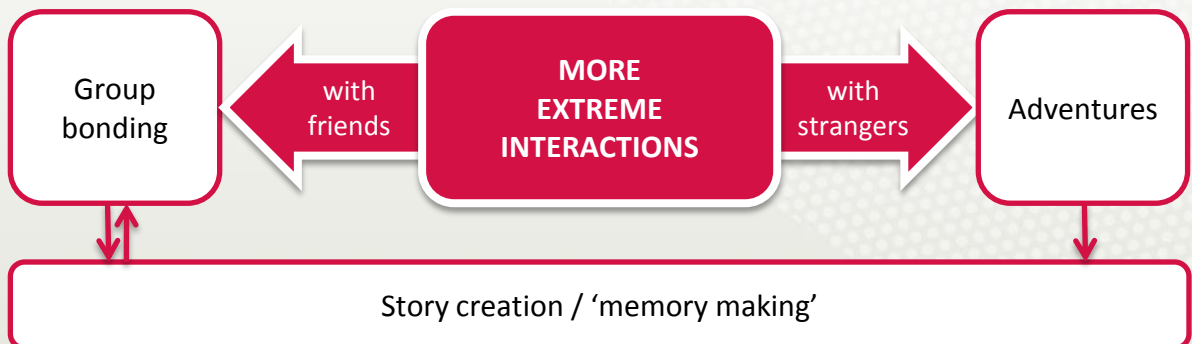
DRUNKENNESS AND DISINHIBITION

Why, then, are people getting so very drunk in (or, more often, before they arrive at) the night-time economy? The easy answer is ‘disinhibition’. However, we need to be careful in interpreting that word and its relationship to drunkenness.

First, it is true that the effects of alcohol on cognitive processing mean a drunk person is less likely to regulate their own behaviour. S/he will do things s/he would ‘think twice about’ if sober.

Equally important, however, are the social permissions afforded by the context of a drunken night out. One can do things which would be censured or condemned in other settings. Drunkenness does not create these social permissions: but, as we have seen, it is an entry requirement for the context in which the permissions exist.

**Disinhibition =
reduced regulation + social permission**



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There appears to be little consensus among participants in the night-time economy regarding what is and isn't permitted. Some things are clearly permitted, including excessive drunkenness. Others are clearly prohibited, including (interestingly from a communications and education perspective) drink driving, described by all of our participants as beyond the line. When it comes to social interaction, however, grey areas create the possibility of serious harm:

"When you get a girl in bed, and some of them play hard to get, they don't want to seem easy. You have to sort of crack your knuckles and say lets get to work, and try and get them in the mood for it. So if they say we're not having sex, and you end up having sex, whose to say that they might not say something afterwards?" [m]:

WHAT ABOUT THE RISKS?

Our participants were by no means blind to risk. In fact, they saw risk as an inevitable consequence of extreme social interactions and 'social adventures':

"I remember when I was younger dancing on the tables in one takeaway while across the street in another takeaway, unbeknown to me, one of the girls out with us got punched for starting a fight. I think this occasion sums up drinking in town quite well. It goes two ways, either a fantastic laugh or a messy blur. It's a risk you take." [f]

Moreover, it was clear that they had strategies in place to minimise the risks of serious harm:

- Avoidance – for example, choosing not to go to certain venues, or to walk away from trouble
- 'Knowing your limits' – stopping drinking when you reach a certain level of intoxication
- Support from friends – if all else fails, the norms of friendship groups mean that your friends

These strategies provide a measure of confidence that one will not come to really serious harm on a drunken night out. Unfortunately, there is good reason to believe such confidence may be misplaced.

For example, the 'limits' which people claim to stick to are themselves very extreme:

"She'll get drunk, but she can feel the drunk coming up her, so the more she drinks, the less of her body she can feel. So when she's like completely steaming, she can't feel any of her body." [f]

Moreover, one has to wonder how capable of moderating further consumption an individual this drunk will be:

"I get to the point where I know that that next drink that I have is going to be the end. But I'll go buy the drink still." [m]

Friendship groups may also fail when people get very drunk, either because the friends themselves are so drunk, or because people 'wander off':

"We tend to all look after each other anyway, make sure we all get home, like, I don't know. We don't leave each other. We'll never leave each other. We all make sure we know where we and... Sometimes one or two just disappear, but..." [f]

People who are more peripheral in a group may be particularly at risk of being left behind. It was also apparent that individuals who repeatedly get so drunk that they need to be looked after may, over time, be dropped by the group.

While these strategies have clear shortcomings, at least they represent a recognition of the risks associated with extreme interactions and social adventures.

By contrast, other sorts of risk are given little if any consideration. In particular, the possibility that consuming such large quantities of alcohol may be doing damage to one's health is almost entirely dismissed:

"If I was addicted to alcohol I'd worry about liver disease and death, but I'm not."

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