
Drunken Nights Out:

Motivations, norms and rituals in
the night-time economy

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**Executive
Summary**

This strategic review, undertaken for Drinkaware, addressed the question: ‘what role could and should Drinkaware play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out?’ The review draws on original qualitative research comprising pre-work, interviews and workshops with a total of 80 participants in drunken nights out aged 18 to 29, a review of literature, and interviews with key informants.

The remit of the review was to make evidence-based recommendations regarding the role that education and communications could and should play in reducing the harms associated with drunken nights out. It does not make recommendations for wider policy, for agents other than Drinkaware, or regarding interventions other than those which Drinkaware might make.

Introducing drunken nights out

The term ‘drunken night out’ refers to a package of behaviours which take place in a specific context (temporal, spatial and social). Drinking and drunkenness are central to this package of behaviours, but they are not the only behaviours involved.

The widely used term ‘binge drinking’ is problematic: definitions are inconsistent; there is a credibility gulf between recommended and actual consumption; a focus on quantities consumed neglects the social nature of drinking and drunkenness; and the term is associated with unhelpful stereotypes shaped by attitudes to class, gender and, in particular, youth.



Participation in drunken nights out, and therefore associated harm, is at a peak among young adults. However, it is essential to stress that:

- Much alcohol-related harm occurs outside the context of drunken nights out, or any other kind of drinking by young people.
- Many young people do not participate in drunken nights out or indeed drink at all.

Drinking and getting drunk are gendered activities, but there are striking similarities in the behaviour of women and men in the young adult age range, especially with regard to intentions and consumption.

One key difference is that women are more likely than men to report many negative consequences. There is no evidence to suggest that students are more likely to participate in drunken nights out than non-student peers of the same age.

Often represented as the excessive behaviour of a 'small minority', drunken nights out are in fact entirely normal – at least from the perspective of those who participate in them. Field studies reveal widespread excessive drinking among

users of the night-time economy (although much consumption may take place at home before going out). Roughly two fifths of 18 to 24 year olds agree with the statement 'I really enjoy going out to get drunk',¹ and 15% of this age group state that they drink with the intention of getting drunk every time or most times they drink alcohol.² A regular intention to get drunk is associated with drinking more frequently, drinking more, getting drunk more often, and running an increased risk of experiencing/causing harm. There is also evidence that the intention to get drunk is associated with a different way of drinking, and with choices of venue in the night-time economy.

Behaviour during drunken nights out is also highly structured – in contrast to common representations as chaotic, reckless and out of control. The structuring role of social norms and rituals is particularly important. Moreover, a drunken night out is undertaken, not by individuals, but by groups of friends. These groups play a central role in managing some of the risks associated with a drunken night out.

¹ GB TGI 2013 Q2 (Jan 2012–Dec 2012), Kantar Media UK Ltd.

² Ipsos MORI (2013).

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Why do people go on drunken nights out?

Participation in drunken nights out can be explained in terms of social norms or other kinds of social pressure; as a response to prompts in the situation; or as a habit. Alongside these explanations, however, the decision to go on a drunken night out can also be seen as a rational choice, made on an assessment of benefits and costs. Drunken nights out deliver a number of clear benefits to their participants (see below); and there are few if any other social experiences which provide the same mix of benefits. Many participants in drunken nights out find it hard to think of other things they could do.

Benefit 1: Escape

The norms and rituals which structure the drunken night out mark a special social context distinct from the rest of life. Individuals describe entering this special context in terms of taking on a different identity – a drunken night out identity – characterised by doing things one would not normally do.

In particular, the drunken night out provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions are permitted, both within one's group of friends and more widely. One of the core benefits of the drunken night out is escape, from the norms of interaction in everyday life, to this more permissive social arena.

Benefit 2: Bonding and belonging

The drunken night out provides an opportunity for a group of friends to strengthen their bonds and collective identity, while also confirming individuals' identities within the group. In this context, group members can engage in interactions which might not normally be possible, for example, banter. They can also synchronise behaviour, for example, through dancing.

Groups tend to be stable over time. In some instances, the drunken night out is the sole mechanism by which the group is maintained. Drunken nights out may also be used as a way of building a group where one did not previously exist – in particular among students. Groups are often single-gendered. Partners often continue to socialise with separate groups.



Benefit 3: Social adventures

Other people outside the group of friends are a critical component of the drunken night out, providing the opportunity for social adventures – more intense and extreme social interactions with strangers. Social adventures can range in extremity from simply meeting and talking to new people to sexual encounters of different kinds and, for some people, fighting.

However, other people also introduce an inescapable element of risk. A lack of clear boundaries means that people may easily be caught up in interactions which go further than they wish – or in which they do not wish to participate at all. In particular, problems can arise around sexual behaviour, with molestation appearing to be a common and, to some extent, accepted part of a drunken night out. Particularly worrying is the fact that the word ‘no’ often fails to work in the absence of intervention by others. This raises serious concerns about what may happen later if people go home together and others are no longer present.

Benefit 4: Stories

Some of the key benefits of a drunken night out lie in the stories one has to tell the next morning. The recollection of events and creation of shared stories provide important opportunities for group bonding. Even hangovers can be redeemed by collective story-telling, becoming part of the ritual of a hangover day.

Stories also transform experiences. Experiences that were in reality uncomfortable, painful or distressing may be transformed into positive and amusing stories. Many stories described by their protagonists as ‘embarrassing’ are in fact prized for their role in creating and confirming a desirable drunken night out identity. However, there are limits to the extent to which bad experiences can be transformed in this way. Moreover, stories may become genuinely shaming when shared with the wrong audiences – for example, older family members. The mere presence of older people not playing by the same rules can be enough to break the spell of the drunken night out and replace ‘embarrassment’ with something closer to shame.

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Drinking and drunkenness on drunken nights out

Drinking in the context of a drunken night out is largely instrumental. Alcoholic drinks are treated as ethanol-delivery mechanisms, with calculations of 'units per pence' and appropriate concentrations guiding choice of drink. People value the effects of alcohol, which they see as giving them the confidence and reduced self-consciousness needed to do things they would not normally do; take on their drunken night out identity; and access the benefits of a drunken night out. For some participants, an instrumental relationship was their only relationship with alcoholic drinks: for them, drinking without getting drunk was a waste of alcohol.

The risks of drunkenness were also recognised. Because alcohol makes you less likely to think twice, you may do things you really ought not to do. For example, over-reactions when drunk can lead to fights. While the effects of alcohol were seen to explain much bad behaviour, some participants argued that alcohol was not an excuse – although there were clear differences on this point. It was argued that even when drunk, you can in fact stop yourself; and that you are still morally responsible for what you do.

Some of the key norms and rituals which structure a drunken night out relate specifically to drinking. There is a powerful norm, enforced by significant social

"I don't remember ever savouring drinks or having a particular taste favourite: the objective was to get drunk." [m]

pressure, that one has to drink alcohol (not soft drinks). There is also social pressure to be as drunk as everyone else. Being sober in the night-time economy is experienced as abnormal and uncomfortable. As a result, drunkenness is a *required condition of participation* in the drunken night out. This is strikingly different from other social contexts in which alcohol is consumed, where drunkenness is an allowable consequence of participation, but not compulsory.

Drunkenness is therefore prized, not only for its direct effects, but also because it is an entry ticket to the social permissions afforded by the drunken night out. In practice, the physiological effects of alcohol during a drunken night out always co-exist with extensive social permissions for more extreme interactions. When we talk about disinhibition in the context of a drunken night out, we should remember that this comprises both an individual and a social element.

Knowing your limits

As people become more drunk, they are less likely to regulate their consumption consciously, and more likely to respond to situational prompts to drink and conform to social norms. Nevertheless, many people assert that they have an intended limit beyond which they will not pass.

This limit is not a rational optimum level of drunkenness, but a point, well past any notional optimum, beyond which really bad things can happen. Limits are strongly associated with the fear of becoming so drunk that you 'lose control'. This is associated with behaving in ways that are genuinely shameful (as opposed to merely embarrassing), and – for female participants in particular – making oneself vulnerable. Intended limits may be varied according to how vulnerable an individual feels.

Judgements of whether one has reached one's limit are for the most part based either on experiences and feelings, or on social comparison with others in the group. The latter approach could lead to a vicious circle, in which higher intended limits lead to more extreme cases of drunkenness, and more extreme cases of drunkenness lead to higher intended limits.

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The group of friends plays a pivotal role in keeping the individual safe. While it is not the norm to challenge how much someone is drinking, it is very much the norm to take care of them if they go too far – even if that means reducing one’s own consumption. Indeed, there is evidence that the group of friends provides a context in which individuals can take turns at being the one to get excessively drunk. Some drinking games may provide a mechanism for randomly allocating turns at being most drunk.

The strategy of setting intended limits has little or nothing in common with promoted approaches such as ‘moderation’ or ‘responsible drinking’. Key differences include the fact that the limits approach pays little attention to actual quantities consumed, or to the incremental gains and losses associated with additional drinks. The limits approach is also inherently social – and leads to intended limits which are well beyond any level of consumption that might be considered moderate.

Pre-drinking

For many people, pre-drinking is not an optional precursor to a drunken night out, but part of the overall package of behaviours. Large quantities of alcohol may be consumed at this stage, often in the context of drinking games. Pre-drinking has often been linked to cost, and there is evidence that the opportunity to get drunk for less money does play a role. However, the evidence also suggests that those who pre-drink may drink as much when out as those who have not pre-drunk. Other explanations of pre-drinking include:

- A more conducive environment for the group to bond before entering the night-time economy, where the focus is more on social adventures.
- The need to be drunk before one enters the night-time economy – and to synchronise levels of drunkenness within the group.
- A ritual passage from the norms of everyday life to the special social context of the drunken night out.
- A way of filling the time until everyone else goes out.

In practice, all of these factors have probably played a role in both the evolution and maintenance of the practice of pre-drinking. For some contemporary participants in drunken nights out, pre-drinking may have become a habit.

Risks and risk management

Some risks are considered and actively managed during a drunken night out – in particular the risks associated with non-consensual interactions such as sexual assault and violence. The evidence suggests that these are indeed serious risks in the context of a drunken night out:

- There is a significant problem of violence associated with drunken nights out, skewed towards more serious incidents such as wounding. Many of our participants had witnessed or been victims of violence on a drunken night out.
- There is an association between alcohol consumption and sexual assault. Responses from our participants suggested that molestation and groping are common experiences as part of a drunken night out.

Participants actively seek to minimise these risks during a drunken night out. For example, they set intended limits of drunkenness, and avoid trouble where possible. In particular, the group of friends plays a pivotal role: staying with one's group is one of the fundamental risk management strategies used on drunken nights out.

Nevertheless, people may leave groups, especially if they become very drunk. Moreover groups may leave people: those who have a history of wandering off and peripheral members of the group are at particular risk of being abandoned.

Alongside the risks associated with non-consensual interactions, participants in a drunken night out face other single-instance risks – risks, that is, that can occur as a result of a single drunken night out. These include risks associated with consensual interactions (such as sexually-transmitted diseases) and risks which do not necessarily involve another participant in the drunken night out (such as accidental injury).



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Participants in drunken nights out do not give these other single-instance risks much thought, although they recognise them as real when prompted. There are a number of reasons why participants on a drunken night out do not give consideration to risks, and instead feel temporarily invincible. These include a tendency to think less about risks when young; a lack of negative experiences; the effects of alcohol; and a positive desire not to think about risks. For such risks to be considered, people have to feel that they personally are at risk.

Longer-term risks to health, associated not with a single drunken night out but the cumulative effects of alcohol consumption, were discounted altogether. Participants' reasons for discounting them included the view that their consumption was small compared to alcoholics, and that they would reduce their consumption in later life. Making longer-term harms current, by providing evidence that they are already starting to happen, may make these risks more salient – as may new information about harms.

Drinking careers

Participation in drunken nights out typically changes as an individual gets older. There was variation in the drinking careers described by our participants, but some clear recurring patterns.

Underage group drinking practices can be seen as precursors of the drunken night out, providing many of the same benefits and structured by similar norms and rituals. The image of the drunken night out – conveyed through the stories of older people or through media representations – may provide a template for these practices. An instrumental relationship with alcohol is, for many people, their *first* relationship: alcohol is first encountered and used as a psychoactive drug, and alcoholic drinks are treated as ethanol-delivery devices, selected entirely on the basis of what one can afford and access.

Underage drinking is described retrospectively as a learning phase, during which people discover how to drink and get drunk – and in particular learn about their limits. The period ends with



key transition moments: most obviously turning 18, but also the move away from home and, for some, going to university. After an initial peak, participation in drunken nights out typically declines with increasing age. Not only was this pattern described retrospectively by older participants, it was also anticipated by younger participants. Many of our participants saw participation in drunken nights out as a phase in life, an opportunity to get something out of their system before taking on responsibilities.

One of the key factors that can drive reduced participation in drunken nights out is the fact that, over time, participation becomes boring. An individual's personal circumstances and priorities also change over time, leading to a recalibration of the costs and benefits associated with participation in drunken nights out. Changes in social context also have an impact. Over time, bonding and belonging move to the fore as the main drivers of continued participation. The drunken night out may eventually change into a different pattern of behaviour, characterised by different choices of venue and a different relationship with alcohol.

"I think things change, the older you get you think there's more to it than just... the novelty has sort of worn off with the drinking, so you still do it but it's not as fun to just down drinks and play ring of fire and drink horrible drinks just for the sake of it." [m]

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A strategic framework for Drinkaware

Harm reduction could be achieved through different kinds of behaviour change, including: people drinking less; people spending less time drunk; people getting drunk less often; and people behaving differently when drunk. The Prototype Willingness Model³ provides an appropriate starting point for the development and evaluation of interventions which aim to achieve these changes.

There is a substantial body of evidence that education and communications are best deployed as *part of a wider package of behaviour change interventions* – and that, by themselves, they are unlikely to achieve changes in behaviour. Education and communication interventions by Drinkaware need to be developed alongside efforts by other partners using other approaches. In particular, efforts to change the norms that shape drunken nights out will require co-ordination of multiple agents, covering both the delivery of messages to support new

norms, and the elimination of messages which, intentionally or unintentionally, sustain and strengthen existing norms associated with increased harm.

Four strategic territories have been identified, which offer the greatest potential for education and communications interventions:

Territory 1: Boundaries

Although social norms govern many aspects of behaviour in the context of a drunken night out, there is a lack of clear boundaries around interpersonal interactions, and very little agreement – even among those who get very drunk – regarding what behaviour is acceptable. In particular, there are differences regarding the acceptability of aggression, violence and certain kinds of sexual behaviour.

To some extent, this situation reflects the nature of the drunken night out, one of the key attractions of which is the fact that it provides an arena within which more intense and extreme social interactions

³ See for example Gerrard, M., Gibbons, F.X., Houlihan, A.E., Stock, M.L., Pomery, E.A. (2008), 'A dual-process approach to health risk decision making: the prototype willingness model', *Developmental Review* 28, 29–61.

are permitted, including more extreme interactions with strangers. Worryingly, however, the evidence suggests that the word 'no' is often ineffective as a way of re-establishing boundaries when needed, unless backed up by the intervention of others. The situation is further exacerbated by the effects of alcohol on individuals' capacity to regulate their own behaviour, and the fact that drunkenness is effectively a requirement for participation in drunken nights out.

Low-level sexual molestation in particular appears to be becoming a norm in many parts of the night-time economy. Young women reported often putting up with it as part of the culture of drunken nights out yet also say they find it unpleasant.

Young men may also be on the receiving end of uninvited molestation by women, although they appear to be unlikely to describe it as unpleasant. Rebuffed sexual advances can also lead to violence: young men who are rebuffed in an approach are particularly likely to attack male friends of the woman who rebuffed them, or more generally start looking for a fight.

A strategy for education and communications activity in this area would seek to encourage the establishment of clearer boundaries around bad behaviour. For example, it might seek to get young adults on a drunken night out to stop tolerating sexual harassment and molestation, by reminding them that they would not accept such behaviour outside the context of drunken nights out.

"Boys can be creepy when they're drunk. Like when you're out they like pinch your bum, or slap your bum. You're like ooh, get off. Like, who are you? Do you know what I mean?" [f]

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Such a strategy would seek to change how people behave when they are drunk by creating a more negative image of those who engage in target behaviours, and a more positive image of those who speak out against them. The hypothesis would be that doing so would reduce the willingness of people to behave in these ways, even when drunk, and increase the willingness of people to challenge these behaviours. Over time, the aspiration would be to influence social norms regarding target behaviours.

Territory 2: Conscience

Strengthening the bonds and collective identity of the group of friends is one of the most important aspects of a drunken night out. Groups also play a central role in managing the risks associated with a drunken night out:

- The group provides a secure base for social adventures, intervening to help individuals establish boundaries, to defuse situations, or to protect other group members.
 - The group also provides care if one goes past one's intended limit of drunkenness – indeed, this support structure may actually enable individuals to take turns at being the most drunk.
- One of the basic rules of a drunken night out is to stay with the group. In practice, however, while people rely on their group to keep safe, this mechanism is far from reliable. People leave groups, especially when they get too drunk; and groups leave people, with those who have a reputation for wandering off, or peripheral members of the group, at particular risk. As a result, people are often put at considerable risk of harm – and if nothing else may become a burden to public services.
- A strategy for education and communications activity in this area would seek to strengthen the existing role of the group in managing risk so that it becomes much more effective. For example, it might seek to get young adults on a drunken night out to use more effective strategies for their own and their friends' safety on a drunken night, by encouraging them



to make plans in advance to ensure that everyone they go out with will be looked after at the end of the night.

Such a strategy would seek to change how people behave when they are drunk. This would be achieved partly by strengthening intentions to look out for each other and to stay with the group. Critically, however, it would also be necessary to tackle issues of *willingness* – both the willingness of individuals to leave the group, and the willingness of the group to leave individuals. In particular, this would require focusing on people’s feelings of personal vulnerability when away from the group (and their sense of how vulnerable friends are when alone), and enhancing images of those who take responsibility for the safety and wellbeing of friends.

Territory 3: Consequences

While participants in drunken nights out deliberately get very drunk, they also recognise that they need to manage their drinking and avoid going too far. They have strategies in place for managing the risks associated with non-consensual interactions such as violence or sexual

assault. They acknowledge that other risks associated with single instances of extreme intoxication (such as injury) are real, even if they do not seem to consider them during a drunken night out.

What they do not accept, even when prompted, is that there may be cumulative health risks associated with participation in drunken nights out. People work on the implicit assumption that, *if you get away with it on the night out, you’ve got away with it altogether*.

Participants offered a number of reasons for discounting these cumulative health risks. One argument advanced was that, even though participants drank large quantities of alcohol on drunken nights out, others – specifically alcoholics or people who drink every day – drank far more, and it was these people to whom the risks in question applied. Even if any damage was being done, the fact that participants were still young, combined with the fact that the harms in question are experienced over a period of time, was seen to make the risks irrelevant to current behaviour. Many participants argued

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that they expected to cut back on their drinking as they got older.

Nevertheless, there was some evidence regarding ways in which the cumulative health risks associated with drunken nights out might be made more credible and engaging:

- Linking the long-term health effects of alcohol to current experiences – for example, the experience of increasing so-called tolerance.
- Providing new information about the effects of alcohol – for example, its effects on the brain.

Focusing on the long-term health consequences of drinking alcohol is almost certainly not going to be the most effective way of changing behaviour associated with drunken nights out. However, given that providing ‘objective, independent, comprehensive and evidence-based information about alcohol’ is a key part of Drinkaware’s mission, it is worth considering how such information might be made most relevant to this target audience.

In particular, a strategy for education and communications activity in this area would seek to use such information to erode the assumption that, if you get away with it on the night out, you’ve got away with it altogether. For example, it might seek to get young adults who regularly participate in drunken nights out to reflect on the consequences of the associated alcohol consumption, by providing relevant (linked to current experiences) and salient (new information) facts about the consequences of consumption in an interesting and non-judgemental way.

While the prospects for changing behaviour in the short term are limited, such a strategy could seek to change how *often* people get drunk by weakening intentions to participate in drunken nights out. In particular, it might help to accelerate the processes by which people already reduce their levels of participation as they get older. It might also help to create a climate in which other kinds of intervention could be more acceptable.



Territory 4: Vulnerability

Participants in a drunken night out consume alcohol instrumentally with the intention of getting drunk. Drunkenness is both valued for its perceived connection to the benefits of a drunken night out, and mandated by powerful social norms – to the extent that drunkenness has become a required condition of participation in drunken nights out, as opposed to an allowed consequence of participation. The consumption of alcohol is itself driven by social norms, especially at the level of the group. As people become drunk, further consumption is prompted by social and situational cues. In this context, traditional efforts to encourage moderation or responsible drinking face considerable challenges.

Nevertheless, many people do claim to have an intended limit, a target level of drunkenness which they seek not to go beyond. This intended limit appears to be driven by real concerns about losing control of one's own actions – and in particular fears about what others might do to you in such a state.

Moreover, limits appear to be varied according to how safe people feel, with greater feelings of personal vulnerability being associated with lower intended limits. There is also evidence to support the hypothesis that intended limits have more force when more is at stake – that is, in line with the Prototype Willingness Model, a greater sense of personal vulnerability not only influences the intention to stick to a limit, but also reduces one's willingness to cross it in response to social or situational cues.

A strategy for education and communications activity in this area would seek both to encourage people to lower their intended limits and reduce their willingness to break them. For instance, it might seek to get young adults on a drunken night out to reappraise their intended limits, and aim for a lower level of drunkenness, by undermining their confidence in the strategies that they use to manage risks if they go too far.

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Such a strategy would seek to change how much people drink, and possibly, albeit indirectly, how long they remain drunk. It would do so primarily by making them feel more personally vulnerable to negative outcomes, and less personally safe – although the strategy might also seek to enhance the images of those who stick to their intended limits, while encouraging more negative images of those who allow themselves to breach them.

Feelings of personal vulnerability might be in relation to existing managed risks, such as the risks of violence or sexual assault. Alternatively, this strategy could be especially effective if linked to consequences arising from the activity of other partners – for example, credible risks of arrest, fines, or being refused entry to premises. This would closely follow the model offered by action on drink driving.



"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]



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